

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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After months of trying to find a location we were at our wits' end and beginning to question the sanity of our venture. The break finally came when we passed 15 Westmoreland street and spotted a sign from ICOS (Irish Council of Overseas Students) stating that the college had shut down. After much effort we eventually got to the landlord of the building and organised a meeting. We had never pictured ourselves sitting in an office negotiating over lease terms and could suddenly empathise with foreign language students as we bluffed our way through the legal jargon. Inexperienced as we were, in what felt like a matter of minutes, we had done the deal. Suddenly, after all the months of daydreaming, planning and searching, it had happened, we were in our own school.

Standing in the school, everything felt really possible again. We began calling in favours and in a matter of weeks had the place painted and our logo on the wall. With a new enthusiasm, we tried everything we could to get the first students in the door. This included doing "busking" English classes in Temple Bar, climbing the Wicklow Mountains to do a duck race for publicity and desperately trying to "sell" free classes. And it worked. After all our scrambling and hard graft, the students began to come, and they started to tell their friends, and then they started to come. A mentor we had from the Local Enterprise Office once told us that you will learn more in one year as an entrepreneur than in any business degree. Over the course of the year our search history shows the evidence of our learning and the DIY spirit we had to adopt. When I type "How" into Google I'm reminded of past searches: "How to write a business plan", "How to negotiate a lease", "How do you stick vinyl to a wall", "How to make Internet cables".

It hasn't been easy and we're still climbing our Everest every day. As our own bosses, we learned early on that we need to look out for and manage each other and ourselves. While inevitably we work long and busy days we make sure we all take breaks and cover for each other when the load gets too heavy. While we wholeheartedly recommend a DIY approach to starting a school, it is important to remember that you can't do it yourself, you need to surround yourself with great people. What makes it easier is the fact that we are now developing a team of incredible teachers who are making our job a lot easier and who are helping to turn our dream into a reality. In less than a year we have had hundreds of happy students, from over 20 countries, study with us. Looking ahead into 2016 we can see plenty of challenges ahead of us, and being your own boss is certainly no walk in the park, but it is allowing us all to build the type of school we dreamed of working and studying in.

Creative projects in the language classroom

by Collete Godkin (ATC)

I incorporate project work regularly into my lessons, as I have found that some of the most engaging classroom activities are those where students are making something - be it physical or digital - which they can be proud of and show to others. Project work has also been shown to provide "opportunities for students to develop their confidence and independence and to work together in a real-world environment" (Fried-Booth, 2002) Additionally, even though the focus of our class projects has always been practising the language they have recently studied, the satisfaction for the students of a job well done is a bonus whose importance for motivation should not be underestimated. In this article I would like to describe my experience with a number of creative projects in adult English language classes and give some practical tips on how these can be carried out.

Making a Facebook group

At the beginning of 2015, I started a class Facebook group with my adult C1 general English class. We use the group as a forum for sharing work and ideas and also as a way for former students to keep in touch with the class. I promote the group as a shared space, rather than a teacher-led space, by encouraging students to comment on posts and to post anything which they think would interest the group. As soon as I, or one of the students, find something of interest online, e.g. a useful language learning site or video,



All your ingredients for a microwave cake, just add English.

Pic by Margaret Barrett

we can share it to the group. In addition, if we watch a video or look at a website in class, the link goes up on Facebook, so students can spend more time on it later if they wish. The main activity in the group, however, is posting individual and collaborative writing tasks, such as essays, articles, recipes, short stories, poetry and more, often accompanied by images or video clips.

Practicalities: Students can use their smartphones for posting, but access to a PC makes it easier to type longer texts.

An interactive white board or projector is important, as much of the value of Facebook activities comes from discussing the posts as a class.

“Project work has been shown to provide 'opportunities for students to develop their confidence and independence and to work together in a real-world environment'”

To set up the group you must have a Facebook profile. On your Home page, click 'Create Group' in the menu on the left. You need to give the group a name and add at least one member (one of your Facebook friends) in order to get started. There are three types of group: 'Public', 'Closed' and 'Secret'. I chose 'Closed', so that students can find and join the group easily but have the reassurance that no-one outside the group can see their work.

The group will also need an image and a description.

Peer correction is facilitated by the use of Facebook; with the students' agreement, in the comments section of the posts, I point out where the errors are in their work. Anyone can then post a suggested correction in the comments. The correct answer gets a 'like' from me. If no-one gets the right answer, we figure it out later as a class.

Results: Feedback from the students after a few months was very positive – in particular, they enjoyed seeing other students' work and, interestingly, they felt they understood their classmates' ideas more easily through the use of multimedia. Additionally, the knowledge that their work would be read by a larger audience may also have inspired them to produce better work. Comparing posting her work on Facebook to it only being seen by the teacher, one student commented: “I don't want to embarrass myself in front of the other students, so I put more effort in and check my work more carefully”.

Drawbacks of this project include the fact that not all students are on Facebook, so a backup plan, such as email, is necessary when using it to assign homework. Also, my time is required outside of class as the administrator of the group, and also to 'like' posts and provide feedback. On the other hand, I find I can do writing correction and feedback much more efficiently online.

Making a book

My favourite online resource to use in class is Storybird (www.storybird.com). On this website, students can write a multi-page picture book, multi-chapter long form book or one-page illustrated poem. The artwork provided by the site is stunning and has proved inspirational for even the most reluctant writers.

Practicalities: This activity takes 1-2 hours to do in class.

You need to make a free educator account for yourself and then set up a student account for each student or pair of students.

You need one PC or tablet per pair since this activity is not practical to do on the small screen of a smartphone.

The site is very easy and intuitive to navigate and has useful instructional videos which could be watched in class when setting up the activity.

The finished work can be shared online.

For a small fee, the books can also be downloaded as a pdf for printing. The book pages are then cut out and bound together by the students following printed instructions.

Results: Writing a book provides meaningful practice of narrative tenses and descriptive language and I have also noticed that knowing their work will be printed leads to students taking great care with their writing. Most importantly, at the end of the project, students have a beautiful physical souvenir of their learning.

Making some noise

Recently, and initially reluctantly, my class agreed to make some 'radio' plays. We recorded dramatised readings from literary classics, as these have the advantage that students may already be familiar with the stories. The purpose of the project was to work on pronunciation and was the culmination of several weeks' work on stress, intonation and vocal animation. We posted the recordings on the class Facebook group and then used them as the basis for further listening comprehension activities and discussions.

Practicalities: You will need voice recorders, any of the many free sound effects apps which are available, a quiet space for recording, and an online space for posting work. The easiest voice recorders to use are those on the students' own phones.

To begin with, the class listen to an extract from a radio play and discuss what makes it entertaining, e.g. the acting, music, and sound effects. There are many good examples available at www.radiodramarevival.com.

In groups of three or four, students then read an extract from a novel and work together to ensure they understand it. The extracts we used were from 'Jane Eyre', 'Pride and Prejudice' and 'The Hound of the Baskervilles'.

The students choose their roles and a narrator.

They check the pronunciation of any difficult words and mark the text for pauses of different lengths and any rising/falling intonation.

They find appropriate sound effects, making some of the effects themselves (clapping, running, screams, etc.). They also choose background music (played on one phone while they record using another).

The groups rehearse and then record their work, doing several versions until they are happy with it.

This is a time-consuming activity and, ideally, should be done over at least two lessons to facilitate rehearsal and pronunciation work.

As audio files can't be posted on Facebook, you can use Windows Movie Maker to convert the audio (MP3) to video (MP4) before posting it. To do this, you select an image for your video, add the audio file as the soundtrack, and then click 'Fit to music', so that the image lasts for the duration of the audio track. Alternatively, you could use a selection of images to play as a slideshow with the audio. A title frame can be added to the movie as well.

“Shyness was in fact less of an issue than I had anticipated”

Results: This activity turned out to be great fun for the students and I discovered that pre-task resistance is not always an indicator of later participation and enjoyment. No-one likes the sound of their own voice, but once they adopted an 'on-air' persona, some of the quietest students displayed the greatest acting skills. Shyness was in fact less of an issue than I had anticipated, with only one student not wanting to be recorded. She decided instead to be the director of her group.

Akin to roleplaying, this activity focuses on the use of the voice to express emotion, but by using a text rather than spontaneous speech, the emphasis is firmly on pronunciation. Recording their work gave students an opportunity to hear themselves and to do further work on improving their pronunciation.

Making some more noise

A similar activity, which required less preparation, was recording 'radio' talk shows. These were based on topics from the coursebook and were either done as interviews with experts or as phone-in shows, with students adopting different characters as presenters, experts or callers to the show.

Practicalities: The practical requirements are the same as for the radio plays, but with less rehearsal time.

Students first outline the issues to be discussed during the show and decide on their roles.

Groups may choose to script their show or to have a freer discussion.

Results: The shows were an opportunity to practise vocabulary related to the theme of the week but were a change from the usual format of classroom discussions. They enabled students to hear the opinions of different groups when the recordings were posted online and they were also highly entertaining, as some of the shows and their callers were hilariously inventive.

Making a cake

As a practical application of food and food preparation vocabulary, my class celebrated the end of a hunger-inducing unit in the coursebook by making cakes.

Practicalities: Like most schools, our cooking facilities are limited to a microwave, a kettle and very few utensils, but a little online research yielded some recipes for making microwave mug cakes.

Results: The point of this activity was for the students to use the language they had been studying in order to follow a recipe independently and produce delicious cakes by the end of the class. Working in teams, they succeeded in doing this without any assistance, and an unexpected benefit of the activity was the promotion of class bonding as we ended the class sitting around the kitchen table, eating and chatting.



Ding! Your cake is ready and no cooker needed.

Pic by Margaret Barrett

Amongst the things I have learnt from these and other classroom projects is that it is essential to give groups enough time to both plan and carry out the tasks, so that they can make work which they feel reflects their true abilities. In addition, it is important to explicitly link the project to what we have been doing in class, so that the students can see the relevance of the activity. I have also realised that creative projects are an excellent opportunity for students to demonstrate their skills in areas other than language. It was a student who discovered how to convert audio to video and post it on Facebook, another who figured out and then taught his classmates how to bind the Storybird books. These two instances also illustrate the fact that the challenges which arise in a project cannot all be anticipated; however, I believe the fluid nature of projects is one of the things which makes them enjoyable and mentally stimulating. As others have noted: "Project work is organic and unique to each class. This makes it exciting, challenging, and meaningful to adult learners." (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998)

I would encourage teachers to try out these or similar projects, for the reasons I mentioned earlier and also because project work can be as engaging and motivating for the teacher as it is for the students. I am constantly inspired by my students who bravely write, speak and create in a language not their own and whose curiosity and enthusiasm remind me what a fascinating experience learning a new language can be.

References

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Film-making as student- centred learning environment

by Vanja Fazinic (Don Lovre Katic School, Croatia)

Collaborative film-making projects put students at the centre of their learning: The emphasis is on activity – based learning rather than on teaching and on teacher–student collaboration rather than instruction. This article will focus on learning language through creative process of film-making as an effective way to engage students in active learning. Setting up collaborative film-making projects fully supports the integration of school curriculum and learning outcomes into a creative new medium, allowing teenage students of any ability to find their place in film making process.

In many schools and school systems power and responsibility are held by the teacher who plays the role of the instructor and decision maker. In contrast to traditional methods, where the authority to make and carry out decisions is placed