CONTENT BASED TEACHING OF YOUNG LEARNERS: Possibilities of assessment

Working in a group on a content based task, presenting the outcomes and thereby using the target language is a very complex performance. For us as teachers there is the crucial question: How to assess pupils' performance when language is not the only focus of assessment, because they are working on a project about history, geography or other cultural or political issues?

Assessing a project on a given topic means not only evaluating the final project (e.g. a reader, poster, multimedia presentation…) but also monitoring and appraising a very complex process over a period of time. The possible areas of assessment are:

- Expanding their knowledge on a specific topic
- Working collaboratively in a team
- Presenting the results and using visual aids
- Using and improving their language skills
- Developing learning and thinking skills

In order to make the monitoring and assessment transparent it is important to design checklists so that students can monitor and assess their own progress and thus organize their learning process themselves. The teacher can use the same evaluation tool for his assessment. These checklists consist of positive "can do" statements taken from the CEFR which reaffirm the achievements of the individual student and strengthen his/her self-esteem. A more detailed description of performance is given by using "rubrics".

The examples from my teaching practice (at a lower intermediate level) will show the potential of different scales and "can-do" statements from the CEFR and "rubrics" when assessing content based learning in young learners' classroom.

The climate of collaboration is essential for the success in the learning process. The pupils learn to respect and value problem-solving processes; classroom rules support risk taking, sharing knowledge and confusion, and working together to solve comprehension problems. They draw on each other's knowledge, serving as resources to make sense of a text together. There is a need for a shared vocabulary to describe reading an learning processes and to evaluate their own level of proficiency.

As teachers, we must be aware of pupils' different abilities and aptitudes in our classes. In order to make the learning process really effective, it is necessary to find a level which is challenging yet not **frustrating. According to Vygotski and Bruner this level is called the "zone** of proximal development" (ZPD) – there must be a challenge, provided pupils also get the adequate support by a competent other (be it teacher or peer) this is called **SCAFFOLDING**; it is a temporary help or coaching till the learner can perform the task independently. (The more they grow, the more we fade)

Activities and tasks which pupils prepare collaboratively and present them to the class contribute most effectively to the language growth. With more competent pupils it is a rewarding experience to work on **real projects**. However this is a very **demanding undertaking** – it has to be well prepared in advance so that pupils know what to do and how they are going to be assessed. They need necessary skills and strategies which must be taught explicitly (especially literacy skills since they have to read a lot to get the information for their script and talk). so that students can engage in depending upon what skills performances are desired. The teacher has to **preteach that means to model the strategies**, doing a similar task as pupils are expected to do. Modelling is an essential element of scaffolding and the teacher as the coach has to be prepared to give the support when needed.

The teacher must be **ready to take risks and to let go** – he is no longer the only expert on the topic, because this has been chosen by the pupils. On the other hand the pupils must be willing to take the responsibility for their own learning, to monitor and evaluate their work, to use the multiple competencies

(linguistic, social, creative, logical ....) they have got to accomplish the task and present the results using visual aids like brochures, posters, videos or multimedia presentations.

In order to prevent cheating the teacher must provide exact criteria and standards for the final presentation and most important of all observe the pupils working on their tasks and keep notes according to the agreed formats. Checklists are not only used for the teacher's evaluation but also for the selfevaluation on the part of the pupils. At the same time, these checklists represent attainment targets concerning teamwork, design of the product, language competence and learning strategies. I have used the descriptors form CEFR for language competences and partly for learning strategies. For teamwork, reading skills and giving a talk with the help of visual aids I used rubrics, mostly adapted from the online tool provided by "rubistar4teachers". The advantage of rubrics is that they give explicit description of a performance usually on four different levels – so the pupils learn the criteria for a very good performance and realize why theirs is or is not that good. On the one hand rubrics provide transparent criteria of evaluation, on the other hand they help the pupils to set themselves new goals because they know now, what to improve.

Working on a project in a team focuses on a topic(media, Geography, History, Science...), language is the means of communication, oral and written.

- Pupils are **exposed to extensive language input**, searching for the information in authentic sources (books, magazines, Internet, films, lyrics)

- They produce **extensive output** writing down notes, summaries, drafts

- Editing their material and rehearsing involves **intensive output**

- There is plenty of opportunitiy to negotiate language use: "how to put it right", what is the most appropriate way of expressing one's thoughts

- There is a need to talk about sentence structure or tenses, thereby dealing with grammar in a meaningful way (**analysed input and output**)

- There is the opportunity to work collaboratively, helping each other and learning from each other, to show one's strengths and admit weeknesses

- Working on a project is challenging, meaningful and authentic experience in the target language

- It offers plenty of opportunities for self-organized learning and (self) monitoring/assessment

- It is a good opportunity to assess oral skills in the classroom.

I was able to work with the same group of learners for 6 years, thus developing autonomous learning step by step, observing the pupils as well as discussing with them the pros and cons of the new approach. Whereas all the pupils found the "work plans" and projects very helpful for their learning, not all of them were in favour of self-assessment. The critical pupils simply stated that assessment was teacher's business, they were also very reluctant and inaccurate when they had to assess their skills, because this was totally irrelevant for them.

On the other hand there were many pupils who experienced the benefits of self-monitoring, they were proud to say what they could do and they could clearly state what they had to improve – and they did improve their language competence considerably; they grew into self-confident, autonomous learners. Since most of the pupils at our school have a migration background, this is of utmost importance for them, because they grow up in a plurilingual environment, coping with at least three languages (one or two within the family, two or three at school). Therefore it is essential for them to learn and get aware of **how to learn** a language.

Pupils' commitment on the project about their favourite pop star was really impressive. They did some research on the internet and magazines in English and German to find the information needed. They created beautiful posters or power-point slides with remarkable texts and rehearsed intensively. They talked fluently and could answer all the given questions. Their material was well organized in a file which they had

to hand in. They listened carefully to the talks of their peers and assessed them objectively according to the criteria we decided upon.

At the end of the secondary school in year 10 I had to prepare them for the final evaluation of their skills for the Language Passport. I chose a project on the film "Bend it like Beckham" along with the book and reading log. Working on it they had to use and thus show all the skills and strategies they had learned so far. During the project they had to assess their competences according to the descriptors in their *Language Portfolio* either on the level B1 or B2. They were able to choose from a pool of different tasks which they collected in their reading log. Some of the reading logs have shown that the learners reached a language competence much above the usual "school English", specially concerning the vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. Asked about what they did to improve their language, they answered that they deliberately watched films on DVD in English, sometimes with the help of German subtitles, two had close relations to their relatives in England or America, a few started to chat and msn.

There was no need to correct any self-assessment in the language passport, however it was a long and difficult way in a school system and in a society, where self-assessment, ownership and self directed learning are just starting to emerge. The implementation of the *European Language Portfolio* and the descriptors for language competences based on CEF are now the issue of the day, as they have been included into German standards for the middle school. And all of the sudden self-assessment has been introduced in all the new course books – let's hope that self-assessment and autonomous learning won't stay only "on paper" but that they will pave their way into the classrooms.

Above all I would like to stress that CEF as well the European Language Portfolio are a set of "potential tools" and not prescriptive books. As Dave Allen points out: *"You can't measure language. You can describe and assess the language skills, but not calculate."* So the "can do" statements and portfolio assessment bring a new culture of assessment and evaluation into the foreign language classrooms, which again contributes to life-long language learning and offers *"opportunities to acquire independence and autonomy as learners (….) and encourages co-operation and other social values."(F. Hayworth: Why the CEF is important. In K. Morrow: Insights from the Common European Framework. Oxford 2004, p. 13.)*

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Online documents: CEFR, Manuals, Reports

http://www.wested.org/cs/sli/print/docs/sli/home.htm

Information on Reading for Understanding

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http://interactives.mped.org/view_interactive.aspx?id=28&title
help for creating venn diagrams (online tool)

http://www.readwritethink.org/student_mat/index.asp
overview of online tools

http://www.readingquest.org/strat/rt.html

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documentation on the COMENIUS school development project focusing on implementation of portfolio and learner autonomy, coordinated by Sanja Wagner, Darmstadt. (Other schools involved were Karlslunde : Hanne Thomsen,;Chafford: Junerose Palmer; StJust: Francoise Coupas; Audrini: Jelena Pimahova)

http://s1.teamlearn.de/b-1-eqt

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