Writing books: a project for seventh and eighth grades

Rachel Duzzy

Nofei Arbel School in Kibbutz Ginossar is an experimental school for language arts which uses alternative teaching methods. Project work is often used as a method to enhance language learning.

My seventh and eighth grade English classes (28-30 heterogeneous pupils) write mini-projects linked to current topics they study. They also write a larger scale project – an annual project – starting in September and ending in March. Pupils decide what they want to write about and what format the project will take, e.g. research project, PowerPoint presentation, website or writing a book. In this article, I will focus on the book writing project.

In our school, pupils choose two courses per semester from a variety of courses, one of which is on writing books in Hebrew. I therefore decided to adopt this idea for English, although on a smaller scale, since project work was already integrated into the English lesson and I could only devote one bi-weekly lesson to it. The project was possible because pupils are well read in Hebrew and have been exposed to books, stories and texts in various genres in English.

As soon as pupils decide the subject and format of their annual project, I introduce a work plan. Most pupils choose to write a short research project or prepare a computer presentation. Not many choose to write books; some of those who do, drop out when they realize it is not an easy option. Usually, only two to four pupils in each class write books, which are later bound by the pupils themselves with the help of the handicrafts teacher. Three copies are made: one for the pupil, one for the school library, and one for me.

Rationale
Ribe’ and Vidal (1993) make an analogy between project work, “a large task (macro-task) composed of smaller steps (micro-tasks),” and a novel “which consists of chapters and episodes” (p. 3). They use literary metaphors to describe project work: “A project has a pre-planned beginning and an end … exploring all its sides … can turn it into a real never ending story” (ibid.). My experiences support this view, as each year I rediscover how versatile project work is.

Project work has many benefits for pupils. It encourages them to take responsibility for their own work and helps them become autonomous learners. In addition, the integration of project work into regular classes creates new interests and elevates motivation. It also improves pupils’ social skills, such as collaboration and cooperation.

Objectives
Ribe’ and Vidal compare project work to a journey through “uncharted waters,” through which the teacher needs to “keep a record of routes, direction and incidents along the way” (p. 39). Projects need careful pre-planning and must be monitored and recorded though all the stages. It is essential to define objectives for the project beforehand and then check if they have been accomplished. This retrospective reflection will help the teacher in planning future projects.

The following are the objectives for the book project:

- Pupils will experience authentic writing.
- Pupils will develop awareness of grammar and other language conventions by using a variety of language skills.
- Pupils will self-access materials and recall...
Focus on Projects

- Pupils will identify with ‘real’ writers.
- Pupils will express their thoughts, feelings and needs.
- Pupils will improve their self esteem.
- Pupils will become motivated to learn English.

Procedure
1. Outline
Stoller (1997, reprinted in this issue of the ETJ, see p. 9) diagrams 10 steps which describe the structure of a project and which “facilitate content learning and provide opportunities for explicit language instruction at critical moments in the project.” Mapping the entire project at the beginning is a useful tool, especially for large scale projects such as the book project (Appendix A).

2. Writing
Writing is a complex process, requiring many skills. Project work is an effective way of integrating writing into the EFL classroom. It enables pupils to use vocabulary and grammar structures together with other language conventions in a challenging way. Writing a book or story is process writing. Process writing focuses not only on the final product but also on different stages, e.g. jotting down ideas, writing drafts, correcting, rewriting and editing. The process requires teacher intervention and interaction with pupils. The five stages of process writing (www.etni.org.il/ministry/portfolio) are prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. These are reflected in the book writing as follows:

Prewriting: At the first teacher-pupil conference, we brainstorm ideas for story, genre and main characters. All ideas are jotted down in a diagram which I call “sun associations.” Some ideas appear in the story while others are later dropped. Pupils receive a list of WH questions (Appendix B) to help them outline the story and its elements – characters, setting and time – and a guidelines (Appendix C) with tips and requirements.

Drafting: Pupils write the books both in class during the time allotted for the project and at home. They are encouraged to write spontaneously without attention to spelling and grammar mistakes. They then check their work and correct what they can. I encourage pupils to use a dictionary to find words they do not know or to translate from Hebrew into English.

Revising and editing: When pupils have finished a chapter or passage in their book, I meet with them to discuss both the language and content of their work. The conference provides immediate feedback and deals with issues such as characters and future story development. Pupils then rewrite and re-edit their work. This process is repeated until the book is ready to be published (Appendix D).

Publishing (presentation): Books are presented in two different locations. First they are presented in the project gallery to be appreciated and assessed by pupils. Each pupil or group presents their project differently. Books are also displayed in the school library where they are catalogued and can be borrowed. Presenting the books is the highlight of the project.

3. Assessment
Alternative assessment tools are used for evaluating projects. Assessment cannot be separated from the learning process. It raises pupils’ awareness of the learning process, helps them check their intended goals, monitors their learning and helps them become independent learners. Assessment helps the teacher check goals, identify problems and give feedback to pupils on their working methods (Ribe’ and Vidal, 1993, p. 82). The teacher should assess not only linguistic accuracy and content but additional, non-linguistic aspects of the project, such as effort, attitude and cognitive development.

Evaluation involves both formative and summative assessment. The former is on-going and takes place throughout the project, while the latter is summative and is given to the final product. Projects are assessed by means of two tools: checklists and/or rubrics. The advantage of checklists is that they are self-explanatory and refer to both the whole product and to its parts (Appendix E).

Rubrics are considered “an authentic assessment tool which is particularly useful in assessing criteria which are complex and subjective.” (http://edweb.sdsu.edu/triton/july/rubrics/). Goodrich (2000) thinks that rubrics are helpful to the teacher in addition to evaluating pupils’ work. She regards rubrics
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as teaching tools which support learning and help develop sophisticated thinking skills. My experience shows that rubrics should be simple, short and clear. They must focus on the different skills as determined by the pre-defined criteria, and they may be written in Hebrew if necessary. Pupils are given the rubrics early in the project and together we modify them, if necessary. Pupils are asked to refer to the rubrics while they are working on their project. Creating rubrics is not easy and takes time. However, once the rubric has been created, it becomes an efficient and quick method of assessing pupils’ work (Appendix F).

Conclusion
The book writing project is a learning experience which incorporates many of the principles and practices outlined in the English Curriculum (2001). It requires extensive use of writing and reading, drafting, rewriting and editing, and teacher-pupil conferences. Despite the hard work, pupils remain motivated throughout, and feel rewarded when actually holding the book for the first time.

References


http://edweb.sdsu.edu/triton/july/rubrics/Rubric-Guidelines.html

www.etni.org.il/ministry/portfolio/default.htm/

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APPENDIX A
Project outline
Presentation of requirements for the whole class for the yearly project. Duration of project, manner of work, topics and ideas, different formats and possibilities.

Decision making process: individuals choose to write a book.

Pupils prepare a “sun association.” First teacher-pupil conference (instruction page and WH questions are discussed).

Every two weeks, project work in class, the computer room or the learning center (school library).

Mini-research collecting and processing of materials, at home and in school.

Pupils prepare an outline of the story, decide on characters, setting, time, genre.

Pupils correct, write and edit their work.

Pupils write at home and in class.

Teacher checks drafts. Conference to discuss errors, content, tips for future writing. The stage is repeated as long as the pupil writes.

Pupils edit and type the book, write the blurb and design the book jacket. Teacher checks again and pupils make last corrections.

Projects gallery: pupils present projects, including peer assessment, activities and feedback. Teacher collects projects, drafts and checklists.

Evaluation of projects

APPENDIX B
WH questions

The following questions will help you write your book:
1. What is your prior knowledge on the subject?
2. Who is / are your main character/s?
3. What does s/he or they look like?
4. What is his/her personality like? Is s/he a “bad guy” or a “good guy?”
5. What are the relationships between the characters in the story?
6. Where does the story take place?
7. When does it happen?
8. What is the problem in the story?
9. What is the solution to the problem?
10. Does the story have a good or a bad ending?

APPENDIX C
Guidelines

Dear ___________________
Congratulations! You’ve decided to write a book as your annual project. I’m sure you’ll enjoy writing it. I know I’m going to enjoy reading it.

Here are some guidelines to help you write your book:
1. Write your ideas inside the “sun association” and discuss them with the teacher.
2. Read and collect information that is relevant to your story (from the Internet, newspapers and magazines, encyclopedias, family stories, etc.).
3. Ask the teacher to check each chapter and immediately make all corrections.
4. Before editing the book, ask the teacher to check it once more.
5. Write the blurb, decide on a title for your book, write the front page including the names of author, editor and publisher, year of publication, list of contents, and bibliography if you have one. Ask the teacher to check them.
8. Prepare a presentation for your book.
9. Hand in the book together with the checklist, rubric and all the drafts.

Good Luck!

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APPENDIX D
English project: teacher-pupil conference

Date: ______________________
Pupil’s name: ______________________
Place of meeting: ______________________
Progress: ______________________
Problems: ______________________
Date for next meeting: ______________________
Comments: ______________________

APPENDIX E
Pupil’s checklist

1- very little 4- very much so

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I checked the spelling of words.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I used punctuation marks.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I used the dictionary.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I asked the teacher to check all drafts and corrected them.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The book jacket is attractive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I edited my book according to my teacher’s instructions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My story is original and interesting.</td>
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<td>I had problems writing my book.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I learned new things.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think writing books in English is important.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I would like to write more books in English.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Teacher’s checklist

1- very little 4- very much so

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project fulfills all requirements.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>WH questions are answered.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>There is evidence of dictionary work.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>There is awareness of grammar, punctuation and spelling.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil combined drafts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book jacket is attractive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The story demonstrates creativity and originality.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX F

**Rubrics for book writing project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideas and content</strong></td>
<td>• Story has a clear sense of focus</td>
<td>• Story has a focus</td>
<td>• Weak sense of focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Story is original</td>
<td>• Story is quite original and interesting</td>
<td>• Story is not very original/interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Story is interesting</td>
<td>• Information is relevant to the story</td>
<td>• Information is not always relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Information is relevant to the topic</td>
<td>• There is some evidence of character development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Character development is apparent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>• Language choices are appropriate to literary form</td>
<td>• Frequent use of literary forms</td>
<td>• Sometimes uses literary forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rich and varied use of vocabulary</td>
<td>• Frequent use of rich/varied vocabulary</td>
<td>• Small amount of rich/varied vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Variety of sentence structures</td>
<td>• Some grammar and spelling errors</td>
<td>• Certain amount of varied sentence structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Very few spelling/grammar errors</td>
<td>• Frequently uses a variety of sentence structures</td>
<td>• Quite a lot of grammar/spelling errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Very few capitalization and punctuation errors</td>
<td>• Some capitalization and punctuation errors</td>
<td>• Many capitalization errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attention to audience</strong></td>
<td>• Target audience considered</td>
<td>• Usually considers the target audience</td>
<td>• Sometimes considers the audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Uses interesting and attractive style (images, metaphors, fantasy)</td>
<td>• Uses some interesting writing</td>
<td>• Writing occasionally interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization and presentation</strong></td>
<td>• Story has a clear beginning, middle and end</td>
<td>• Story has a beginning, middle and end</td>
<td>• Story doesn’t develop or end properly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Story is organized logically</td>
<td>• Story is mostly organized logically</td>
<td>• There is an attempt to organize the information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The book has all required elements (attractive book jacket, blurb, etc.)</td>
<td>• Book has most required elements</td>
<td>• Book has some of the requested elements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Loosely based on www.wcboe.k12.md.us/mainfold/curric/eleme/WtgInfdev.htm/)