

Experiential and Project-Based Learning in Foreign Language Education: The “How” That Can Change Everything in The Field

Elisavet Veliou

House of English Language School and Research Centre, Greece

Abstract

Language learning has been constantly changing and developing according to the needs and demands of society. From grammar-translation to communicative approach we have come a long way in order to realise that learning a language should focus on the things the students can do, on the productive and receptive skills and not on the memorisation of grammar rules and exercises that have nothing to do with real life. We now know that teachers should aim at creating not only students who know the language but mainly students who use the language and express themselves through it.

However, together with the needs of society, our students have changed too. We are called to educate children who are native users of technology, who are easily bored and many times lack the motivation to become interested or engaged in the learning procedure. It is our role as modern educators to provide them with this motivation and create a learning environment where lessons become holistic experiences that put the student in the centre of learning. This paper will show ways the language can be taught through an experience. It suggests examples of teaching English as a foreign language in a different way, by having students be part of a fairy tale or a film, time travel or through some interesting creative writing techniques. We will also cover different types of project-based learning and the positive effect that it has as a valuable learning tool on the students, their learning of the target language and the development of 21st century skills, such as problem solving, communication, creativity, information literacy and presentation skills.

Keywords: innovation; experience; projects; creativity; experiential; holistic

1. Introduction

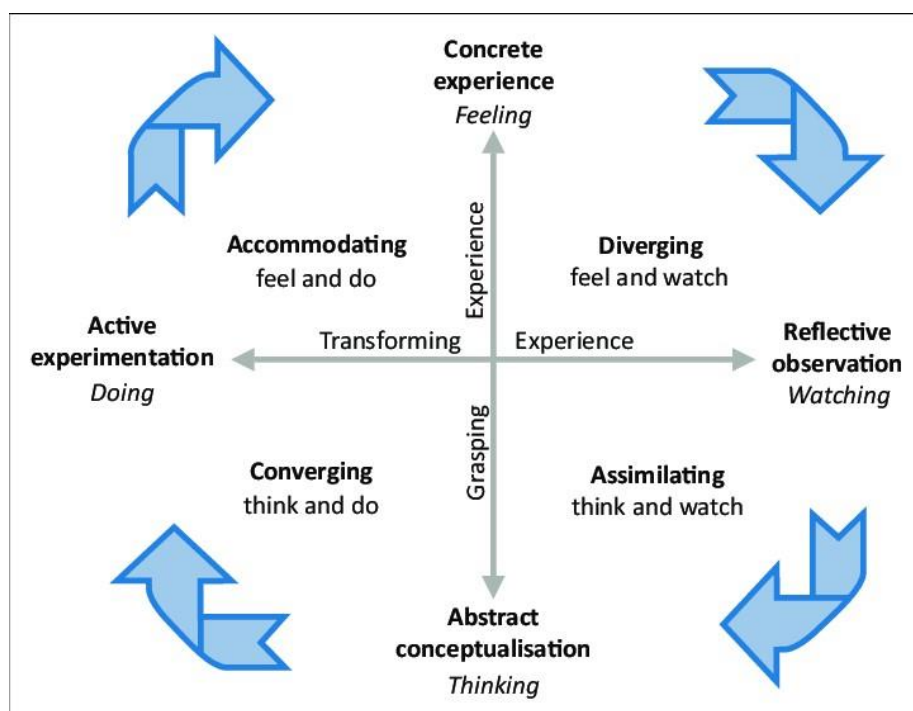
Many of the educational practices used in Greek language schools today largely focus on a grammar-based model of teaching the language, having as a main aim to pass the exams and not to teach the actual language. Some blame parents for that, others teachers, while there are those who believe that this is how the system works and it is very difficult to change it. In this paper we will see parents' and teachers' opinion on experiential and project-based learning and then we will move on to analyse the results of the surveys as regards to what parents really want and how this will be achieved in the classroom environment and what teachers believe about experiential and project-based learning and how they implement it in their teaching. Finally, we will explore experiential and project-based learning in the classrooms of our language school and based on my empirical research. We will see and analyse lessons and projects and how students are taught grammar, vocabulary and skills by creating experiences or through projects and how this way of teaching methodology can transform ELT and prepare students for the needs of the 21st century.

When we want to assess a new student most of the times, we test grammar. Parents evaluate a teacher's job based on their child's grammatical accuracy; we feel safe when teaching grammar. How do we teach grammar, though? I have noted down some ways of teaching it placing the most traditional one on the top.

Linear model → learner passive recipient of information

- Presenting the rule → memorising the rule → translation exercises and practice
- Presenting the rule → controlled practice and production
- Presenting the example → elicit the rule → practice → production
- Finding examples in context and analysing them → learners exploring the language → eliciting the rule → practice → production

According to the experiential learning cycle presented below, none of these ways can be named experiential though, in none of these ways in other words, the learner is taught and learns the language by experience.



In the book “The Experiential Educator” it is mentioned that “Learners receive information through concrete experiences and transform it through reflection and conceptualization and then transform it again by acting to change the world including what information is attended to in the new experience. They are both receivers and creators of information.” (Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb, The Experiential Educator). This is how language learning works. You expose children to an experience; they live and use the new language or the structure and then students themselves discover the use of it.

Teaching English as a foreign language, if you want to do it differently, in Greece is a challenge. We started by experimenting after lots of studying, testing techniques and methods to see if they work and finally concluded that we do want our students just to know the language but we mainly want them to use it. We had parents, students and

teachers answered questionnaires and we analysed them and of course we assessed our methods not only in terms of fulfilling the language objectives but also in terms of succeeding in the exams.

Instead of teaching rules and wasting time on out of context structure we created learning experiences and organised projects. And the outcome was amazing.

2. Creating the Experience and Project Based Learning

2.1 What is the better way for Students to Learn a foreign language today?

The

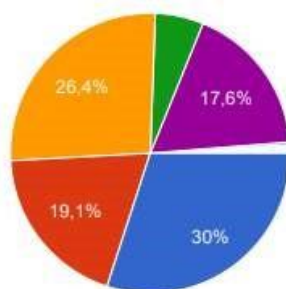
Parents' and the teachers' opinion.

We have conducted two online surveys, one for parents and one for teachers all around Greece using Google Forms and Microsoft Forms respectively. We did this to see how parents and teachers perceive experiential and project-based learning, how they feel about it and what they think are the benefits of it. We also wanted to see if both parents and teachers actually really understood the “why” behind those teaching and learning methods and when they understood the “why”, if they had a full realisation of the “how” and the connection between the “why” and the “how”.

Seven hundred parents from all around Greece 94.6 % of them being women, covering all kinds of Education levels, were asked 1) What they think is the most important reason for a child to learn a foreign language nowadays 2) What they think is the most important thing in second language acquisition and what should be the focus of a modern language school according to that 3) What they think is the most effective way for an elementary school student to learn grammar and use of English as an EFL student. The answers to the question are as follow:

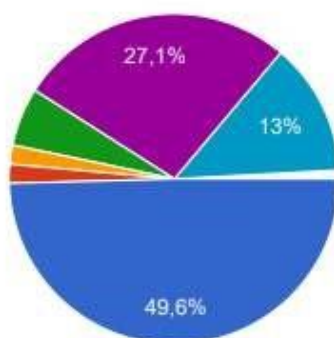
In question one, the majority answered that the most important reason to learn a foreign language is the ability to communicate and express yourself in it. 26,4% answered that the most important reason to learn a foreign language is to learn another culture, recognise and accept the “other” and become more tolerant towards what is different from you. 19,1 %

answered that the importance lies on the cognitive abilities that are improved when someone learns a foreign language while a 17,6% believed that someone should study and learn a foreign language for the employment prospects that this knowledge will offer to them in the future.



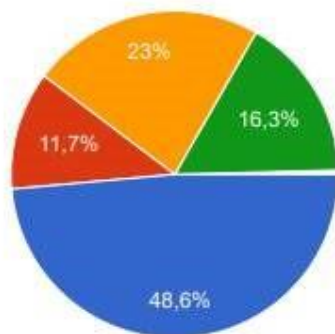
Question 1

As far as the second question is concerned, a great majority of 49,6% believes that the most important thing when a child learns a foreign language is the implementation and teaching of 21st century skills in the learning procedure and the development of the 4Cs. 27,1% believes that the emphasis should be on the development of productive skills such as speaking and writing and 13% believes that the focus should be on the Vocabulary development of the students.



Question 2

Finally, in the last question parents answered that the most effective way for elementary aged students to learn grammar is:



Question 3

According to the 48, 6% by creating an experience for the students and let them live the grammatical point in it.

According to the 23% by presenting the rule, giving an example and assigning exercises.

According to the 16,3% of the parents by assigning activities or exercises and let students discover the use of the new rule without presenting any rules at all.

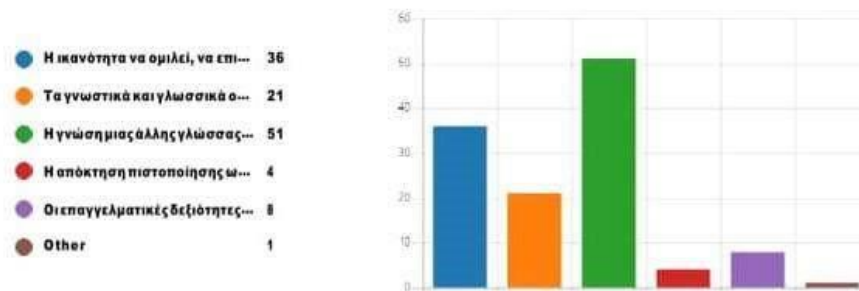
According to a 11,7 % by giving the example and let the students discover the rule.

The results of the above research show that the great majority of parents are in favour of experiential learning and that is probably connected with the fact that they consider communication the most important reason why someone should learn a language. However, when it comes to the “how”, the way students should be taught grammar to use it communicatively-since that is according to them the main reason to learn it-parents seem to be a bit confused. A great majority agrees that creating experiences is the best way, thus experiential learning, but there is also a considerable amount that believes that traditional ways of teaching grammar to young learners’ work.

Moving on to the teachers' research, 121 foreign language teachers were asked six questions: 1) What they think is the most important reason for a child to learn a foreign language nowadays 2) What they think is the most important thing in second language acquisition and what should be the focus of a modern language school according to that 3) What they think is the most effective way for an elementary school student to learn grammar and use of English as an EFL student. 4) What they want to achieve through the experiential learning. 5) What they would like to change in FLT Education. 6) What they think is the greatest obstacle when implementing experiential and project-based learning in their teaching.

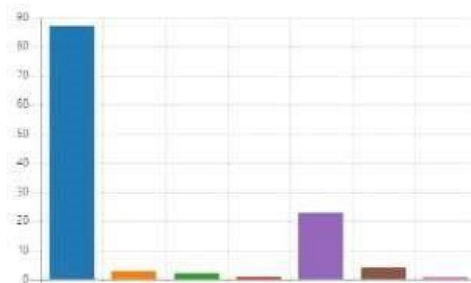
Regarding the first question, the majority answered that the most important reason to learn a foreign language is to learn another culture, recognise and accept the “other” and become more tolerant towards what is different from you. Thirty-six out of the 121 teachers answered that the most important reason to learn a foreign language is the ability to communicate and express yourself in it. Twenty one out of the 121 teachers believe that that the importance lies on the cognitive abilities that are improved when someone learns a foreign language. Finally, only a few teachers believe that employment prospects or obtaining a certificate is an important factor in order for someone to learn a foreign language.

We can definitely see that although communication and tolerance towards the “other” are both for teachers and parents very important reasons in order to learn a language, teachers do not believe that certificates or employment prospects are very important reasons for someone to learn a language while parents, still have that “old-fashioned” notion. This is probably because teachers are aware of the fact that knowing a language does not necessary mean having a certificate proving it but actually being able to communicate and express yourself in it. Experiential and project-based learning, communicative approaches to language learning and teaching in general aid language acquisition and help students become capable users of the language. Parents need to understand that when teaching test takers, it is almost impossible to prepare them for the needs of their time, implement creative tasks and alternative teaching methods and achieve the communicative result that they desire.



Question 1

Regarding the second question, the vast majority of teachers believes that the most important thing when a child learns a foreign language is the implementation and teaching of 21st century skills in the learning procedure and the development of the 4Cs and 23 out of 121 answered that the emphasis should be on the development of productive skills such as speaking and writing. So, here we could argue that there is an agreement between parents and teachers both of them believing that 21st century skills, the 4Cs and the ability to speak and write in the target language should be the main focus when someone is teaching or learning it. Again, the focus of both groups is on communication, creativity and the production of the language, all promoted through experiential and project-based learning- still, the “how” is not clear in both groups since a considerable number of answers concerning the way to teach grammar to elementary school students involves rules and exercises, remains of the old and traditional Grammar- Translation Method as you will see in the question that follows.



Question 2

In the third question teachers answered that the most effective way for elementary aged students to learn grammar is:

According to 61 out of 121 teachers creating an experience for the students and let them live the grammatical point in it is the ideal way to teach grammar to young learners.

According to 22 out of 121 teachers the ideal way to present grammar to young learners is by giving the example and let the students discover the rule.

21 out of 121 students believe that presenting the rule, giving examples and then doing exercises works better with young learners while 14 out of 121 teachers answered that assigning activities or exercises and let students discover the use of the new rule without presenting any rules at all is the best way.



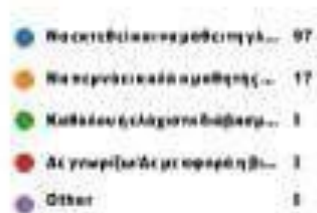
Question 3

The fourth question teachers were asked, was about their main goal when using experiential learning methods. A great majority (97 out of 121 teachers), answered that their main goal was to expose learners to the language naturally and motivate them. 17 out of 121 replied that they used experiential learning methods in their lessons so as to make their learners have fun while only a few teachers answered that they are not aware of any experiential learning methods or they just use them to minimise homework time.

So, teachers are aware of the reasons why using experiential learning methods for the right reasons. According to Wurdinger (2005, p.18),

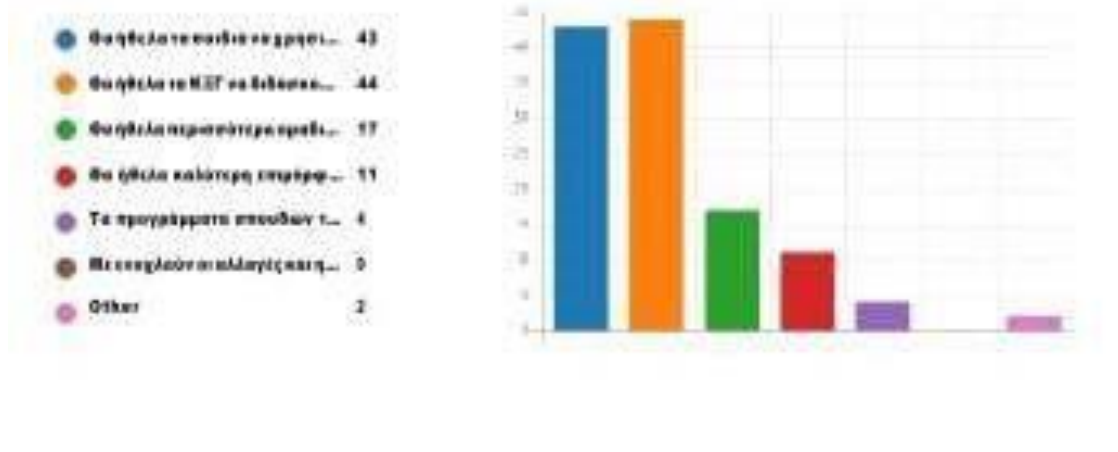
“It appears that the primary aim of formal education is often focused on attaining content, which tends to sever emotions from the learning process, resulting in a lack of desire and motivation. When students choose experiences, which are meaningful to them, they become excited and pursue learning on their own. In essence they become self-directed learners.”

Motivating students is one of the main reasons why using experiential learning methods when teaching a foreign language and provide them with reasons to pursue their own learning. Educators have clearly understood that and it is surely important for the field that such a great majority of them has realised the importance behind the “why”.



Question 4

Question 5 was about the changes teachers would like to see in Foreign Language Teaching Education.



Question 5

44 out of the 121 teachers said that they would like to see Language schools teaching through CLIL, literature, Art etc giving students the chance to develop language skills and their talents, critical thinking and problem-solving skills at the same time.

43 out of the 121 teachers who answered the survey said that they would like to see students using the target language in many different, creative ways in the classroom.

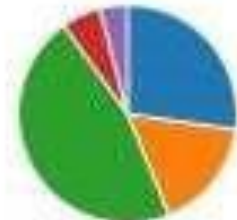
17 out of the 121 teachers said that they would like to see more group projects, presentations and creativity in the learning procedure.

11 out of the 121 teachers replied that professional development of the teachers is what the field needs the most.

Only a few teachers actually answered that the changes in the field should be on the teaching hour or the exams.

The final question was about the main difficulty in implementing experiential teaching methods and project-based learning in their teaching.

Teachers answer to the point this time as well, as most of the changes they would like to see are connected with experiential and project-based learning or with the professional development required in order for them to be able to teach in a more alternative way.



Question 6

Almost half of the teachers who took part in the survey (56 out of the 121) answered that the main difficulty is that there is not meaningful knowledge and enough professional development from the part of the teachers on experiential and project-based learning so as to implement them in the learning procedure.

33 out of the 121 teachers answered that there is disbelief from the part of the parents as regards the efficiency of these methods in the field of Foreign Language Education.

23 out of 121 teachers answered that there is not an organised support plan from the part of the schools and language schools in order for the teachers to implement these teaching methods in their lessons.

Only a few teachers answered that the obstacle is that the students are not familiar with this kind of teaching methodology.

The answers to the last question are very interesting since up to a point they are connected to the previous ones. Teachers believe that the main obstacle for the implementation of experiential and project-based learning at schools and language schools is their own lack of knowledge and need for professional development in the specific field. Although there are teachers who believe that it is the parents' disbelief or the schools' lack of support to blame, the majority answered that it is actually their insecurity or insufficiency that makes it difficult for them to implement experiential learning methods or project-based learning in their teaching.

All in all, we see that although there is a realisation of the “why” behind experiential and project-based learning and although a considerable number of teachers understands the “how”, there is still a long way for parents and some educators to make the connections between the “why” and the “how”. We ask for communication and productive skills, we emphasize the importance of 21st century skills, CLIL, literature, Art and Projects in the learning procedure, but at the same time we see grammar teaching as a set of rules, examples to be analysed and exercises to be done. In order to be able to see the extraordinary results of the implementation of experiential and project-based learning in the ELT classroom we have to think out of the box and focus on the student and the experience.

2.2 Creating the Experience. What is really the best way for students to learn a foreign language today and why?

The photos you can see here are part of a grammar lesson. No rules, no books, but an experience created by the teacher for the Ss in order to receive and create information. A holistic language learning experience.





It is easy to guess what the aim was, to talk about the past and in particular to introduce the past simple of the verb to be. However, we changed the rules, looked at things differently and decided to let the children travel in the past, be exposed to the new language, use it to talk about the past and in the final minutes of our lesson just to make sure that everyone had actually understood the function of the new form we did some gap filling exercises to practice the new form-all students excelled by the way-and elicited the use of it.

In the following picture, you can see a thorough case study of this lesson.

Creating the experience

A trip back in time ➡ teaching was/were (A' Senior case study)

- A learning space: tickets, equipment, time machine and sound effects.
- The actual experience: set the scene, use visuals, delve into the experience, use the new language while living it in a trip back in time.
- Students create meaning not only by observing but also by deep involvement in experience.
- Students use the new language orally (There was/There were affirmative, question, negative and short answers) having made the connection between the form and the function (conceptualisation)
- If they are asked to do a task (controlled practice) they can use the new form and they can explain why they have used it. They can talk about what there was or there wasn't in their town in the past based on some visual aids and then move on and talk about life now and in the past in general (action).

Moving on to the next lesson, which we call tea in Britain, you will be presented how we introduce Past simple to our Students. Learners are introduced to the etiquette; they practice their listening skills and then they learn the history of tea in Britain through storytelling. They have the texts in front of them of course so as to notice the -ed form which is the new language they are introduced to.

Some people have asked me why bothering creating the experience instead of just giving them a text and read them a story. According to Chris Biffle “students were completely engaged in class when they were emotionally involved in lessons that required seeing, saying, hearing and physically moving.” I would add another sense and say tasting as well.

You can see the steps in relation to the experiential learning cycle here:

Creating the experience: past simple

- A learning space
- The actual experience: set the scene, use visuals, delve into the experience
- Students create meaning not only by observing but also by deep involvement in experience.
- Students use the new language orally (-ed form, short answers in past simple etc) having made the connection between the form and the function (conceptualisation)
- If they are asked to do a task (controlled practice) they can use the new form and they can explain why they have used it. They can talk about things that happened in the past and their past routines in the same way (action).
- When they come across an irregular verb the teacher explains that these verbs form the past in a different way and introduces a matching game or another kinaesthetic play based activity for the Ss to explore the new forms
so the cycle begins again

When we do not just teach the language but create the experiences for students to learn the language the cycle begins again and again because language learning is an ongoing process. Ss are taught something, while they discover, use and learn new language they come up some new one and it is our role as 21st century educators to guide them through the learning procedure as creator of experiences and co-traveller in the journey of knowledge.

Of course, experiences can be created not only to teach grammar but also vocabulary, writing and speaking skills.

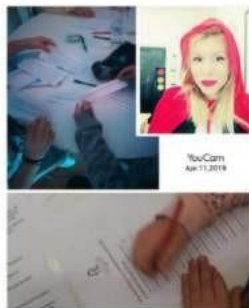
Teaching topic vocabulary



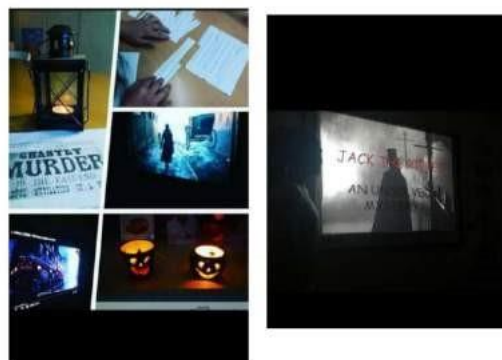
In the above pictures, for example, you can see how we taught travelling and places topic vocabulary by turning our school into an airport. We also used VRE for this experience which really had a great effect on the learning outcome.

And in the following pictures you can see moments from experiences we created to teach writing production, bringing fairy tales into life or creating our own magic potions and writing stories about them. In both cases grammar was not the main focus but it was practiced meaningfully in context. We even went back to Victorian London to solve the mystery around the identity of Jack the Ripper. During that lesson with our B2 Ss we even reproduced the sounds and the atmosphere of the time using sound effects and photocopies of real newspapers of that time. Ss as Scotland Yard detectives, practiced all skills using language holistically again, were very motivated and finally they gave a presentation after conducting their own research on the identity of Jack the Ripper.

Teaching skills (and more)



Unsolved mysteries: Who was Jack the Ripper?



Experiential learning and teaching through creating experiences had a great effect on the way our students learnt the language. By the end of the school year students could achieve much more “can do statements” than the CEFR had set for their level, but the most amazing thing was that even weak students who could not achieve high scores in gap filling exercises or term tests, could actually produce language orally or in short texts with very few mistakes, achieving a great communicative result.

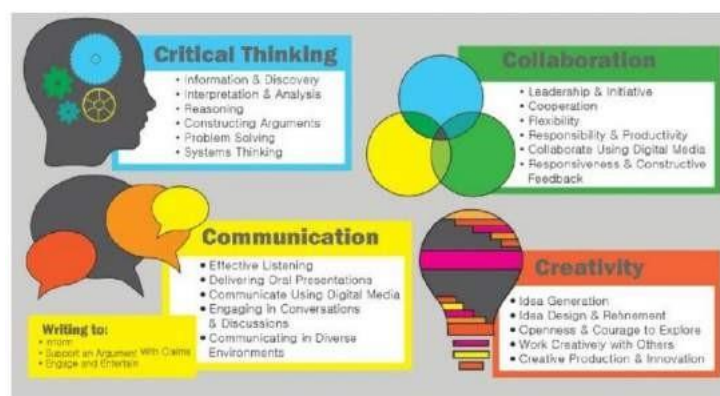
2.3 Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning is also a great way to teach language and important soft skills. Ss are given a task and they explore the language through it until presenting it to their classmates or a larger audience. A huge problem when it comes to inspiring students' love for learning is that we teach them things, we teach them the language but we do not give them the chance to actually use it. Of course, PBL is very much connected with experiential learning, it is part of experiential learning. It provokes serious thinking and students acquire new knowledge through it. Moreover, they are

called to collaborate, communicate their ideas and finally present them in public. They use language meaningfully; they use it in context for a specific purpose and they acquire it by discovering it through active participation, maximizing their role in the EFL classroom.

If you take a look at the 21st century skills in the following picture, which are considered essential for modern students to succeed in school and the workplace you will easily understand how experiential and project-based learning promote them all and prepare students for the needs of their time.

The 4 Cs



The findings of classroom observations and questionnaires answered by our students, showed that PBL and experiential learning promote students' enthusiasm, creativity and collaborative learning ability. Moreover, all our students achieved high scores in their speaking exams (Cambridge, Language Cert), even the ones who considered themselves weak or spent minimum or no time doing their homework.

When it comes to writing, my empirical research showed that although some students had trouble using the language accurately in gap filling exercises, they achieved a very good result when asked to produce a written text. That, had an effect on their exam results too, since learners who had low or very low scores in the book's tests achieved high scores in high stakes exams where language is tested as Use of English and through skills and not in the way it is tested in most test booklets provided by Greek Publishers.

Although I personally do not consider having a certificate equivalent to knowing a language, my point is that PBL and experiential learning not only have a transformative result in the way students learn but also helps in passing the exams, which means satisfying parents too.

Moving on I shall present you examples of some big projects we have done in our school. The first one is The Live Wax Museum. The Live Wax Museum is used in many countries as a way to teach and practice history. The project started in October and students had to collect information about a famous person, athlete or a historical figure. Then, they had to write a text about them. Next, they had to write a short summary of the text and prepare their presentation and their project. Young learners had to choose a fairy tale character or a superhero and guided by their teachers they researched some information about them, wrote a short text and prepared their presentation. We organised an event and both parents and other students could press the button and hear the live exhibits' presentations. Finally, we had a panel discussion in our classrooms where students discussed the things they learned about all characters. Speaking skills, listening skills, writing skills, research skills and presentation skills were the main focus, language was taught holistically and the result was truly magical.





The Live Wax Museum

Business Fair



In the picture above, you can see the preparations for another big project, our Business Fair. Students had to create their own businesses and advertise them to the public. In the case of that project, we had a collaboration between students of different levels, since for example the b' juniors had to prepare a poster for the A' Senior's business and a' juniors had to create a logo. Upper intermediate levels had

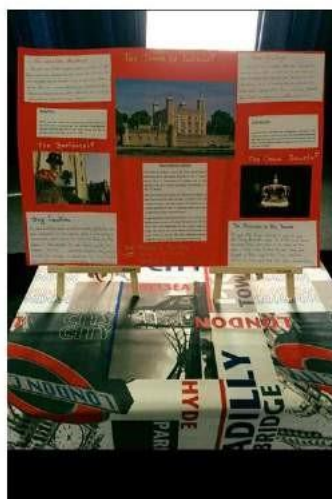
to promote their city by creating a tour of it and sell it as travel agents to tourists. Unfortunately, we weren't able to complete this project due to COVID-19 and the lockdown but we hope we'll finish it in the near future.

Another Big Project that worked really well in our school was the following one, which was called "A trip Around the World in search of the Crown Jewels". All B1+ students created a project based on famous landmarks or locations of countries around the world. They carried out a research, they wrote a text about it, and prepared their presentation. On the day of the event, students from lower levels had to solve puzzles which took them from country to country where the students who had created the projects gave them a presentation of each landmark or location and clues in order to go to the next one. The leaders of each team were teachers in the roles of famous detectives, like Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple, just to monitor the whole procedure. The goal was to find who stole the crown jewels and in a trip around the world and through English history they explored the language, used it meaningfully with a purpose and had great fun while doing it so.

Of course, the students who prepared the projects, studied English history and Geography in order to prepare them, so CLIL was integrated as well as in the whole learning procedure.

Pictures of the project follow:

Students' Projects



Our B2 and Advanced Students' Projects. They were used as the stops, where younger students had to solve a puzzle in order to move on.

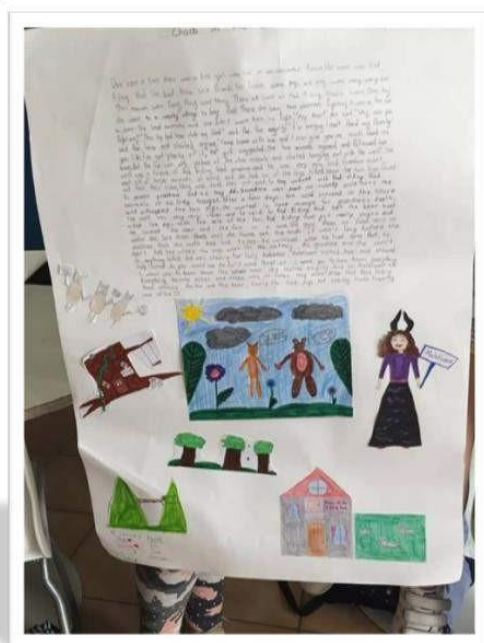
“Good teaching is 1/4 preparation and 3/4 theater.”
Gail Godwin



Teachers as coordinators and part of the project

Mini projects should also be part of the syllabus since they prepare students for the big ones, promote the 4Cs of course, they engage students in the learning procedure and again language is taught and learned holistically.

Mini projects: alternative endings to fairy tales & creative writing



3. Conclusion

All these lessons and activities presented in this paper required a lot of preparation from the part of the teachers, research, time management skills, creativity and organisation not only in terms of time but also of the syllabus. It surely is not the easy way to teach the language, but I can definitely tell you that it is the most engaging one, which teaches our students much more things than just language. You have to deal with parents' questions and doubt sometimes, with students who are not used to that way of teaching and learning but mostly with your own doubts and worries if this way really works and if it is worth the time and effort put on it. Years of empirical research and happy, successful students who do not only know but also use the language meaningfully have proved as you have been shown only one thing; It does work and it is worth it.

Acknowledgments

This paper is an output of the empirical research of the last five years in our English school & Research Centre. The greatest part of the research was conducted the past two years and the outcomes of our method and approach were visible quite recently by seeing the generations of children who started studying English with us succeeding in high-stakes exams and using the English language meaningfully, communicatively and successfully. So, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the many parents who trusted us and believed in a different Education System, when it comes to teaching English as a foreign language.

My gratitude also goes to my husband, co-teacher and co-owner in our school for being part of my dream of a different, innovative Education and to my team of the past two years who have been working really hard in order to make this dream come true. Special thanks to my colleague and English teacher in our school, Miss Glykeria Mangela for helping me in the part of the research.

Finally, I am very grateful to my students who helped me see through their eyes, made me want to become a better person and a better educator and have always helped me choose

“the road not taken” and that has made the difference in my life and theirs as well.

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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