PROJECT *'NATURAL ATTRACTIONS OF SLOVENIA'* – DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCIES DURING ENGLISH LESSONS AT SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Abstract:

Many Slovenian teachers have been participating in a national project called PODVIG (a Slovene abbreviation for 'Entrepreneurship in Secondary School'), which focuses on developing and enhancing 21st-century competencies. These are important for young graduates who are about to either continue with their studies or enter the job market and that is why it is even more essential to implement innovative methods in the school curriculum. The participants of the project regularly meet on a monthly basis and discuss examples of good practice. As an English teacher, eager to deal with the challenges of many kinds, I wanted to try something different. I also wanted my students to learn about their home country and talk about it with pride, so the outcome was a project named 'Natural Attractions of Slovenia'.

Keywords: competencies, innovative methods, co-creators, experiential learning process

1. Introduction

In this article, I will present how a class of the 1st year high school students bravely tackled various entrepreneurial competencies during English lessons. Teaching a foreign language is never a one-way street, but it always offers us endless possibilities to develop various skills and competencies, be it in mastering difficult grammatical structures and tenses, which students are usually not very fond of, or when it comes to arguing and persistently convincing the opposite pole during many discussions on slightly more controversial topics.

Developing the competencies that the participants in the Slovenian project 'PODVIG' emphasize is not really a new approach to teaching different school subjects, as we realize that we have been doing this for a long time. During the learning process, we always encourage students to be independent and proactive, creative and innovative.

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When working in groups, students also practise the competencies of organization, collaboration and resolving minor conflict situations, critical thinking, and others. On the other hand, through various activities within the PODVIG project, we can really focus on all the listed competencies and develop them thoroughly at multiple levels. Due to the complexity of our project described below, it was impossible to highlight one competence only because the contents and activities from different school subjects implemented in the whole process, constantly 'encouraged' students to deal with and strengthen several different competencies.

2. About the Idea and Reasons for the Project

It often happens that the best outcomes are of those ideas that arise spontaneously and unexpectedly just after class when I reflect on a particular lesson and the response of the students. This time, however, an idea occurred to me during a lesson on holidays and travel while teaching my students the new vocabulary from a lesson about travelling along the famous American Route 66. While researching cultural elements in the English language, I always try to deal with the issue how to make students with heterogeneous language skills and experiences compare cultural differences between countries, upgrade their knowledge and use it appropriately in various life situations. The two more important elements of the learning process are also how to upgrade a simple learning content, such as in our case 'holidays and travel', and make it more meaningful. In a certain segment, this particular topic can become too easy, uninteresting, or even too trivial for students, but through a different perspective, experiences and new discoveries, it can gain some 'added value'.

After some consideration, we set out to explore the more or less well-known Slovenian routes, destinations, natural and cultural sights and named our challenge 'Natural Attractions of Slovenia'. All topics from our textbook were discussed and learnt in accordance with the school curriculum and umbrella goals, though this time they served as the basis on which we built and developed the competencies of 'PODVIG', thus students did not focus only on reading and listening comprehension skills, learning new vocabulary, or creating texts of various kinds.

From the first short meditation, when we revived the memories of the summer holidays, to the brainstorming, when the students' minds were overwhelmed with the ideas on how to relive holidays and trips in our classroom during school time, little time passed. We dedicated quite a few more hours to the creative process during our English lessons, to which the students added a few extra hours of research in their free time at home and 'in the field'. An interesting fact and at the same time one of the reasons for our challenge, which I would highlight, is that students acquire most of the content knowledge in a foreign language indoors, at home or at school. 'Fieldwork' or 'field learning', which may be carried out more often within the framework of natural sciences or some other social science subjects, could in our case also include various excursions or trips organized by an individual family. However, these are often only short holidays

without any specific educational content. Sometimes these are trips abroad, and less often, as we find out, only short trips around the surrounding area or the wider homeland. For a successfully completed task, the students were required to go to the field this time. They come from different parts of our region and it would be organizationally too demanding to carry out all activities during school hours. The second reason was that sometimes teenagers do not even want to go on holiday with their family, or maybe they do not have this option at all. At the same time, when they stay in a more or less safe and comfortable shelter of their home, they admire photos of our wonderful planet on various social networks and quietly wish to visit all those beautiful places, preferably in the company of peers. The challenge for a parent or a teacher is how to introduce young people to another dimension of travel and exploring. We should at least try to convince them that 'the grass is very green' also at home and our surroundings are alive, interesting and pleasant to explore. Thus, when we added the possibility of role-playing to our idea, the students accepted the challenge and our journey began.

3. Planning, Organization and Objectives of 'Different' Lessons

The instructions on how to tackle the project were brief and not intended to limit the way of thinking. The topics were determined in advance, but finally agreed on in the classroom, according to the constructive suggestions of the students and students' abilities to perform the tasks.

In English class, students are already accustomed to working in pairs or groups, depending on the seating order. The project work required an alternative strategy. The students divided into groups according to their place of residence. All groups also included the students who did not socialize at school or in their free time and did not even know each other well before entering secondary school. Each group appointed a leader and picked their own topic and form of presentation. The groups had to agree on the selection themselves through their 'more popular' communication channels offered by the modern technology, as one of the requirements was that the themes and modes of presentation did not repeat, moreover, each work had to be authentic in its own right.

Students could choose from the following topics:
- Ecotourism in our region;
- The Road(s) Less Travelled;
- Off the Beaten Track - exploring new places;
- Being Responsible Tourists and Travellers;
- A Staycation - Supporting the Local Community.

Another requirement was that the students had to look for tourist brochures at home, or walk to the nearest tourist agency and ask for help there. They could also use e-materials and verified data online, which they searched for and evaluated on their own, in the group, and with my help. The students chose accessible and effective tools and aids, while looking for innovative approaches to problem solving, along with a great deal of criticism of their own ideas or the ideas of other participants.

They also successfully used a lot of the technical knowledge they had acquired before entering secondary school, or in computer science classes in secondary school. Equipped with a variety of teaching aids and their own resources, they sometimes found themselves in a situation where they had to choose wisely from the given options, also because of the type of their presentation.

They could choose among the following options:

- Filming and screening of a short film that included a role play (e.g. a tourist guide talking about the sights, local specialities, eco farms, history, geographical features…),
- filming a documentary that included a role play,
- filming and broadcasting reportage, which also included a role play (e.g. a journalist explores the region, the local offer, talks to the local people or to the people in charge of tourism development, etc.),
- filming and broadcasting the news which covers e.g. less known sights in the area,
- PowerPoint presentation of one of the topics that students explore in detail + designing a leaflet or a tourist brochure.

Each group also had to make a glossary of new words they learnt while working. During the project students really connected and developed competencies of collaboration and organizing activities within the group, together and without disagreements 'jumped over' obstacles, used different resources and ICT, learnt to perform in front of an audience, at the same time they showed a lot of innovation and creativity.

As the students undertook the planning quite well, they easily overcame the obstacles that arose at the outset and took some minor slips as examples of learning from mistakes.

4. Reflection and Evaluation

The students who were less confident and fluent in English also participated extremely well. They quickly became enthusiastic about a different approach to language learning, and from the initial feeling of discomfort at the thought of public speaking, they switched to considering it as a new challenge, helped by the thought that they would not remain alone and that they could rely on their classmates and the teacher. The students who did not know how to perform in front of an audience, or those who preferred to avoid it due to certain personality traits, removed a huge obstacle and with the encouragement of their classmates and the teacher, successfully overcame their fears. Consequently, this contributed to the additional internal motivation and high level of readiness to co-create new conditions for learning English, as well as finding new or different problem-solving strategies. They thought about their efforts, about the amount of work and energy they put into the project, they evaluated the presentation, performance, pronunciation, the correct formation of sentence and grammatical structures. The feedback was very valuable to both, the students and me. All students had the opportunity to actualize their

work and achievements on a personal level, within the group and in the classroom while viewing the presentations of all the participants.

In our case, some principles of formative monitoring of progress and the method of assessment have replaced the classic oral assessment. Peer evaluation encouraged the students to judge the quality of their own work as well as the work of the whole team, to think critically and provide feedback at a higher level. It also encouraged them to accept constructive criticism to improve certain segments of the presentations, from the correct and clear pronunciation to nonverbal communication with the audience or a natural and confident performance without stage fright. After the appropriate self-evaluation and feedback, they received from their classmates and the teacher, the students' task was assessed accordingly.

5. Conclusion

In our case, learning proved to be a multifaceted, mainly experiential process in which students were involved as individual participants with their own mindset and different strategies of acquiring knowledge through their own experience. Simultaneously these students were also group participants actively involved in the work of the organization where the flow of information was faster but more selective. Self-reflection and reflecting on the experience at multiple level upgraded the learning process.

Following the guidelines and requirements of the curriculum, we sensibly incorporated a common topic into broader frameworks and went beyond them while not wasting time on the subject matter that needed to be covered in accordance with the standards of knowledge from the curriculum and were thus able to realize all the main objectives of the lesson.

English as a subject can always be appealing and presented in a different way, but the dynamics of teaching through project teamwork takes on new dimensions. Teenagers usually spend a considerable part of their everyday life more or less intentionally in contact with English, mostly when they browse the Internet. A variety of informal and entertaining content online all too often gives them a false sense of eloquence, fluency and proficiency. In our case, choosing an alternative way of learning had a markedly opposite but positive effect and we managed to change 'what I have to' into 'what I want', so that the students took responsibility for their work, learning and developing a wide range of competencies. They consolidated and upgraded their previous knowledge of English, while acquiring and deepening some general knowledge from other subjects and fields, such as geography, history, tourism, and journalism.

My students had a great opportunity to actively plan and create the learning process, therefore their work was done not only in a more relaxed and fun way, but also in a more thorough way, so the finished films and documentaries were authentic, appealing and instructive.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

About the Author

Eva Kristan is a secondary school teacher of English as a Foreign Language at School Centre Postojna, Slovenia. She teaches students at grammar school and in vocational programmes. Her main interests are cultural diversity, mindfulness in education, new educational technologies and English for Specific Purposes.

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