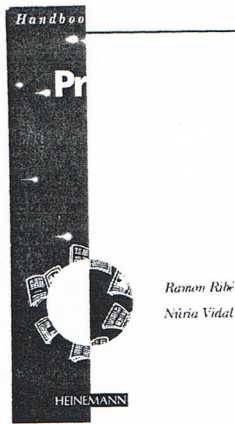


## PROJECT WORK STEP BY STEP

by Ramón Ribé  
& Nuria Vidal.  
Oxford: Heinemann, 1993



The British Council is currently carrying out a survey into the future of English Language Teaching (ELT) around the world entitled 'English 2000'. One of the questions they ask concerns people's views on the prevalence in ELT of British authors, materials writers, teachers and teacher trainers. Their question centres on whether or not this will change over the next two or three decades. *Project Work*, written by two Catalan authors, materials writers, teachers and teacher trainers, seems to me a clear indication that the future of ELT, in the year 2000 and beyond, will be far more international than, today, many may suspect.

At a time when 'autonomous learning', 'motivation', 'humanistic teaching', 'learner-centredness', and 'individualised learning' have all become catchwords and bandwagon banners, this book offers readers a fully-integrated demonstration of how the best of

these can - with little apparent effort - be pulled together into a simple, harmonious whole, which does not over-load anyone with jargon, or put them off by presenting complex theoretical approaches without applying these to the practical requirements of the classroom situation. Furthermore, it is a work which practises what it preaches, drawing together the strands of its content in such a way as to clearly demonstrate its purpose. A skillfully crafted text, written with precision, understanding, humour, and *arte*, it is illustrated by the work of learners produced in the authors' own classrooms, making it all that much more real. They suggest teachers who use project work should aim to 'motivate through sense of achievement' (p. 40) and that is just what they have done.

As its subtitle suggests, *Project Work* moves step by step through the various phases of a project. Its ten chapters cover more than the reader might initially expect. 'Creating a good class atmosphere' and 'Getting the class interested' are the titles of chapters one and two respectively, and denote the humanistic, learner-centredness of the authors' approach. Here, techniques and activities are presented which have been borrowed and adapted from other sources. Some readers might be tempted to skim through them, and then move directly into the 'meat' of the text. But as the authors point out, unless the ground is thoroughly prepared anything sown in it later will fail to bear fruit. Accordingly, the negotiation and planning of

project work should take place as a participative activity with teacher and learners working together. Ribé and Vidal demonstrate the means by which they have been able to establish common interests among their learners, and simultaneously build up the group cohesion which is so important in the process of carrying out a project.

The specific selection of activities they offer in these chapters are of two kinds: some are 'open-selection' techniques, others are more 'teacher-guided'. In my experience, the latter are more easily accepted by both teachers and learners in Spain, and this may account for the fact that we are offered considerably more of these. Coming back to my opening remarks: here, we see a clear example of the ways in which a book of this type is so much more appropriate for the Spanish market having been written by authors with inside knowledge and experience.

However, one of the pitfalls of this type of material, is the tendency of practising classroom teachers to take away the 'recipe' and apply it in their own classroom without understanding what is behind it. When, on page 36 for example, we find ourselves with the following statement, we can appreciate Ribé and Vidal's concern about this too:

*WARNING: At this point we may find ourselves in a situation where the students, wanting to complete the task in hand, revert to their mother tongue. The teacher, while not encouraging this, should not be unduly worried by it.*

This, and other similar interventions in the reading of the book are one of its strongest



points: no one need feel they are alone in trying to put its contents into practice.

As we follow the process of setting up a project through its various stages, the importance of detailed planning, and of recording events as they occur, in order to review and revise plans, is made easier by the presentation of a number of photocopiable checklists. Sometimes these are headed 'Golden rules for ...', and these are particularly useful in that they gather together in one simple block what are really the straightforward, commonsense things we all know, but that we have probably never thought to put into words in such a compact format.

Project work, as the authors describe it, involves the class, sub-groups, and individual learners, at different times, in different but complementary processes. Tasks are defined and responsibility taken on a sub-group, and/or individual level. Learners involvement is in accordance with their interests and abilities in as much as possible, as well as with the overall objectives of the project. This interweaving of people, tasks and language is highly complex, and demands a great deal of awareness on the part of the teacher of exactly what is going on within the classroom group, and with each individual learner. As a means of drawing these threads together the authors propose that feedback at certain points is presented by the individual learner in order to motivate her, and boost her

confidence. Creating an awareness in the learner's mind of specific linguistic aspects of the project, which are then recycled in creative, 'personal reports' - again based on checklists - helps learners develop their personal organisational skills and become more autonomous as people, at the same time as improving their knowledge of language. At this point in project work linguistic accuracy takes on a great significance, and the teacher has the opportunity to introduce self-access learning materials for individuals, or group correction activities, as well as more teacher-centred analysis and input of the language they use, or intend to use, in their feedback reports.

The final two chapters cover aspects of the project which might all too easily get lost, or left behind, in many a teacher's classroom. In Chapter 9 'Presenting the project', objective three is 'To enjoy celebrating the end of the project' (p. 79). Here they discuss organising a class, or school party in terms of a mini-project with which to round off everything. Chapter 10 deals with the more thorny issue of 'Assessing and evaluating the project'. In this chapter the authors point out the importance of any summative evaluation of project work being in consonance with the project work itself in terms of the manner in which it is carried out: 'The test and the project should not be in conflict' (p. 85). Traditional testing involves a series of exam techniques, and it is unfair to use

these to evaluate learners' performance without having given them prior training. The distinction between formative and summative assessment techniques is made explicit, and so are a number of learner-centred self-assessment techniques, once more facilitated by the presentation of photocopiable checklists.

The book is completed with 'A final word to the teacher', and a quotation from C.V Cavafy's poem 'Ithaka', with which the 'Introduction' began:

Arriving there is what you're destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you're old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

In the same way that the authors insist a project should be 'consistent, coherent and attractive' (p. 61), their own text meets each of these criteria. And, in as much as they can, the same process of negotiation they recommend teachers carry out with their learners is present in their work. To describe the process of producing a project Ribé and Vidal use the metaphor of bricklaying, and really with this they encapsulate the complexities of detail which project work involves. This slim text goes a long way to teaching us all how to cement brick to brick, from the foundations up, in the construction of a well-built project.

*Bryan Robinson*