

A theme-based approach: a video project

By taking the focus off language practice and putting it on project work, learners become more aware of communication in a broader sense, claim Patricia Magni and Alison Tickle. The added bonus is students take more responsibility for their own learning.

IN this article we are going to describe a project we have been pursuing with first year false beginner students at an Italian Liceo Linguistico (High School specialising in languages).

At the beginning of the school year the students were presented with an idea: Life in the Year 3000, with the final aim of a video production. We decided to provide the initial idea and the guidelines as it was a first year, mixed-ability class in a new school and the class was not as yet integrated. The students were extremely enthusiastic about the idea of producing a video and this gave them the incentive to produce something meaningful.

We presented them with a variety of themes and activities which encouraged team work. The emphasis was always on the project, backed up by language practice through the performance of various tasks before presenting each relevant theme of the project. Our role was to provide guidelines and to monitor activities while the students improvised and organised the final product.

The guidelines

Each theme consisted of a warm-up, the activity and a follow-up, with a concrete end product for each theme to which the students could relate. The table on the next page gives the guidelines for the project.

Text 1

(First teach new vocabulary and expressions: *spin; whizz round; backwards; forwards; sideways; it reminds me of...*)

In the corner of my room there's a box. It looks like a telephone-box and I often travel in it. I'm walking towards it. I'm opening the door and stepping inside. As usual I find that the box is very big inside.

I'm standing in front of my computer. The date on the clock is - (insert today's date). I'm going to travel in time so I'm pressing some buttons. The date is changing slowly and my machine's turning. It's 1990, 1997. The machine's turning faster and faster. (using Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, the meaning of the passage was timed to coincide with the pace of the music) the clock is whizzing round. It's the year 2252, 2373, 2614...my machine is spinning too fast the clock's whizzing round too fast. It's going slower now... and slower... bump - it's stopped. It's the year 3000.

I can hear a strange noise outside... and what's that smell? It reminds me of something. I'm walking to the door of my time-machine but I'm afraid to open the door. What is that noise and that strange smell? I'm opening the door...



Landscapes drawn by students for the year 3000



Writing the script

After the completion of this programme, students elected a production team



Alison Tickle/Patricia Magni

Experiencing live bar entertainment in the future

consisting of: director, assistant director, technician, scene designer, costume designer, two make-up artists, photographer, treasurer. In this way everyone was involved in the project. At this stage the objective was to write a script for the play on video.

During participation in the above programme students had been required to use their imagination to simulate unreal situations (in the year 3000). They were extremely stimulated by this activity, much more than when performing tasks related only to their present-day experience.

They had also been involved in 'real' critical and problem-solving activities when assessing other groups' presentations. Now, with concentration on suggestions for sound, lighting and shooting angle plus body expression and intonation, in the piecing together of the script, they practised this technique more systematically. It was interesting to note the evident facility learners had to speak more accurately and fluently when imagining an unreal situation than when performing 'real' organisational activities.

The students wrote the video script and created the following story-line together: A boy goes to visit his friend who is busy inside a washing machine transforming it into a time machine. Whilst they are both in the washing machine and she is showing her invention to him, the mother enters the kitchen, throws her clothes into

Theme	Warm-up	Activity	Follow-up	Language practice
The Environment	Concentration exercise with music-Vivaldi's <i>The Four Seasons</i> : students close their eyes and are transported by the teacher reading text 1 (see next page).	With eyes closed, students say what they imagine one by one, as the teacher touches their shoulders. They may also describe what they can touch, taste, smell and hear.	Drawing of the landscape they visualised in the activity.	Description of places; simple present (<i>can, is/are, there is/are, a/some</i>).
Fashion	Students stand back to back and in turn they describe what each other is wearing.	Working in groups students decide what people wear in the year 3000 and set up a fashion show.	Drawing of people in their daily clothes.	Description of people and clothes; simple present and present continuous.
Directions	Using <i>English Sign Language</i> (1) students are given examples of present-day signs and work through the activities.	1. In groups students write the signs they would expect to find in the year 3000. 2. Recreation of environment with students and teachers acting as signposts - role-play: asking and giving directions.	Choice of the most original and appropriate signs to use for the video.	Asking/giving directions; questions (<i>Where is/are? can you tell me the way to... Imperatives</i>).
Routines	Concentration exercise (as for theme 1 but with Mozart's <i>Piano Concerto in B flat major</i>). The teacher then describes the environment as imagined in theme 1.	Role-play set up by the students; two time travellers encounter daily life in the year 3000. The time travellers meet and talk with people (a typist, a mechanic and other workers), trees, flowers and animals about their daily routines.	Students write about the routines of the inhabitants.	Routines; present simple; frequency adverbs; questions with <i>do/does</i> .
Sounds	Students describe sound on <i>Sounds Interesting</i> cassette (2) as if they were taking place in the year 3000.	1. Students produce recorded tape of sounds from the year 3000. 2. Students act out mimes to the sounds. 3. Students create and act out a scene using the sequence of sounds.	Students write out the script of the scene they have improvised (battle in space and bar scene).	Descriptions: <i>It is/It sounds like...</i>
Food	In groups students write menus for the year 3000.	Students improvise dialogues: at the restaurant using their menus as props.	Students write the script for the scene in which the two time travellers visit a restaurant in the year 3000.	Offers and requests: <i>Would you like...? I'd like...</i> Vocabulary: food and drink of the present day (menus).
Narratives	Students play Visual Consequences (passing a sheet of paper round in groups of five to end up with a creature from the year 3000). Concentration exercise (as before), but this time with Chopin's <i>Nocturnes</i> .	Students work in pairs with their eyes closed. They take turns being a time traveller and a creature asking and talking about the past.	Students write narratives about the creatures' past.	Narratives: simple past including questions with <i>did</i> .
Inventions	The whole class discusses instructions for the building and operating of the 'time machine'. They decide it is going to look like a washing machine and write instructions for its building and operation.	1. In groups they invent machines of the year 3000 and write instructions on how to build and operate them. 2. Each group demonstrates the building and operating of a robot housekeeper, a remote control electronic cooker, a three-dimensional photocopier and a shower with movable hands protruding from the walls.	The audience asks questions about the inventions.	Giving instructions: how to build and operate a machine; imperatives.
Intergalactic Trade Fair	In groups students make posters to advertise their inventions.	1. The same groups prepare a role-play to sell their inventions at an Intergalactic Trade Fair using persuasive language. 2. They then perform the role-play, giving particular attention to intonation, facial expression and gestures.	Students write the scripts of their role-play.	Language of advertising; analysis of present-day advertisements.
Games	Students play a present-day game in groups.	1. Working in groups students invent a game for the year 3000 and write the instructions. 2. Each group presents its game to the rest of the class. Games presented: The King is in/out; Meteorites; The Zodiac Game; The Number Game.	The whole class plays each game	Study of instructions for present-day games; revision of imperatives.

Teaching Ideas

the washing machine unaware that her daughter and friend are inside and sets the machine in motion. The time machine takes them forward to the year 3000 where they encounter friendly flowers which bear names of English queens and can speak and walk as can the trees which also snore. They ask the trees the way to the bar. The trees give directions. On the way to the bar, they pass a park where there are groups of people playing outdoor games: The King is in/out and Meteorites. At the bar they are presented with a strange menu and are entertained by a very peculiar group of singers. They also meet some soldiers who have just returned from a battle in space which they recount (it is shown in flashback). When they leave the bar they see signs indicating an Intergalactic Trade Fair which they decide to visit. They watch demonstrations of 'Aragostina 3000, the Electronic Cooker', 'The BCL 1 House Robot', 'The Washing Machine for People' and 'The 3/D Photocopier'.

After the Trade Fair they see that it is getting late and must go back to the present, but realise that they do not know how to operate the machine and so are trapped in the year 3000.

Feedback

One attempt was made to produce the video with the help of the school

technician. The scenes were prepared in the school gymnasium. On viewing the video which did not come out as they had expected, they analysed the faults in detail. These included images which were not surrealistic enough, barely-audible sound, too many scene changes, stiff body movements, unconvincing facial expressions.

Several constructive suggestions were made. They decided to resume work on the video the following year and to concentrate more on the technical aspect. The technician offered to give them lessons as they were eager to operate the camera themselves. They also thought that more body awareness exercises were required and we contacted their sports teacher who was enthusiastic to participate.

Although they found that the initial attempt to produce a video was unsatisfactory, the language they were able to produce in the final discussion was more accurate and their vocabulary range wider than when discussing and organising the activities in the themes. The process of learning through the experience of putting the project together was more important for us than the final output.

This project stimulated cooperation allowing slower learners to feel just as involved as faster learners. Everyone worked to their maximum potential and were encouraged by the concrete results

that they all contributed to.

Shifting language practice from the main focus of the syllabus put emphasis on all aspects of communication. Learners become aware that not only the forms and functions of a language were to be considered but also important were para-linguistic features.

This method of language teaching has proved far more stimulating than methods we have used previously. It encourages the whole class to participate and become more active in their own learning. ■

Patricia Magni has been teaching for 10 years and teacher training for five. She has written several books on teaching literature. She has an MA in linguistics. Alison Tickle has taught in Italy for seven years and has an MA in linguistics.

References

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- (2) *Sounds Interesting*, A. Duff and A. Maley (Cambridge University Press, 1975).

Further reading

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