An alternative to tap dancing: projects for high school

Evelyn Solomonov

As I was dashing through school the other day, my principal waylaid me and directed me into his office. "You have got to make English classes interesting so that the kids don't cut! I don't know what the problem is in English, but they always cut class. And they never cut math!" I started to laugh. I asked him a few pertinent questions about how he had learned English, whether he had needed to be in class to learn English, whether he had ever studied for English tests, and whether he felt that he had needed to be in math class to learn what he needed for his math tests. "From books, television and friends, no, no, and of course," were his respective answers. Actually, I think that many of our pupils would say exactly what my principal had said.

I went home and started to seriously consider his remarks. His implication was clear. Teachers must take the responsibility for interesting, and perhaps entertaining, their pupils. He did not even suggest that pupils take responsibility for their actions or education. Had I been clever enough at the time, I might have answered that he didn't have to worry because the English staff had already signed up for singing, dancing, and comedy routine workshops over the summer.

Realistically speaking, however, the solution to the problem is evident and places the responsibility for interest on the pupil, where it belongs. The first step in this direction is teacher implementation of the English Curriculum (2001). This may sound like a catch-all phrase, a panacea, the "new lingo," or an attempt to be loved by the Ministry of Education's English Inspector. However, it really is the solution. The problem is, of course, that the English Curriculum demands teacher autonomy. And teacher autonomy demands teacher responsibility, creativity, innovation, soul-searching, analytic skills, remedial and remediation tools, and the time and energy to implement them, both in and out of the classroom.

Most of what is required by the English Curriculum is already being used in one form or another throughout the country by English teachers in schools. We may not have formulated the domains, benchmarks, and rubrics which the curriculum now requires, but these aspects of our teaching have always been present. Now, however, in order to meet the standards in the curriculum, we need to take the time to examine our choice of materials, methods and grading systems to enable pupils to achieve the expected standards. Teachers can no longer blindly choose a textbook and use it, assuming that all the benchmarks will be met. We must assess our classes, sit down with peers in our department and develop a syllabus for our school. The syllabus should be a three-year plan (if the school is a three-year high school), and should set out the benchmarks we hope to achieve by the end of the three years. It must be flexible, to allow us to make changes depending upon the level of the pupils as they enter each grade. And it must take into account the alternatives we can offer by way of materials and assessment to meet the needs of even our special needs pupils, without lowering standards.

Realizing that implementation of the English Curriculum could solve my problem, I now had to figure out how to implement it in my classroom (and keep my pupils from cutting class). I felt that doing projects and tasks was the answer, although the research findings regarding initiation of classroom projects are inconclusive. It has been suggested that the projects and performance-based tasks be initiated and chosen by pupils. However, Barbara and John McKenna (2000, p. 53) believe that, "Most teachers recognize that much
Focus on Projects

of good classroom management depends on that first day of class. Likewise, much of the students’ success in a research project depends on the work the teacher does well before the beginning day. These plans should include selecting the topic or topics, as well as designing the activities that will lead to genuine academic growth as the students pursue an issue within the topic.” They note that "a number of highly respected theorists endorse the notion that high-interest, student-selected topics improve children’s writing…[and] Nancie Atwell… endorses self-selected topics” and that Hidi and McLaren note, 'The underlying rationale for self-selected topics is that they increase interest, motivation and intellectual activity…’” (ibid.).

While I recognize the benefits of self-initiated projects, (and the English Curriculum, at least at the proficiency level, strives for individual selection), I believe this presents certain drawbacks in an EFL classroom. The most obvious are the lack of interest on the part of the pupil, the unwillingness of many pupils to invest the time it takes to successfully create a project, the language barrier of the weaker pupil, and the lack of sufficient time for research in the computer room. If the teacher, however, is willing to do the initial research, and perhaps bring to class articles (reading comprehension passages, primary sources from all genres) that pique the pupils’ interest via class discussion, pupils may be motivated more positively to choose to research material that catches their fancy. The teacher’s input for weaker pupils and for pupils who are doing projects for the first time in high school (tenth graders) is important. However, teachers must also listen to pupils, and be willing to take ideas from what they have said to create projects.

An example of a pupil-initiated project is the following. Pupils asked their teacher about a song which had been translated by Yonatan Gefen, and which they thought related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The teacher brought the song to class and asked the pupils to research its history and theme. The pupils’ questions, discussions and analysis of the song evolved into a multicultural and multicurricular project. The project culminated in a wall display exhibiting the lyrics and relevant artwork selected by the pupils.

An example of a teacher-directed project is one which developed from courses I took during my sabbatical. The project, “The Language of the City,” (Appendix A) is designed for the eleventh grade. Its end goals are as follows:

- Pupils will have learned how to analyze a poem (terminology, skills, basic practice on other works studied in class).
- Pupils will have learned how to surf the net to find the sites needed.
- Pupils will have discussed, in class, cities of the world.
- Pupils will have learned basic writing skills, such as organization of paragraphs, sentence structure and syntax, etc.
- Pupils will have already done other projects in which they work in groups to brainstorm the topic.

Pupils may choose the countries, societies, cities, or writers involved, but the topic of the project is not pupil-initiated. It may therefore prove to be more useful in weaker classes or with younger pupils. The project focuses on a topic where research is available on the computer, although it is not research that will enable the pupil simply to “cut and paste.” The pupil will have to make choices, to think about the topic, to focus, to “weed out” material, to truly understand what is being read. It is also a way for the teacher to have some control over what the pupil chooses and to help the less experienced researcher understand what material is appropriate for a school presentation/project/task. This may sound strange, but as McKenna & McKenna (2000) suggest, “It does not take much imagination to foresee a Web search that begins with Hannibal Lector and heads in the direction of sadomasochism and all sorts of perversions” (p. 55). While this might interest pupils, and although censorship is rightly considered a “dirty” word, it is important for pupils to learn what is appropriate for classroom presentation.

Stronger and more mature pupils may, in the spirit of the English Curriculum, choose their own topic. An example of a pupil-initiated project is the "Senior Graduation Exit Projects" introduced by Nicolini (1999). She began by asking her pupils to "make a list of things that you know a little bit about and would
like to know more about … Share one” (p. 91). She chose the idea of the graduation exhibition in which pupils would exemplify one of the Ten Common Principles of Ted Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools: “The focus of a secondary school program should be on helping students to use their minds well … a high school graduate should have the ability to show his or her knowledge and skill - to ‘exhibit’ mastery - in a variety of areas deemed important by local and external authorities. This suggests that the high school diploma should signify genuine competence, specifically in the areas of reading, writing and fundamental mathematics” (ibid.). In order to implement this principle in her classroom, Nicolini assigned pupils the graduation exit project in which each pupil would research a topic of his/her choice and present the findings of this research to a panel of adult volunteers after school hours. The presentation would be oral and no longer than thirty minutes, during which time pupils would “explain the story of the search and the findings, leaving time for questions and answers.” Pupils spent much class time brainstorming and doing various writing/reading tasks, such as KWL (Knowing, Wanting, Learning), cubing and computer response. Because so much time was spent analyzing choices of subjects, pupils often began researching one topic only to end by doing an entirely different one.

In both pupil- and teacher-initiated projects, specific guidelines must be set, rubrics must be presented, and expectations must be made perfectly clear to pupils. Some teachers prefer to create rubrics with their pupils; others present rubrics as a fait accompli. Whatever the choice, a rubric or a checklist must accompany the assignment so pupils understand exactly what is expected. Friedman (2000) suggests that valid assessment incorporates writing in other content areas. When pupils in Boston schools write papers for science or history, for example, they are judged equally on writing and content. When EFL teachers assess projects, it is also necessary to take into account both style and content in order to achieve the proficiency level in the relevant domain. Friedman notes that the more detailed the “prompt,” the easier it is for pupils to understand the demands. Whether we write rubrics alone or with pupil input, it is important to focus on the benchmarks we wish to assess and to be as specific as possible.

Depending upon the task, a checklist may be just as appropriate as a rubric. Friedman offers several suggestions, which may be revised and adapted to suit the needs of the EFL class and the English Curriculum (Appendices B and C).

Long term projects and performance-based tasks which meet the standards described in the English Curriculum are the key to reviving our pupils’ interest in the English classroom. The autonomy given to both teacher and pupil, and the responsibility which accompanies this autonomy, should allow each member of the class, teacher and pupil alike, to react to the real world surrounding them. It should enable every pupil to reach proficiency level, not simply for a matriculation examination, but to be an active member of the global community. If we help our pupils create tasks which interest them, we may be able to put away our tap dancing shoes, our repertoire of jokes, and any other “tricks” we have up our sleeves. Our principals will not have to worry about pupils cutting class out of boredom; instead, they will have to worry about pupils who say they can become educated on their own without attending class, a skill they have mastered because of the projects they have done in English class!

References


APPENDIX A
The Language of the City

General objective: Your assignment is to choose a city anywhere in the world, to find a poem written in English (or translated into English) about the city, and to find a piece of artwork (a painting, a sculpture, a poster, etc.) of the city. You will then create a large poster to be put on display, using pictures and written analyses of the poetry and artwork you have chosen.

(You may work alone or with ONE partner.)

1. Choose one city. You must do research about the city so that you can:
   - write the geographic description of the city (It is a large city in Illinois, but not the state capital. It is located on Lake Michigan. It has a population of… and other facts that you have found out about the city). You may want to look up this information in an almanac or on a city guide site. Type material for the poster presentation (100-150 words).
   - write a descriptive paragraph about your chosen city. This paragraph should enable us to see and feel the city from your point of view. Use colorful adjectives and vocabulary which will affect the reader's senses. Type material for the poster presentation (150-250 words).

2. Look for a poet who writes about the city. What is the relationship between the poet and the city? Some poets, for example, write about a city even though they are not there; their poem is a nostalgic desire to be there. You may want to choose a poet and then see if this poet has written about a city (and then choose that city). If you do this, surf the net under the poet's name. If you have chosen a city, enter the city name and then words like literature, poetry, stories, etc. about the city to narrow your search and to find the poet.

3. Choose one poem that has been written about the city of your choice. Copy the poem and then analyze it. Think about the style of the poem (sonnet, lyric, limerick, etc.), the use of metaphor, simile, and other literary devices, and the point the poet is making. What is s/he saying about the city and how does s/he say it? What is the relationship of the poet to the city? How does the poet help the reader feel what s/he feels? Use specific examples to support your ideas. Your analysis should be well-organized and written in paragraph form. Check your grammar and spelling. This analysis should be typed for the poster presentation (250-500 words).

4. Choose a piece of artwork about the city that you have chosen. It can be a drawing, a painting, a sculpture, a poster, or a photograph. Make a copy of this work to be placed on the poster. When you choose your piece of art, you need to make sure that it reflects the feelings that the poet has expressed in the poem. Write 150-250 words explaining the connection between the poetry / the artwork / the city. Describe how the city is seen, and how the artwork is related to the poem and to the poet's description or emotions.

5. All elements of the project should be presented on a large piece of poster board which can be displayed. The project should be handed in by ____________

Example:
**Assessment rubrics**

**Written presentation (75% of the total grade)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>0-3 points</th>
<th>4-7 points</th>
<th>8-10 points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographic description</td>
<td>Very few details given. Not focused at all. It is clear that more research was needed. Very few, if any, facts included. Many errors in presentation – spelling, syntax, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and/or punctuation.</td>
<td>Some details presented, but more could have been included. Research has been done, but it is a bit superficial. Additional effort and research might have resulted in additional facts. Some errors in presentation – spelling, syntax, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and/or punctuation.</td>
<td>Excellent use of facts and details. Your efforts, responsibility, and diligence are clearly seen via the information you have presented. There are few, if any, errors in spelling, syntax, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and/or punctuation. Nicely done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry analysis</td>
<td>Very little information presented. Little indication of understanding of the poem. Unable to see the connection between the poet, poem, and city. Little analysis of literary devices or meaning of the poem. Many errors in spelling, syntax, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and/or punctuation.</td>
<td>Some information given. It seems as if you have made an effort to understand the poem and the relationship of the poet, poem, and city. You have tried to analyze the poem using literary terms, but your discussion is a bit superficial and you have missed some of the devices used by the poet. For the most part, this is organized. There are some mistakes in grammar, etc.</td>
<td>Exhibits an understanding of the poem, and the relationship between the poet, poem, and city. Well organized, good examples, and strong usage of literary terms. You have shown the way the poet uses words to convey feelings and ideas. Good understanding of literary devices and how they are used in this poem. Very few, if any, errors in grammar, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Very poor description of the city. Few adjectives and sensory words. Many mistakes in grammar, punctuation, spelling, syntax, paragraphing.</td>
<td>Good attempt at description. Needs additional adjectives and sensory words. The images are not clear. Some writing mistakes. Stronger paragraphing (focus and organization) needed.</td>
<td>The city has come alive! Good use of adjectives and sensory words. The image is clear. Very few mistakes in writing. The organization of your paragraphing is well done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art analysis</td>
<td>Very little information presented. Unable to see the connection between the artwork, poem, and city. Many errors in spelling, syntax, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and/or punctuation.</td>
<td>Some information given. It seems as if you have made an effort to understand the relationship of the artwork, poem, and city. Your discussion is a bit superficial and you have missed some of the devices (such as color, symbols, etc.) used by the artist. For the most part, this is organized. There are some mistakes in grammar.</td>
<td>Exhibits an understanding of the relationship between the artwork, poem, and city. Well organized. Good examples of the devices the artist uses in the work to convey feelings and ideas. Very few, if any, writing mistakes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total points ________________
Name of pupil ____________________

Choice of artwork and poem (25% of total grade)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0-3 points</th>
<th>4-7 points</th>
<th>8-10 points</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artwork (10%)</td>
<td>Little thought given to choice of material presented.</td>
<td>The artwork had some connection to the poem, although it was difficult to see the relationship.</td>
<td>The choice of the artwork illustrates, exemplifies, or heightens the understanding of the relationship between the poet, artwork, and city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poem (15%)</td>
<td>Poem not related to the city at all, or only very superficially. Shows little research or effort to find appropriate poem and author.</td>
<td>Some connection is seen although the choice is not as thoughtful as it could have been. Better poetry choices are available.</td>
<td>Nice choice of poem. The relationship is clear and the choice shows an understanding of the relationship/connection between the poet, poem, and city.</td>
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</table>

Total points ________________

Sum of all rubrics (final grade on project) ________________

APPENDIX B
Content rubric

An organized response presents the information in a logical way that makes sense and maintains the reader's attention. Put a check before the number in each section that best describes the pupil's work. S/he

_____ (4) presented information in a way that flowed smoothly, made sense, and kept the reader engaged. (4) presented paragraphs that had a clear beginning, middle, and end and flowed from one to the next in a way that made sense.

_____ (3) presented information in a way that flowed smoothly and made sense. (3) presented paragraphs that had a clear beginning, middle, and end and flowed from one to the next in a way that usually made sense.

_____ (2) presented information in a way that was sometimes unclear and confusing to the reader. (2) presented paragraphs that had at least a beginning and middle but flowed from one to the next in a way that was awkward or confusing.

_____ (1) presented information that lacked clarity and organization and was difficult to understand. (1) presented paragraphs that were confusing and disconnected.

Score ____________________Score ____________________

APPENDIX C  
Rubric for seventh grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>4 (Pudding filled with lots of goodies and topped with whipped cream)</th>
<th>3 (Pudding filled with lots of goodies)</th>
<th>2 (Plain ol’ pudding)</th>
<th>1 (Pudding mix and milk)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>• Stays focused on the topic</td>
<td>• Stays focused on the topic</td>
<td>• Strays from the topic</td>
<td>• Strays from the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Has a clear and coherent beginning (topic sentence), middle (supporting sentences) and end (clincher sentence)</td>
<td>• Has a clear beginning (topic sentence), middle (supporting sentences) and end (clincher sentence)</td>
<td>• Has a beginning, middle, and end</td>
<td>• Has a beginning, middle, but no end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Uses transitions throughout</td>
<td>• Uses transitions occasionally</td>
<td>• Is organized and logical</td>
<td>• Is disorganized and confusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is carefully organized, logical and sequential</td>
<td>• Is organized and logical</td>
<td>• Is disorganized and confusing</td>
<td>• Is disorganized and confusing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>