

## TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN ZAFERİYE ABALIOĞLU PRIMARY SCHOOL, DENİZLİ, TURKEY

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**Abstract.** This article deals with implementing project work in the teaching of English as a foreign language in a Turkish state primary school. Theoretical foundations for project-based learning are presented and project-based learning method is applied in ten 3rd classes during 2014/ 2015 school year in Zaferiye Abalioğlu Primary school in Denizli, Turkey. Developing of students' motivation for learning and benefits resulting from student participation in project work are discussed. The article describes a pedagogical experiment that is aimed at investigating the effectiveness and motivating role of project-based learning in teaching English to young learners.

**Keywords:** Project-based learning, English as foreign language, young learners, interactive teaching methods;

Foreign language teachers know that introducing second language in the class and creating natural atmosphere in the classroom is really difficult. It is also known that students learn better when they are doing and when they are active. In order to make the pupils active builders of the language and speakers or users of the second language the teachers should make a little effort like creating situations where they can be active and just supervise them. Namely, the teachers should use different materials, methods and techniques. Project based learning is one of the things that creates a lively and natural atmosphere in the class and the children have opportunity to use the language and they do not forget the things easily as they are learnt by doing. The project based learning also helps the children to develop physical, intellectual, social, emotional and moral skills.(4)

Project based learning (PBL) is one method in which students learn by actively exploring and investigating real-world problems and questions. PBL is a great way to help students make real-life connections with the material, as well as increase

motivation and collaboration – all while having fun learning. Project-based learning lessons are all based on solving a central question or problem. Ideally, these questions/problems are ones that are posed by the students. When students ask questions, this shows that they are actively engaged and thinking about the material. Hopefully, some of these questions can prompt further research, exploration and study. Many teachers believe that PBL only works for “gifted” students or students who are performing at or above grade level. We don’t support this notion and want to prove that young learners and learners with disabilities, can all successfully and effectively participate in and learn successfully from this cool way of teaching and learning. (2)

Some advantages of project work are increased motivation of learners who become personally involved in the project; integration of all four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking); autonomous learning is promoted as learners become more responsible for their own learning; there are learning outcomes - learners have an end product; interpersonal relations are developed through working as a group; content and methodology can be decided between the learners and the teacher and within the group themselves so it is more learner centered; learners often get help from parents for project work thus involving the parents more in the child’s learning. If the project is also displayed parents can see it at open days or when they pick the child up from the school. Participation in project work gives a break from routine and the chance to do something different. (3)

The role of the teacher is very important in project - based learning. He/ she should be competent and well prepared. As Çırak, D. (2006), has pointed out the teachers of English should be aware of music, games, puppets, poems, rhymes, jokes, riddles, real objects, projects, CD’s, DVD’s overhead projector, video, TV, stories, posters. Flashcards make the lessons more attractive and motivating. So the pupils can be more concentrated on the subjects. In addition to these, there are some actions that should be taken by the teachers of young learners. The teacher should be patient, creative, humorous and active. He should praise the children (this may be by word like “Good boy, well done” or by small gifts like stickers etc.); he should be flexible, honest, fair and objective; he should make use of his body language often instead of using mother tongue; he should use the time efficiently. There are many responsibilities for the teachers of English who are teaching young learners. (4)

The idea of implementing of project-based learning method in Zaferiye Abalıoglu Primary school came thanks to a previous common work of Zaferiye Abalıoglu Primary School from Denizli, Turkey and the Secondary School ”Georgi Karavelov” from Shivachevo, Bulgaria.

Zaferiye Abalıoglu is a primary school located in the center of Denizli, Republic of Turkey. It was built in 1992 and was gifted by an important industrial

family. During the project period the school had students in three sections: Pre-primary section (6 years old students), Primary section (7-12 years old students) and Secondary section (12-15 years old students), and 57 teachers working in the school. There is a guidance service in the school which deals with the problems of students. The school consists of two buildings. Each building has got three floors. There are three big aquariums at the common entrance. The school garden is very large and surrounded with trees. There are a canteen and large football-basketball and volleyball playing grounds in it. The outer walls of the school buildings are full of pictures drawn by students and teachers. The school is equipped with two computer laboratories which are also used for language studies. The Turkish government has started the DYNET project in Turkey (Dynamic English Teaching) and Zaferiye Abalioğlu Primary school is a part of it. This system provides students to study and develop their English through internet.

The interest degree of learning languages is very high in the school. The location of the school is very close to the historical and tourist beauties of Pamukkale – Karahayt (Ancient theaters remaining of Roman times). The inhabitants of Denizli are fond of learning languages in order to communicate with their visitors. The motivation of learning foreign languages is kept very high because of the direct contact of students with foreign tourists. Thanks to the tourist development of the region, the students are aware of the fact how much it is important to speak any of the languages used in Europe.

“Georgi Karavelov“ Secondary school, Shivachevo is situated in a rural area in the south – east part of Bulgaria, in the region of Sliven. Families deal mainly with agriculture. Great number of students helps their parents in everyday work. There are many students from Gipsy ethnos. The school supports a policy of integration of these students in the school life. There are also students whose parents work abroad and the children don't live with their families. It causes certain difficulties in the contact between parents and teachers and influences badly on the educational process. There are a large number of students in the school who have difficulties in studying. Taking part in the project gives students and teachers the opportunity to come closer to the idea of European Union and to accept Europe as a common country.

The main idea of the project was to find out what are the best and the most effective methods of acquiring a foreign language; how to develop students' motivation to learn a foreign language; how to turn the boring process of learning vocabulary and grammar rules into a joyful and entertaining action. The project supports the idea to teach a language not directly mentioning grammar and rules, but using various interactive methods, children's games, songs, twisters, direct communication between students from two different nationalities, learning by doing, problem-based learning, project- based learning and others.

During the project period two class exchanges have been implemented between partner schools – one in Turkey and one in Bulgaria. During the exchanges various methods of learning have been experimented with participating students, aged 15-17. It was proved that using interactive methods of teaching foreign languages develop students' interest and motivation for learning, gives them the opportunity to be autonomous and independent, to take own decisions, to learn by investigating, researching and doing, to produce own income and to present it to their friends.

After the project period, results and outcomes, experiences and, products of the partnership have been disseminated and used by both participating organisations. Project ideas have been multiplied and successfully integrated in both schools.

One of the examples for integrating of project ideas is the application of project – based learning method in teaching English to 3rd grade students during 2014/2015 school year in Zaferiye Abalioğlu Primary school in Denizli, Turkey. The pedagogical experiment is aimed at investigating the effectiveness and motivating role of project-based learning in teaching English to young learners. Having in mind the age of the students it was decided to use mini – projects for the experiment.

According to Zeliha Gulcat, (2004) mini projects raise student motivation and serve pedagogical purposes as well. Students do something they enjoy doing when they are working on the topic of their own choice, and this certainly raises motivation. Students form work groups, and this again raises motivation since the learners are working together and enjoying cooperation. They do research work. When students do projects, they work on something different from learning English. Students do presentations; it is a social skill. They practice public speaking, organization and equipment use.

Mini projects are a nice change from teacher talk, blackboard presentations of ordinary lessons. They present a break from the routine of everyday lessons and therefore raise the motivation on part of the learners. (1)

Participants in the experiment are 270 students (150 girls and 120 boys) from ten 3rd classes in Zaferiye Abalioğlu Primary school in Denizli, Turkey.

The total number of students in the school is 900, so the participants are 30% of the total number of students in the school. Participants have different level of achievements in English language. There are students with special educational needs among participants. The period of research is 2014/2015 school year. During the first term of the school year the students are taught only through traditional methods. At the end of the term a short questionnaire is implemented (Appendix 1). It consists of five questions. The students have to answer four of them by simply giving marks from 1 to 5. (5 = very much, 4 = quite a lot, 3 = so-so, 2 = not really, 1 = not at all). For example if

a student likes English very much he has to circle (5), if he doesn't like it at all, circles (1). To be sure that the questions will be clear and understandable for the students we translated them in Turkish as well. The results from the questionnaires were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed by the researchers and conclusions were made.

During the second term of the year students were taught through the method of project - based learning. Ten mini- projects on different topics were realized. The topics of the projects are the following: Clothes; Geometrical figures; Animals; Weather; Food products; Mother's day hearts; Places in the city; Cooking; Birthday cards; English - Turkish dictionary. Students were given the opportunity to choose whether to work in pairs, in groups or individually. Also they could choose their partners. At the end of the school year same questionnaire is implemented again. The results from second questionnaires were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed by the researchers; conclusions were made. And finally results from both questionnaires were compared.

All projects were implemented following four main stages: information, preparation, implementation and presentation of project results by the students. In the information stage the teacher is introducing the topic, giving the tasks and instructions for work, introducing different ways of presenting. They could be information poster, hand written booklet with pictures or drawings, a picture, photo album, etc. Students choose partners and are organized in groups or pairs. If a student prefers to work individually he is allowed to do it. Students can ask questions if there is something not clear.

During the preparation period students choose materials, distribute tasks in the group, search additional information, (for example for the mini-project "Clothes" they know ten words for clothes, but they must search and add some more in their project work); they decide about the design of their product and choose the way of presenting. Each project is implemented in two lessons. Information and preparation are implemented during the first lesson. Also additional work could be done at home.

During the second lesson, which could be the next lesson or later the students come with ready materials, and ready ideas. They produce their product and present it to the class. As the topics "Food products" and "Cooking" needed more time for implementation, they were organized as workshops after the lessons. Except the English teacher also the class teachers and some mothers participated in the activities.

Examples of students work are shown in appendices 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Results from (answers to questions from 1 to 4) before and after the implementation of mini projects are shown in **table 1.** and **table 2.**

**Table 1.** Results from questionnaires before the implementation of mini projects  
(answers to questions from 1 to 4)

|   |   | 1<br>not at all | 2<br>not really | 3<br>so-so  | 4<br>quite a lot | 5<br>very much  |
|---|---|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Do you like English?                                  | 40<br>students  | 30<br>students  | 50 students | 50<br>students   | 100<br>students |
| 2 | Is it easy to learn English?                          | 51<br>students  | 59 students     | 60 students | 43 students      | 57 students     |
| 3 | Do you manage well with tasks in English lessons?     | 61<br>students  | 49 students     | 50 students | 53 students      | 57 students     |
| 4 | Do your classmates manage well with tasks in English? | 55<br>students  | 45 students     | 40 students | 55 students      | 75 students     |

**Table 2.** Results from questionnaires after the implementation of mini projects  
(answers to questions from 1 to 4 )

|   |   | 1<br>not at all | 2<br>not really | 3<br>so-so  | 4<br>quite a lot | 5<br>very much  |
|---|---|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Do you like English?                                  | 20<br>students  | 40<br>students  | 60 students | 30<br>students   | 120<br>students |
| 2 | Is it easy to learn English?                          | 21<br>students  | 49 students     | 60 students | 58 students      | 82 students     |
| 3 | Do you manage well with tasks in English lessons?     | 32<br>students  | 48 students     | 50 students | 63 students      | 97 students     |
| 4 | Do your classmates manage well with tasks in English? | 35<br>students  | 35 students     | 30 students | 75 students      | 95 students     |

The quantitative analysis of the results from questionnaires before and after the application of mini projects shows that the number of students who don't like English as a school subject before the experiment is reduced after the experiment; the number of students who like English increased.

Before the experiment 57 students think that English is very much easy to learn and 51 think it is not easy at all. After the experiment the number of students who

find English very much easy to learn increased to 82 students and only 21 students answer that it is not easy at all.

Answers to question 3 (Do you manage well with tasks in English lessons?) before and after the experiment are as follows:

| Answers     | Before | After |
|-------------|--------|-------|
| Not at all  | 61     | 32    |
| Not really  | 49     | 48    |
| So-so       | 50     | 50    |
| Quite a lot | 53     | 63    |
| Very much   | 57     | 97    |

Before implementing of mini projects 61 students think that they don't manage well with tasks in English lessons. After participating in project work their number is decreasing to 32. Before implementing of mini projects 57 students think that they manage very well with tasks in English lessons. After participating in project work their number is increasing to 97. The number of students who think they manage so-so remains the same.

The results from answers to question 4 are very similar. Before the experiment 75 students think that their classmates manage well with tasks in English and 55 think they don't manage at all. After implementation of project work students who think that their classmates manage well with tasks in English become 95 and only 35 students think their classmates don't manage at all.

The results from answers to question 5 (What is your favourite subject at school?) show increase of number of students who point English as their favourite subject before and after the experiment. Before implementing mini projects 42 students (from totally 270 students) point English as their favourite subject. After participating in project work their number increased and 62 students answer that English is their favourite subject.

Before the experiment great number of students doesn't like English, because they find it difficult to learn. Big number of students is not confident in their language skills and abilities to manage with tasks in English lessons. They have low self- assessment. Students think that their classmates also don't manage very well. English is a favourite subject only to 15% from the 3rd grade students in Zaferiye Abalioğlu Primary School in Denizli.

After the students have been taught through project-based learning method, their attitude towards English as a school subject is changed. Their learning motivation developed. They became more self-confident and independent. They evaluate higher their own management with tasks in English lessons and the management of their classmates as well. More students point English as their favourite subject.

After analyzing quantitatively and qualitatively the results from the questionnaires (implemented before and after the application of project-based learning in teaching English to 3rd grade students), direct observation of English lessons and students'

participation and involvement in traditional lessons and in project – based lessons some conclusions and suggestions concerning project-based learning could be made.

Project based learning makes English lessons more interesting and attractive for young learners. The project work puts the students in the centre of the educational process. They become active users of the foreign language. Project based learning develops various skills in the students (physical, moral, emotional, intellectual, social). Young learners enjoy project work. It raises their autonomy, self-confidence and motivation for learning of foreign language. Teachers should be informed about profits and advantages of project based learning. This can be achieved by organizing in-service trainings for language teachers, round table discussions and exchanging of good practices.

Although this study was carried out in Zaferiye Abalioğlu Primary School in Denizli, Turkey the results can be generalized.

## LITERATURE

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### **Appendix 1.**

#### Orientation Questionnaire

We would like to ask you to help us by answering the following questions concerning foreign language learning. This is not a test so there are no “right” or “wrong” answers and you don’t even have to write your name on it. We are interested in your personal opinion. Please give your answers sincerely as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation. Thank you very much for your help.

Please, answer the questions by simply giving marks from 1 to 5. (5 = very much, 4 = quite a lot, 3 = so-so, 2 = not really, 1 = not at all. ) For example if you like English very much circle (5), if you don’t like it at all circle (1).

|   |                              | 1<br>not at all | 2<br>not really | 3<br>so-so | 4<br>quite a lot | 5<br>very much |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Do you like English?         |                 |                 |            |                  |                |
| 2 | Is it easy to learn English? |                 |                 |            |                  |                |

|   |   |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| 3 | Do you manage well with tasks in English lessons?     |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4 | Do your classmates manage well with tasks in English? |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5 | What is your favourite subject at school?             |  |  |  |  |  |

**Appendix 2.** Sample of students work on the topic: “Clothes”  
(individual work)



**Appendix 3.** Sample of students work on the topic: “Clothes”( group work)



**Appendix 4.** Sample of students work on the topic: “Animals”



**Appendix 5.** Photos from the mini project: “Food Products”



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