

ARTYKUŁY

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PROJECT WORK – LEARNING FROM FAILURES

In this article I look at a popular form of experiential, task-based learning – project work. As a practitioner, I fully acknowledge its advantages, such as (Fried-Booth 1988: 9): bridging the gap between classroom and real world; the motivating power of co-operation; the learner's personal involvement and the satisfaction at the tangible final result; learner-centredness of project work and its potential for skill integration in language learning. In this article, however – as implied in the headline – I concentrate on drawbacks of on-task collaboration, referring mainly to projects carried out online.

I start by presenting ethnographic and survey data – from two of my numerous courses based on online project work. Then I discuss three potential reasons for the presented state of being: individual, cultural and task-related problems connected with (online) collaboration. Finally, I offer some pedagogical implications as to how the drawbacks presented can be avoided or, at least, minimized.

ONLINE PROJECT WORK IN TEFL TEACHER TRAINING COURSES – RESEARCH DATA

The research data presented in this section come from two courses which included online project work: 1) *ELT Methodology* online, taught in Spring 2012 to 20 students of an MA English Studies programme; and 2) *Collaborative online*, a course in language as a social semiotic, taught from autumn 2012 till spring 2013 to 11 volunteers, ongoing/former students of English Studies. It is important to point out that the participants of *ELT Methodology* had a choice of tasks and generally avoided project work showing a strong preference for individual activities, whereas the participants of *Collaborative online*, who were offered a non-option course syllabus, carried out all 8 projects quite willingly, expressing their appreciation of the collaborative tasks in the post-task satisfaction surveys. Nevertheless, both courses revealed a number of project execution and attitude problems related to project work.

To begin with, as demonstrated by the discourse samples presented below, in each of the courses there was a general project working mode, which could be described as *collective* rather than *collaborative*. In distinguishing between

the two, my point of departure is an assumption that good on-task collaboration is based on two important factors: proper division of labour between the team members as well as the dialogic, ongoing-feedback mode of their interactions. While true *collaborative* will include both aspects, what I mean by *collective* amounts to proper division of labour alone, without the necessary interaction and feedback offered by team members to each other while on task.

Such a collective working mode is visible in samples 1 and 2 below. Sample 1 illustrates an email exchange of 3 students carrying a task which required creating a set of classroom activities based on an article all team members were supposed to have read. Sample 2 is a screenshot of team work at GoogleDrive, an online collaboration environment enabling both synchronous (chat) and asynchronous (comments) opinion exchange while on task. This particular course assignment, made available via GoogleDrive, requires discussing enclosed authentic teacher feedback and, based on this, proposing a set of guidelines on how to constructively evaluate student work. When the screenshot was taken there were two students – Michał and Patrycja – simultaneously working on the document, together yet on their own, neither of them inclined to dialogue with the other party, even though Patrycja actually used one of the communication tools mentioned above (comments; there is a reply function at GoogleDrive).

Sample 1. Online collaboration; ELT Methodology.

B (6/03/2012)

Hello!

I like Gosia's activity: simple, right for the pupils at that age.

I've just written 3 activities.

Look at them. I'm waiting for your opinions:)

G (7/03/2012)

Hi,

We are getting closer to the end of this project :)

I added one activity and attached the updated file. (Still one to go.)

It's not so easy to make them but I would be really interested to see later what other people included in their activities. I think it could be helpful for the future.

B (7/03/2012)

Hi!

I wrote my last activity.

What do you think about?

Sample 2. Online collaboration; *Collaborative online*.

- All your strategies are good, and the list you provided shows that you understand Dörnyei's guidelines.
What would have made the essay better is adding some reflections. As it is, your work is just a list of things you do. *pleasant, constructive pleasant; constructive*
- your essay is quite interesting and shows good understanding of Dörnyei's guidelines. The language is ok, and the whole piece of writing is pleasant to read.
What I would like to see more of is the reflection alongside the list of things you do. And the intro seems a bit too long. *pleasant x2, humanistic x2, constructive x2*
- the assignment is well written and very convincing - the second paragraph gives a structure to your later examples and reflections.
If I were to make a wish list - the writing could be a little more careful ... *pleasant, empty (lack of elaboration of the last point made by the author x2)*
- I like your essay very much. It's well-structured, well written and to the point. *pleasant, [succinct :)]* –Michael
- Your essay is well written (adding a sum-up section would make it even better), and shows good understanding of the ideas at issue. The examples of teacher routines you give are appropriate but not very original. *pleasant, constructive*
- This is a very well written assignment. A bit too long, but all your arguments show a reflective mind and a (potentially) very good teacher. *pleasant*

The screenshot shows a forum thread with four comments by a user named Patycja B. The comments are as follows:

- Comment 1:** 7:58 PM Yesterday. Text: "That's a very humanistic approach. What a choice of words... 'What I would like to see more...' ;) Isn't it really constructive and motivating :)?"
- Comment 2:** 8:04 PM Yesterday. Text: "excellent example of an indirect speech act :D . Me gusta :)"
- Comment 3:** 8:02 PM Yesterday. Text: "If I were the addressee, I would probably ask the author of this very feedback to expound on it." Below the text is a text input field with the placeholder "Reply to this comment...".
- Comment 4:** 8:08 PM Yesterday. Text: "I like the feedback, because it doesn't just say 'well done' ;), but in a short way explains why the essay is good."

The unwillingness to dialogue demonstrated above may be related to either – or both – of the other two collaboration problems observed during each of the described courses. First of them is a negative – or, at best, indifferent – attitude to peer feedback demonstrated explicitly by *Collaborative online* in one post-task evaluation survey. Based on cited comments (Sample 3), it can be noted that peer evaluation is found to be substandard, of little value and inferior to teacher feedback.

Sample 3. Selected reactions to peer feedback to an essay assignment; *Collaborative online*.

Q: To what extent did you rely on peer feedback in the final draft of your essay?

A1: I didn't. I left the essay as it was, because I was more interested in the teacher's feedback.

A2: To very little extent.

A3: I didn't agree with the feedback.

A4: Most of the feedback seemed to be art for art's sake.

Another factor related to the *collective* – and not *collaborative* – mode of project execution is a belief that individual work is superior – faster, more effective, more natural – than teamwork. Post-task evaluation offered by the participants of *Collaborative online* is frequently to the effect of the comments cited in Sample 4, the second of which is a visual joke one of the course participants found on the Internet and shared with the group to express this – quite universal – sentiment.

Sample 4. A typical comment on collaborative work.

I prefer working on my own, because it is less time-consuming and more productive. Sometimes I have a feeling that group work impedes progress.



PROJECT WORK – WHEN AND WHY WE FAIL

Various problems arising during project execution are well known even to the greatest advocates of this type of collaboration. In her well-known book on project work, alongside the advantages of on-task co-operation in language learning, cited in the introductory section to this article, Fried-Booth (1988: 10) lists a number of drawbacks which may prohibit the group from working and learning effectively. They include: organization and time management – projects, especially long-term ones take up a considerable amount of time; monitoring – when students take the project out of class, teacher control is minimal; or personal problems – some people are not very good at group work, and there may be conflicts that prevent successful task completion. While, like all ELT and TT practitioners, I am perfectly familiar with the above-quoted trio, I think it needs reconsideration and, possibly, completion. To begin with, when it comes to individual characteristics – which most definitely influenced the attitudes of my tessees quoted earlier in this article – I see them in terms of the challenge of individual differences rather than “personal problems” and intend to argue to the fore of such an attitude later in this article. In turn, when it comes to other drawbacks visible in the data presented in the first section of this article, they, in my opinion, point to underlying problems that go beyond management or monitoring; I would like to argue that the failures me and my students faced are culture-determined and/or related to task specificity. Both issues, together with

the earlier-mentioned individual differences, are discussed following a discussion of individual differences (below).

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES (IDS) IN PROJECT WORK

One of the popularly cited individual differences pertaining to learning in general are learning styles. Among the best known learning style constructs is the one put forward by Kolb (1976), dividing learning styles alongside two predispositional poles: concrete-abstract and active-passive. While the former determines how we assimilate knowledge, the active-passive dimension is related to how intake is processed. Departing from this classic model, Willing (1987) proposes a typology which is of greater use to the present article, as it specifically pertains to learner preferences for individual or team (project) work. Willing puts forward the following four learner types: (i) analytic/passive: the conformist, who is authority oriented, classroom-dependent and visual; (ii) holistic/passive: the concrete learner, who inclines towards the classroom and fellow learners, likes games and groupwork; (iii) analytic/active: the converger, who is analytic, independent, solitary and prefers to learn about language; and (iv) holistic/active: the communicative learner, who prefers learning in a group. What transpires from the division is that some learners – the concrete and the communicative – will potentially be more oriented towards collaboration while others – the conformist and the converger – are more likely to choose and benefit from tasks whose execution is solitary.

The claim made above is that some individuals will be inclined to work in groups while others are likely to prefer working alone, no matter how many advantages of project work we list. As it is purely theoretical, stemming from the analysis of the learner-type characteristics put forward by Willing (1987), I decided to have it research-confirmed in the course of *Collaboractive online*. I carried out a mini-study which investigated a factor often related to learning style: the personality profiles of the participants. I correlated the sten scores the testees obtained on the NEO-FFI test (Costa/McCrae 1992) with their attitudes expressed in self-reflection diaries, labeled deference and demeanor (following Goffman 1967), interpreted as other-centredness and self-centredness, and categorized as indicative of pro-team or pro-individual work attitudes, respectively. The Pearson coefficient's measures between individual personality traits – neuroticism, extravertism, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness – and these two types of attitude are presented in Table 1. What they show is that while some course participants – the extraverted and conscientious people – may be more inclined towards project work, those exhibiting neuroticism and openness to experience are more likely to favour individual work (for a

more thorough discussion of the results, see Turula 2013). All in all, the levels of neuroticism and, especially, openness to experience being quite high in the *Collaborative online* is most likely one of the important underlying reasons for the dissatisfaction with some aspects of project work the participants of the course occasionally expressed.

Table 1. Correlation between the number of deference and demeanor comments and the five NEO FFI scores.

deference/neuroticism	-0,45868	demeanor/neuroticism	0,458681
deference / extravertism	0,434621	demeanor/extravertism	-0,43462
deference/openness	-0,46867	demeanor /openness	0,468668
deference /agreeableness	0,266307	demeanor / agreeableness	-0,26631
deference /conscientiousness	0,424208	demeanor / conscientiousness	-0,42421

CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS OF PROJECT WORK

Whether we like it or not, project work is culture-specific, at least by origin. The offspring of task-based learning (Prabhu 1987; Willis 1996) – or Dewey’s (1938) experiential learning, if we want to trace it further back in the history of pedagogy – this task execution mode is the didactic contribution of the so-called western world, characterized by its individualistic, autonomy-oriented, low-context culture. For more than two decades now – or almost a century, if we choose to see Dewey’s work as a landmark – it has been made popular in other parts of the world, including high-context cultures, which focus upon in-group reliance and mutual support and demonstrating a strong sense of tradition. One of such cultures is Poland, in which the two courses I refer to for research data took place.

The distinction between low- and high-context cultures as well as the above-quoted definitions go back to the 1970s of the previous century when they were proposed by Hall (1976). While it is true that such a clearcut division does not sound good in the contemporary, post-modern melting-pot-like globalised world, it is also quite justifiable to stick to Hall’s definitions, in spite of their essentialist, culture-encapsulating nature. As I argue elsewhere (Turula in press), when we look at multi-cultural societies, with their constant dynamic interplay of all represented individualistic fragmented cultures, their liquidity is to a considerable extent compatible with Hall’s definition of low-contextuality. On the other hand, homogeneous cultures like Poland, which, in spite of ongoing globalisation, have had a fairly limited range of culture de-capsulating experiences, are quite aptly described in terms of Hall’s high-contextuality.

Related to context in culture is the concept of *face* understood, generally speaking, as our status or image. What is important for the present line of reasoning is that in high-context cultures *face* is much more important and, consequently, more easily threatened as well as more fiercely defended. Face threats are posed, among others, by different positive and negative communication acts, such as (dis)approval (criticism or complimenting), directives (orders, requests), discussion of taboo topics, speech acts affecting interpersonal distance (confessions) and, as a matter of fact, feedback. Face defence, in turn, may be manifested in a number of ways, some of which were mentioned earlier, in relation to problems occurring in the process of project work. First of them will be the attitudes and actions related to evaluation, or rather the unwillingness to accept it as well as offer it. This is demonstrated by reactions to peer feedback (Sample 3) as well as the amount and quality of feedback given (Sample 1).

Another aspect of project work which is influenced by the type of culture the collaborating parties come from is their understanding of the very nature of collaboration. The very tendency of being *collective* only – and not truly, dialogically *collaborative* – may result from this understanding. While the representatives of the highly individualistic low-context cultures will see project work as an instruction method, in which learners work in groups towards a common goal, high-context cultures are likely to perceive it as a team process where members support and rely on each other to achieve an agreed-upon objective. Consequently, the collectivity in task approach demonstrated by the groups studied (often including a labour division which will not necessarily be truly fair) may be a specific manifestation of group solidarity and – to go back once more to the issue of feedback, already discussed in relation to *face* – the avoidance of evaluative comments, understood as peer criticism/peer denouement rather than constructive peer feedback, is likely to be the result of the students uniting and covering for one another in the face of the superordinate control and evaluation represented by the teacher.

TASK SPECIFICITY IN PROJECT WORK

Finally, some of the aversion towards project work identified in the on-task routines of the participants of the two courses as well as expressed explicitly by *Collaborative online* may be unrelated to individual or cultural differences but pertain to the working mode itself vis à vis the task type offered. In spite of all the advantages of project work, it seems counterintuitive that this working mode will always be the best choice. Such doubts are corroborated, among others, by the mixed data obtained in the research into the effectiveness of a collaborative procedure applied in problem-solving called brainstorming. These inconclusive

results and a following debate on whether team work is or is not the most effective date back to the publication of Osborn's seminal *Applied Imagination* (Osborn 1953), which first proposed brainstorming and argued in its favour. In a fairly recent article, Kavadias and Sommer (2009) revisit the problem, and show it is task specificity which is relevant to group configuration, nominal or brainstorming. Brainstorming groups seem to fare better facing cross-functional problems, in which task complexity and open-endedness, demanding considerable amount of thinking flexibility and creativity, make team diversity an asset. Nominal groups, on the other hand, in which individuals work more alongside one another than truly collaboratively, are more effective when confronted with specialized tasks. Apparently, the main advantage of brainstorming, the collaborative build-up of ideas in which the group help scaffold each other's concepts in the course of group interaction, does not apply to situations in which individual expertise is asset enough. Consequently, project work with its dialogic exchange of ideas is likely to serve best in contexts, in which the solutions to be arrived at are less knowledge-based and more dependent on out-of-the-box thinking. In less complex yet more knowledge-based tasks – and such were a prevailing number of activities offered in the course of both *ELT Methodology* and *Collaborative online* – working alone or *collectively* (just division of labour, no brainstorming and/or feedback exchange) may have actually been better and more effective, as implied by the comments cited in Sample 4.

PROJECT WORK – SOME PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

It would be hard to overrule the charge that the research-based observations presented and discussed at the beginning of the article are of local rather than universal application. Considering the small number of testees (N=11), the correlation between individual personality traits and attitudes to project work has to be seen as purely group specific; in turn, the reflections on the role of culture pertain specifically to the Polish educational context. Moreover, the described courses are both FL teacher training rather than language learning classes, the latter being of more interest to a EFL practitioner. While I am not going to argue with the obvious, I would like to show that local as they are, the observations I made and presented in this article can be the basis of more general pedagogical recommendations.

To start with, even if the cited correlation between personality traits and project-work attitudes is course-specific, individual differences in learning and working styles related to personality traits are a fact. That is why, as declared in the introductory section, they need to be treated as a challenge rather than a problem. Consequently, factors such as the student's preference for project or

individual task execution needs to be catered to rather than dealt with. A way of doing that may be a certain subtask chronology consisting in interweaving collaborative stages of project work with related individual activities. Such a chronology was in fact suggested by a vast majority of the participants of *Collaborative online*, regardless of what and what level their personality traits were. As it can be seen in Table 2, project work that would be to everybody's satisfaction is, in most cases, sequential, and alternates between the two, seemingly mutually exclusive, working modes.

Table 2. *Collaborative online*: the preferred project work chronology (i=individual; g=group).

WHO	COLLABORATION CHRONOLOGY
S1	g-i-g
S2	g-i-g
S3	g-i-g
S4	i-g-i-g
S5	g-i-g
S6	g-i-g
S7	not specified
S8	g-i-g-i-g-i ...
S9	i-g
S10	not specified
S11	g-i

Another way of catering to individual preferences regarding task execution will, to a certain extent, amount to pre-project role assignment, based on the teacher's knowledge of each student's predispositions or on the student's choice resulting from self-reflection. The latter was the case in *Collaborative online*: the list of student-preferred roles which comes from the self-reflection diary each participant held for a time during the course is presented in Table 3.

When it comes to the role of culture in project work, the observations presented in 2.2, although made based on a study carried out in the Polish educational context, will most probably apply to all high-context cultures. Going beyond problem identification towards possible solutions, I would like to argue that given the described culture specificity, project work – especially in the form of the increasingly popular telecollaboration, which involves task execution in international teams – has to involve an awareness raising component. On the more general level, this would imply making the co-operating teams aware of their cultural specificity and resulting attitudes and preferred working modes as well

Table 3. *Collaborative online*: preferred roles in project work.

WHO	ROLES
S1	leader; idea manager
S2	what I have qualifications for
S3	mediator; leader, if I have to
S4	not specified
S5	mediator; leader
S6	leader
S7	not specified
S8	mediator; HR specialist; proofreader, coordinator
S9	leader; coordinator
S10	not specified
S11	proofreader; final product manager

as sensitizing them to the fact that other cultures may differ in this respect. In turn, when it comes to more specific problematic aspects of project work – such as giving and accepting feedback or acknowledging the difference between real collaboration and efforts that are merely collective – some pedagogical interventions on part of the teacher may need to be undertaken. As I propose elsewhere (Turula in press), interventions of this kind may be either inductive/*a posteriori*, based on and related to the students' actual experience of project work with its advantages and drawbacks; or in the form of deductive/*a priori* activities, preventing future failures in the problematic areas by, for example, explicitly training prospective project teams in giving and accepting constructive feedback. Different forms of such pro-project pedagogy, planned in relation to specific learning contexts, should be implemented in both types of cultures, low- and high-context, as they are likely to benefit each of them individually as well as their prospective encounters.

Finally, as regards the effectiveness of project work in relation to task specificity, it is advisable to apply the collaborative mode only if the task at hand is multifaceted, open-ended, and its execution needs to involve creativity. Mono-aspectual, knowledge-based tasks will be carried out to a better effect if the individual working mode is selected, no matter how many advantages of project work we can list, following Fried-Booth (1988) or referring to our own pedagogical experience.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, if we as teachers (of languages; of teachers; etc.) want our project assignments to succeed, in addition to all the good pedagogical practice we routinely fall back on, we need to (i) cater to individual differences, ready to accept the fact that preference for individual work is personal in nature and, as such, needs to be respected and provided for in, even in profoundly collaborative tasks; (ii) raise awareness to the fact that some on-task routines are culture-specific, and, as such, they can be altered/managed in culture-culture contact only if consciously controlled as a result of the teacher's inductive or deductive interventions; and (iii) truly effective project work may not be possible if selected for a type of task which is more suitable from the individual working mode. All of this, as indicated by the contents of the brackets at the beginning of this paragraph, is rather universally applicable – holding for teacher training, language learning as well as other kinds of projects – as it brings out the advantages of collaborative work and alleviates its potential drawbacks.

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