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Filip Zachoval

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Individualized Project-Based Reading and its Effect on Students' Reading Habits and Beliefs

Filip Zachoval

In recent years, a number of empirical and conceptual studies about Project-Based Learning (PBL) have presented consistent arguments rationalizing this approach to language learning and teaching. However, there are no known studies available on PBL in the Russian language classroom. This article presents the results of a qualitative research study that investigates incorporating an individualized reading project into a third-semester Russian classroom. Within the movement of student-centered pedagogies, the overall purpose of this study was: (a) to implement a reading project into a third-semester university Russian language class and (b) to provide an analysis of some of the educational gains made by students in the class. More specifically, the article reports the effects of this experimental treatment on students' reading habits and beliefs regarding foreign language (FL) learning and provides insight into students' perception of the project implementation. The results demonstrate that the project implementation had a positive effect on reading habits and beliefs regarding FL learning, and that the project implementation was received positively by the participants.

INTRODUCION

Project-Based Learning (PBL)¹ is not new in the field of education, but its role and application have changed considerably over time. It was introduced and pioneered by John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick in the first half of the twentieth century. Since its inception, PBL has taken many different forms and has been applied in a variety of disciplines and settings. Researchers and practitioners have located and described numerous positive effects of PBL on students' motivation, higher-order thinking skills, and the cultivation of learner autonomy in a wide variety of disciplines (Au et al. 1997; Blumenfeld et al. 1991; Henry.1994; Krajcik et al. 1998). However, implementation of PBL practice within the field of Second-Language Acquisition (SLA) is still rather sporadic.

One of the first advocates of project-based methodology in SLA was Brumfit, who claimed that this language-teaching methodology provides students with the opportunity to develop accuracy and fluency through “emphasis on integrated projects” (1984, p. 123). Similar belief in the positive effects of project-based methodology in creating opportunities for second language learners to develop their abilities in the target language was advocated by other SLA researchers and practitioners, most notably by Beckett (1999, 2005, 2006); Fried-Booth (1982, 1986); Carter and Thomas (1986); and Hilton-Jones (1988).

Despite the number of positive reports on project-based methodology and an increasing interest in its use in SLA environments, empirical studies have been scarce. While some informal research (e.g., Coleman 1992; Gardner 1995; Hilton-Jones 1988) suggests that project-based instruction results in higher student motivation, improved language skills, and teacher/student satisfaction, only a few empirical studies have been conducted and described that examine project work in the context of SLA. This research includes Eyring’s (1989) study on the implementation of project-based instruction in ESL classes, including teachers’ and students’ responses to this instruction; Turnbull’s (1999) case study on the effectiveness of multidimensional project-based teaching in French classes; Beckett’s (1999) study investigating PBL in four ESL classes focusing on teacher and student evaluations of PBL methodology and on investigation of their goals; Luke’s (2004) evaluative case study investigating the implementation of an inquiry-based learning approach for teaching Spanish and analyzing linguistic and educational gains; Sidman-Taveau’s (2005) study on learners’ experience and linguistic development with a computer-assisted version of project-based learning in ESL classrooms; Kobayashi’s (2006) study of students’ meaning-making efforts through oral presentation and other project-related activities including journal writing; and Tims’ (2009) study exploring students’ perception of PBL through their own experiences by means of in-depth phenomenological interviewing. The majority of these studies have been devoted to English as a Second Language (ESL), with only a few involving other languages (Spanish, French), and none in a Russian language classroom.

While PBL is becoming more popular in the field of SLA, the available empirical studies are scarce and there are no known studies available on PBL in the Russian language classroom. There is a need for

second language research that examines the practice and effects of project-based instruction in SLA education in general, and more research should be done in languages other than ESL.

METHOD

This article is based on a research study² that investigates the effects of implementing a project-based reading treatment in a third-semester Russian language class. More precisely, it investigates how a semester-long project designed around reading topically related texts affected students' perceived reading habits and beliefs regarding FL learning. The following research question is central to the study:

How does implementing a project-based reading treatment affect students' reading habits and beliefs regarding FL?

In order to address the research question, the study set out to test the following null hypotheses:

Second-year adult L2 students who read a series of narrow texts (single topic and genre) based on their individual interests following a guided procedural treatment will not demonstrate a significant change in reading habits and beliefs regarding FL (as measured by the pre- and post-test attitudinal survey interviews).

In this study, the students' reading habits and beliefs were measured by pre- and post-treatment attitudinal survey interviews. The students' perception of the project implementation was based on the post-treatment interviews. The attitudinal survey consisted of fifteen questions that were identical for both the pre- and the post-treatment condition. A semi-structured interview in English was conducted before and after the treatment was implemented. The post-treatment interview contained an additional section that collected information about students' experience with the project's implementation.

Participants

Participants in this study were enrolled in a third-semester Russian course designed for learners who had completed approximately 120-130 hours of elementary-level instruction in the Russian language, i.e., one year of language training, at a large research institute located in the

Southern U.S. It was a standard university-level language course focusing on developing functional proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It was a four-credit-hour course that met for fifty minutes four times a week during a fifteen-week semester; this amounts to 57 class meetings. The course covered the first five chapters of the ten-chapter textbook *“Russian: Stage Two: Welcome Back!”* The first two weeks of classes were devoted to the Introductory Unit that primarily reviews first-year material, and throughout the remainder of the fall semester, ten class days were spent on each of the five units: nine class days on the material and one class day on an hour-long unit exam.

Based on comparable information related to language learning, one intact third-semester class was selected as the treatment group and one separate intact class was chosen as the comparison group. Students in these two sections were comparable and homogenous in their language level³ and in their previous Russian language experience. They were all at the same level of instruction, had received a similar number of previous contact hours, and were enrolled at the same university the previous semester.

Five students from the treatment group decided to participate in the study: four were female, one was male. The average age was 20, with 21 being the oldest and 19 the youngest. Of the five participants in the treatment group, none were freshman, two were sophomores, one was a junior, and two were seniors. All students had completed two semesters of Russian language instruction and of the five participants, four previously studied other foreign languages. None of the participants were native speakers of Russian, spoke Russian at home, or had ever participated in a Russian study abroad program.

Treatment

During the semester, the treatment group followed the same standard third-semester syllabus as the comparison group, but incorporated a semester-long reading project entitled *“Semester Project: Let’s Read”* («Курсовой проект: Давайте прочитаем»). In the treatment group, each student worked with a set of three texts that were related to a topic of his or her own interest. The same general steps, as described below, were followed for each reading. First, students searched for a specific reading on the Internet. Second, students worked individually on their readings in class. Third, they shared their findings in class.

The project allowed students to research a topic of their interest through a set of readings with the ultimate goal of reporting their findings in the form of a newsletter article in English. Through a series of in-class activities and home assignments, students practiced and developed all-around language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing), acquired cultural knowledge about contemporary Russia, and explored in-depth a topic of their interest. The project entailed interconnected sets of sequenced tasks (see below for details) during which students were actively engaged in information gathering, processing, and reporting, with the ultimate goal of increased content knowledge and language mastery. Even though the texts were used primarily for enhancing reading comprehension, they also provided students with a basis for developing other language skills, specifically speaking, listening, and writing, but also grammar, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural awareness.

Reading played a central role in this project and all related activities stemmed from and utilized the three texts. The choice of readings⁴ and the work with these texts was designed around the following four tenets: 1) each student read a series of three texts on single narrow topics; 2) students read a series of texts within the same genre; 3) each student read different texts of their own choice; 4) students read to acquire information.

Project Implementation

Work on the project followed the steps described below. Topic research constituted the core part of the project and was conducted for each reading.

Step One: Project Introduction – one week was devoted to the project introduction.

First, students read the description of the project at home and prepared questions that were discussed briefly in English the following day in class. They were asked to make sure they understood what the project involved, what was expected of them, and what the outcome(s) of the project would be. This was done to familiarize students with the project in general, to give them an idea about its main objectives, assignments, and their involvement.

Second, students were asked to think of a field of interest and come up with an individual topic to research throughout the semester.

Students selected a variety of topics: some of them were related more to their college major and/or professional interests and some were chosen based on their personal interests.

Finally, students discussed and agreed on the format of the project's end product. Several possible outcomes were considered: specifically creating a DVD, a website, a newsletter, or holding a conference where they would present their research. They decided to create a newsletter that would compile articles written in English. The class instructor did not interfere in their discussion and the decision was left solely to the students.

Step Two: Topic Research – students researched the topic of their interest via three different readings over a period of approximately nine weeks, devoting about three weeks to each reading. By reading three different articles on one topic, students were able to look at the topic of their choice from three different perspectives. The same general steps as described below were followed each time. The amount of in-class reading was about twenty minutes a week, which corresponded with the amount of time that the comparison group spent reading in class.

First, students searched for specific readings on the Internet. For the first reading, they individually came up with a few key words in Russian that they would combine in a search engine. Usually, these keywords would correspond to the topic of their research. For example, the student who was interested in HIV/AIDS would search for these words. Often, these were combined with Russian/Russia to find articles related to that region. They received a list of several search engines and websites (the Russian version of Google, BBC, Wikipedia, and two major Russian search engines: “Rambler.ru” and “Yandex.ru”) to help them get started. However, they were encouraged not to limit themselves to those and to use any other search engines with which they were familiar.

Once they found an article, they were asked to send a link to their instructor for his comments, suggestions, and approval. Most of the time, their choices were approved right away. Occasionally, students reported uncertainty about their choice or difficulty in finding an appropriate reading. They would receive further suggestions on their choice of key words and/or receive links to specific websites to browse, or specific articles related to their topic. The search for specific articles was done individually as a homework assignment and students reported spending on average ten to fifteen minutes finding appropriate articles. Once their

article choice was approved, they were asked to print them out and bring them to class each day for about three weeks.

Second, students would spend about twenty minutes reading their articles in class over the course of two weeks, usually split into two ten-minute sessions. This was done using a method of silent reading where students read their articles individually and the instructor walked around and answered questions. The first reading session was usually spent reading the introductory part and then skimming through the entire article. In the second reading session the students completed reading the article. However, no specific instructions on how to approach reading were given by the instructor, who observed that each student went about it individually and that students generally used the following reading strategies: analyzing the title and the introductory paragraph, paying attention to a logical structure of the whole passage, skipping unknown words, and guessing.

Third, once they had finished reading an article, students shared their findings in class. Each student had to prepare a short a summary of the article in Russian and share it with his or her classmates. Students were given about ten minutes to prepare their summaries (based on the notes they had been taking during the reading phase) and then about ten minutes to share their findings. Sharing was done in pairs: one student would summarize their reading to a classmate who was encouraged to ask additional questions. After sharing and discussing the first student's reading for about five minutes, the second student shared and discussed their findings.

The same procedure was repeated for the second and third readings.

Step Three: Research Outcome – as determined by the students themselves, the results of their individual research were presented in the form of a newsletter.

The students decided that each of them would write an article in English on the topic that they chose to research at the beginning of the semester. To make their endeavor more effective, students decided to divide responsibilities among themselves. The division of the responsibilities, deadlines, and the newsletter specifics were discussed and decided by the students, often via e-mail or briefly before the beginning of class.

The final outcome of the project was a newsletter that consisted of thirteen articles written in English on a variety of topics exploring Russian history, politics, arts, sports, economics, and social issues. Each student wrote a 500 to 700-word article. As there were no specific instructions about the format or other attributes of the articles, the individual articles varied in style and format. Some of them resembled a short course paper; some had the clear features of a newspaper article; others resembled an opinion essay. However, they all shared one commonality—they extensively used the information that they had learned from their respective readings.

ANALYSIS

To assess possible changes in students' reading habits and beliefs regarding FL, pre- and post-treatment attitudinal interviews were conducted and analyzed. The surveys consisted of fifteen questions that were identical for both the pre- and the post-condition. These questions focused on six main issues related to L2 reading and were grouped by topics to facilitate the statistical analysis. Questions 1 through 3 assessed students' perception of the importance of L2 reading for developing other language skills. Questions 4 and 5 examined students' motivation for reading in Russian. Questions 6 through 9 determined the amount and sources of independent reading in Russian that students undertake outside of class. Questions 10 and 11 assessed students' attitudes toward the reading topics in previous classes. Questions 12 and 13 examined types of readings in which students are most interested. Questions 14 and 15 determined students' self-assessment of their current reading proficiency.

The oral interviews were recorded and later transcribed and analyzed using content cross-case analysis. The analysis adopted a qualitative approach by using descriptive statistics, quotations, and examples mentioned during the interviews. The data were read a variety of times, looking for key ideas or topics and labeling these ideas with marginal notes. Any recurring topics raised in the interviews were categorized and juxtaposed. Based on the six question sets established for the qualitative analysis, the following section presents the major findings in relation to each question set. Additionally, students' responses toward the project are presented at the end of this section.

Question Set One: Perception of the role of reading in FL acquisition.

To define students' perception of the role of reading in FL acquisition, the first interview question asked: *What is, in your opinion, the role of reading in Russian language courses?* All students interviewed deemed reading to have an important role in FL acquisition. The respondents stated possible effects that reading can have on language acquisition. Most often mentioned was a positive effect on vocabulary development, followed by an effect on grammar in general. One of the respondents recognized the role of reading as a base for other language skills. The following examples represent typical responses from students on the pre-treatment interview.

Example 1: I personally feel it's essential, in not only figuring out how to construct the language cleanly, grammatically, but it's interesting to look at words, how other people use them.

Example 2: Well, I think that reading is the first thing you learn to do in Russian. I think I'm much more comfortable in reading than doing anything else. And I think that when I see the words a lot when reading, I will be able to understand them better. I think that it's my springboard for learning other skills.

In the post-treatment interview, the same question was asked to find out how students perceived the role of reading in FL acquisition. As in the pre-treatment interview, students acknowledged the valuable role of reading in FL acquisition. However, when addressing specific areas that reading could possibly affect, there were three major changes. First, the previous connection between reading and vocabulary development was less present, while the recognition of reading as a base for other language skills remained. Second, students were more specific—when addressing the positive effect that reading can have on grammar, and repeatedly mentioned a relationship between reading and syntax. Third, one respondent cited a positive relationship between reading and creating affirmative individual motivation in FL acquisition. The following examples represent typical responses from students in the post-treatment interview.

Example 3: For me, it's basically to understand the grammar and how the language goes together. And, hopefully, make it easier to learn how to speak.

Example 4: I think it is important in establishing a good grammatical foundation. And perhaps it depends on the reading material and whether you are being exposed to what Russian people would read – it kind of sets up your ambitions for the future in terms of learning language.

Question Set Two: The sources of enjoyment and motivation (or lack thereof) in reading Russian.

To determine the bases for students' enjoyment and motivation to read in Russian, the following two questions were asked in both the pre- and post-treatment interviews: *Why/why not do you enjoy reading in Russian? Why/why not are you motivated to read in Russian?* Students most often reported a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment when overcoming challenges associated with reading as the main source of their enjoyment and motivation. At the same time, they also stated that difficulties in overcoming challenges when reading in Russian could lead to frustration. A couple of respondents reported that their motivation came from previous long-term goals of being able to read Russian literature in the original.

Example 5: I guess I kind of find it more difficult than the other skills in Russian and I like to figure it out, although I get frustrated very easily.

Example 6: I really like Russian writers and I'd like to be able to read them in the original language. So I guess I'm very motivated because eventually I want to be able to do that.

In the post-treatment interview, a majority of students reported a sense of satisfaction in overcoming challenges associated with reading in the FL. None of the respondents expressed frustration associated with reading, which was reported repeatedly in the pre-treatment interviews. Two students also remarked that they were motivated to read in Russian because they think it will help them with other skills, namely speaking. One student noticed her motivation coming from expanding her viewpoint in Russian when reading. Below are some examples from the post-treatment interview.

Example 7: It's pretty inherent in me. When I'm learning foreign languages, I want to take on the challenges. That's probably where the motivation comes from, more than anything else.

Example 8: I think it'll help me with my conversational language and by reading here and there, I can get better.

Question Set Three: The types and sources of independent reading.

In order to determine what reading students undertake outside of class, they were asked these two questions: *What have you read that was not required as a part of your Russian language course? Where did you find those readings?* Respondents reported having read mostly newspaper articles, short stories, and song lyrics. The majority of these readings were found on the Internet, although one respondent reported checking out a book of short stories from a university library. The responses on the post-treatment interview were almost identical to those on the pre-treatment interview, with the exception of being more specific about the Internet resources, as some students mentioned specific websites they read, namely the Russian version of BBC and Wikipedia. Here are a few typical responses:

Example 9: The Russian news websites, I go to those and I try to read some of the stories.

Example 10: I've read quite a few articles online and now I have starting reading Russian song lyrics online, just a few really random things. They have amusing Russian websites and those are typically in Russian.

Question Set Four: Students' attitudes toward previous reading topics in relation to their interests.

In order to find out about students' attitudes toward the reading topics in their previous language classes and whether these reflected students' personal interests, the respondents were asked to elaborate on the following two statements: *I liked the reading topics in my previous Russian classes. The reading topics in my previous Russian classes reflected my personal interests.* The majority of students reported that they had a favorite reading in their previous language class. Favorite readings varied among all respondents, as each mentioned a different text. These

included song lyrics, fairy-tales, children's poems, and short stories. One student stated that she did not enjoy any previous readings. In terms of the relationship between the previous texts and students' interest, two respondents reported their desire for being able to choose readings of their own interest.

Example 11: Honestly, I didn't enjoy any readings we did in class. When I was little I read some Russian fairy tales in English and I wish we could read those.

Example 12: We read Pushkin's poems in the original and I was able to understand them, so I liked that a lot. It's not really that I enjoyed the story itself; it was more the fact that I could read it and understand. Also, we read some song lyrics. Those were fun.

In contrast with the pre-treatment interview, in the post-treatment interviews students unanimously reported that they liked the reading topics in their current language classes and that those topics reflected their personal interests. In addition to their positive attitudes toward their readings, students also stated reasons for enjoying them. The most common reason was that they liked the freedom of choosing texts that reflected their interests, followed by being given an opportunity to work with materials outside of the textbook. The examples below illustrate typical responses.

Example 13: It would definitely be the articles for the project. The reading topics, in general, in the book are very limited. I mean it's nice from a learning perspective, but I do really well when I'm thrown into just a pool of language, so allowing us to find our own articles and read them was really useful.

Example 14: I like the project reading topics, because we got to choose our own, something we really wanted to read. It was cool to go and be able to research topics we wanted to, because in the book it's limited to the vocabulary that's in the unit. So it was great to be able to read our own texts outside of the textbook materials.

Question Set Five: students' individual reading goals.

To get an insight into students' individual reading goals, they were asked: *What are you interested in being able to read in Russian, and in what fields?* The respondents' answers revealed a great diversity in their interests both in the fields and types of readings they would like to read. Five students reported interest in about sixteen different fields, ranging from science to history to law. Only three fields (classic literature, history, and political science) were mentioned repeatedly. The majority of students mentioned interest in readings related to their respective career interests. The respondents' answers were replicated in the post-treatment interviews.

Question Set Six: students' self-assessment of their current reading skills.

To determine students' self-evaluations and the possible factors affecting their confidence in reading Russian, the following two questions were asked: *Why/why not do you feel confident about the ability to read authentic Russian texts? How do you perceive your Russian reading skills?* The respondents reported confidence in reading textbook texts, especially in getting the main ideas of their readings, but noted being much less confident about reading other texts. The most common disappointment reported was in vocabulary, which students seemed to attribute to their lack of confidence and their perception of weak reading skills. A few respondents linked their weaker reading skills with insufficient amount of exposure and practice. The following two examples illustrate students' self-assessment of their reading skills prior to the treatment.

Example 15: I think I don't practice enough on my own and I know I should do that. I can get the gist of what I'm reading, except occasionally I need to look up a word I don't understand. Because of my frustration, I sometimes try to figure out every word, what it means, which is not necessarily what I need to do in order to understand the overall concept.

Example 16: Stuff we do in class I feel 100%, but not the stuff that's meant for the native speakers. Whenever I pick up a newspaper article, I understand maybe 5% of it.

In their post-treatment interviews, all respondents reported being more confident compared to the pre-treatment. The degree of their confidence varied, from “a little bit more” and “more” to “pretty” and “strongly” confident. Students also stated feeling an improvement in their reading skills; namely, an increased ability to understand the main points of their readings, better orientation within a text, and focus on the overall meaning of a text. At the same time, some of the respondents mentioned a lack of vocabulary knowledge to be a shortcoming in their reading skills and to negatively affect their confidence. Typical comments by students sampled are presented in the following examples.

Example 17: I feel strongly confident now, because I take time to sit down and struggle with it instead of just looking it up, but I still don't feel 100% confident. I get very excited when I do know some things. I mean when I'm able to pick things up and kind of clue something together. That makes me feel better about my ability. I feel for the level I'm at, it's good. But it could be stronger, obviously.

Example 18: Even though I can't necessarily understand everything that's going on, I'm starting to be able to put things together. I'm a little bit more confident, but still I feel it's mostly the vocabulary I need to work on. It's easier for me to get an overall picture of what I read now. I feel I'm better now than I was before.

Based on the results of the content cross-case analysis of the six question sets, the null hypothesis can be rejected, as a significant difference in students' reading habits and beliefs regarding foreign language (FL) learning occurred, as demonstrated by shifts between the pre-treatment to the post-treatment answers.

Students' Evaluation of the Project

As mentioned earlier, students from the treatment group were asked to evaluate the procedural treatment they underwent during the post-treatment interview. They were asked these three questions: *What did you think about the project? What were the biggest strengths of the project? What were the biggest weaknesses of the project?*

Students unanimously reported that they liked the project. The most commonly reported reason for the positive project evaluation was the freedom of choice in both their reading topics and specific texts. They stated that this allowed them to work with materials that they were interested in and that were related to their respective careers. Respondents also mentioned enjoying the use of authentic materials as a supplementary component to their textbook, as they found choosing their own texts both stimulating and novel. Several students also reported enjoying working on the newsletter. As for the biggest weakness, respondents mentioned a few diverse reasons: difficulty in working together with other classmates and time constraints. Below are typical responses:

Example 19: I thought it was excellent. It really let us get out there and do what we wanted to do in topics we were interested in. And the fact we could pull out the information from the Russian sites was just great. I think it was a little time consuming. I wish it was a little more like a grade project. Otherwise, I really liked the project.

Example 20: I liked it, I really did. I mean, I got really fired up when I heard that I would get to do something on my own choosing. I tried to pick up something related to my own career. It didn't take that much work, as I thought it would and I just really enjoyed it. I was impressed with what people produced from what they had been reading all semester and researching. I'm really proud of what we came out with.

In summary, students' comments suggest that the experimental treatment created a new reading experience for the participants. The experimental readings, based on student evaluations, were much more comprehensible and interesting when compared to the textbook readings.

DISCUSSION

This study employed an experimental methodology to investigate the implementation of an interactive reading project in a third-semester Russian language class. More specifically, the study examined the possible effects of a project-based experimental treatment on students'

reading habits and beliefs and their perception of the project implementation. The central findings from the data analysis are twofold:

1) The students following a guided procedural treatment that involved researching topics of individual choice and interest through a set of readings revealed a significant change in students' reading habits and beliefs regarding FL. Furthermore, the students seemed to modify their old reading habits and were able to read with focus more on macro-processing rather than on micro-processing of textual details. As a result, the experimental input encouraged the active interaction between students and the texts leading to students' increased beliefs about the importance of reading in FL acquisition.

2) The study participants responded positively to the experimental treatment, i.e., project implementation. The PBL framework⁵ for reading a series of texts of the students' own choosing proved to be an enjoyable experience for the treatment group. Based on their responses to the attitudinal survey, the treatment group not only enjoyed the reading, but also expressed interest in being able to read texts of their own choosing in subsequent semesters.

In summary, at this early stage of research into implementing PBL in the language classroom, a central finding from the treatment group is the fact that the students were able to successfully read on their own a series of authentic texts of their own choosing. Furthermore, this implementation of PBL had the effect of improving reading skills, positively affecting some beliefs and habits related to FL.

LIMITATIONS

The current experiment does have certain limitations. First, the current findings may not be generalizable to all FL learners. The participants used in this study came from a particular group of third-semester university students. Whether other categories of FL learners such as advanced students would respond to the experimental treatment in a similar way is not clear. Additionally, the study of this particular design was conducted with learners of Russian. Whether students of other foreign languages would respond to the treatment differently is unclear and studies with other L2s are desirable, especially those with different scripts or alphabets.

Second, the current study also exhibits a number of limitations in regard to its design, some of which were unavoidable due to curriculum

and pragmatic requirements. They include the sample size and the number of instructors. A study of this type might generate more meaningful results with larger samples of both students and instructors.

Third, PBL is a wide-ranging concept and specific projects, as described by language instructors in the available literature, vary greatly. Whether different forms of projects would produce similar results is not clear. If a similar project were to be integrated into a curriculum, it could be used more fully as a learning tool. Students could spend more time reading their texts and a more detailed discussion of their individual topics could be held during regular class hours. Work on the final product could take place in the classroom. In the case of this study, students read three relatively short texts during the semester, and it is unclear whether the choice of one longer text would have altered the results.

Fourth, the study participants were not assessed for their precise language proficiency levels by any standardized scales (such as the ILR/ACTFL) at any time during the course of the study. Whether differing proficiency levels among students would affect the results of the study and students' perception of the project is unclear.³

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Bearing in mind the limitations of this experiment, the results of the study lead to a proposal of the following pedagogical modifications to improve the way foreign language reading is taught in Russian classes in particular and potentially in other languages, as well.

First, language educators should incorporate projects into the FL classroom. With closer integration of PBL into FL instruction through a procedural approach to reading, there appears to be a possibility that L2 learners develop more efficient reading skills. The fact that the experimental treatment could be implemented into the standard curriculum suggests that increasing the flexibility of reading does not necessarily involve any major curricular changes; thus, the standard curriculum and pedagogy of existing L2 courses can remain in place.

Second, language educators should provide FL learners with a choice of their own reading texts, based on students' background knowledge and/or interests. Reading in one's own fields of interest may help FL learners to more successfully build cultural competence than reading a single de-contextualized article written for sophisticated

readers who belong to the target culture. At the same time, and perhaps most significantly, the findings in the current study can be used to argue that the FL profession needs to encourage instructors to step away from selecting all materials used in the classroom. Instead of FL instructors deciding what texts students should read, a more appropriate goal should be to enable students to choose particular topics or even specific readings.

Researchers and educators involved with SLA are faced with the challenging task of providing instruction and content for all learners that are culturally appropriate, personally relevant, and maximally effective. PBL has the potential of helping them reach these goals by incorporating content- and interdisciplinary-oriented elements into language courses, and by taking full advantage of students' individual strengths and interests.

NOTES

1. The definition of PBL varies to a certain degree both among the different fields that incorporate it (K-12 education, educational psychology, instructional technology, mathematics, the sciences, etc.) and within the discipline of SLA. As the versatility of PBL makes it difficult to articulate one single definition, Stoller (in Beckett 2006) specified conditions that should be present for effective project-based learning to take place:

1. Have a process and product orientation;
2. Be defined, at least in part, by students, to encourage student ownership in the project;
3. Extend over a period of time (rather than a single class session);
4. Encourage the natural integration of skills;
5. Make a dual commitment to language and content learning;
6. Oblige students to work in groups and on their own;
7. Require students to take some responsibility for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information from target language resources;
8. Require teacher and students to assume new roles and responsibilities;
9. Result in a tangible final product; and
10. Conclude with student reflections on both the process and the product.

2. The study described in this article was a part of a larger research study (unpublished) that also measured the effects of the same experimental treatment on students' reading comprehension, perceived reading skills, and overall language proficiency.

3. Language proficiency in both groups was followed throughout the semester to gauge whether the students in the study group were able to cover the same material with similar success as the students in the control group. More specifically, the groups' results on five written unit exams were compared. Each written exam lasted fifty minutes, was cumulative in nature, and focused on recently learned material from the course textbook. The average difference between the means of the comparison group and the treatment group grades on all of the five written exams was 3.16% on a 100% scale. This indicates an equivalent level of language ability between groups over the course of the semester. The comparison is only approximate, as the low number of participants did not support quantitative analysis.

4. All the articles were found and chosen by students themselves. Students were instructed to find three different articles on one topic, all written in the same genre. However, no further specific characteristics (e.g., length, sources of these articles, specific genre) were required. Nevertheless, during the course of working with the texts in class, the instructor noticed that the majority of texts were about 500 words in length and most of them were newspaper articles.

5. The overall theoretical framework for the design of this experimental treatment was Project-based Learning. However, numerous commonalities between the proposed treatment design described in this article and treatments stemming from other service-based learning methods (such as Free Voluntary Reading, Sustained Silent Reading, or Extensive Reading) can be found.

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