

THE USE OF RESEARCH POSTERS IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

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Abstract. The use of actual classroom posters is a blend of using technology and developing students' tactile senses. The students at the English Language School at the International Balkan University attend a one-year intensive language program. In order to implement alternative teaching methods and techniques, during the winter semester students participate in a research poster presentation project. The aims of the poster projects include: promoting team work, developing students' cooperation and collaborative skills, as well as their research skills, and learning English in a fun and creative way. A survey was conducted with 200 students in order to receive students' feedback on the poster project experience. According to the survey results, most students chose learning English in a fun and creative way and improving their team work skills both as the most important and the most interesting things they learned during the poster projects. Students found working with others and finding the right information on the internet to be the least appealing aspect of the project. They had most difficulties with reacting to teachers' and other students' comments, as well as working with other students and learning from them. In conclusion, students are generally in favour of alternative methods of teaching, such as learning English through making and presenting posters. Furthermore, teachers should consider the fact that students have not had much previous experience with team work and therefore need additional training to help them collaborate better and to learn how to respond to feedback and assessment of their work.

Keywords: *EFL, poster presentations, team work, research skills.*

Introduction

Posters are a valuable source of information and knowledge transfer. Transferring knowledge is both in the poster itself and being present to talk to an audience about it (Nycyk, 2018). In this paper the term poster refers to students' research posters made on paper or cardboard. These types of posters differ from the academic 'presentations that teachers attend at conferences', where 'the 'audience may ask questions and open up debates following a talk' (Munby, 2011: 163). The use of actual classroom posters is a blend of using technology and developing students' tactile senses, while increasing student interaction and collaboration. Such alternative teaching techniques are more than necessary in today's society because of students' dependence on technology, which

leads to more screen time and less face-to-face interaction. The study was conducted with students in the one-year intensive English language program, organized by the English Language School (ELS) for future students at International Balkan University (IBU) in Skopje, North Macedonia. The language of instruction at IBU is English; therefore students whose proficiency is lower than B2 are obliged to attend the ELS for one academic year. During the winter semester students (A2 and B1 level) participate in a poster project for a period of three weeks. The aims of the poster projects include:

- promoting team work,
- developing students' cooperation and collaborative skills, as well as their research skills,
- learning English in a fun, engaging and creative way.

The research poster provides students with the opportunity to be involved in an academic type of research while improving their English language skills. This is part of their preparation for the university setting in which they will be studying for the next four years. Previous studies by A. M. Wolfe & College (2006) have demonstrated that 94.7% of the respondents believe that oral presentations play a significant role in

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their academic experience as well as future employability (98.9%). The 12 EFL teachers from the ELS unanimously agreed that some students are reluctant to participate in research poster projects. This research problem was the reason for conducting a study in order to a) receive students' feedback on the poster project experience; b) identify the challenges of research poster projects that students face; and c) to suggest ways of making research projects more effective. The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the students' experience with the research poster presentation project?
2. What challenges do students face while working on the poster presentation? and
3. How can research poster presentation projects be made more effective?

The practicality of using research posters in the classroom in general has been widely acknowledged. According to Rief & M.A., (n.d.) students retain 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they see and hear, 70% of what they say, and 90% of what they say and do. Research posters enable students to say what they know based on the research they have done. The benefits of using them in the classroom are numerous. They increase students' level of interest and participation in the language activities (Tanner and Chapman, 2012), improve creativity and promote learner autonomy (Ozturk, 2017), enhance students' presentation skills (Conteh, 2018) as well as their research skills (D'Angelo, 2010), and provide students with opportunities to receive feedback from/give feedback to their peers (Billings & Halstead, 2012).

Studies conducted with university students suggest that research poster presentations promote vital communication skills for the 21st century learner (Ahmad, 2019; Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2015; Prichard & Ferreira, 2014). The project of preparing the poster itself is time consuming and involves a lot of effort, which in turn results into students experiencing 'a sense of achievement when they present it to an audience' and realizing how vital it is for training them to be successful in their future career (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2015). Regarding language skills, a study by Ahmad (2019) indicated that digital posters have a significant effect on the reading comprehension and engagement of EFL students. He included thirty-three 3rd-year EFL college students and divided them

into a control and an experimental group. The Mann-Whitney U Test showed significant differences between the two groups in the posttest of engagement ($U = 57.00, p < 0.05$) and reading comprehension ($U = 70.00, p < 0.05$). In another study, with low-proficiency EFL learners, the hypothesis that poster presentations would lead to an increased rate of speaking, more vocabulary retention, and better affective effects was confirmed (Prichard, & Ferreira, 2014).

However, there are several drawbacks of traditional posters, such as the fact that they are a static final product (Cook, 2013) with a small audience, and once the presentation is over, they are frequently discarded in a trash bin (Cabrejas Penuelas, 2013). On the other hand, digital (online, multimedia, electronic) posters are more convenient because of a) their multimodal nature; b) the hyperlinks, which save space (D'Angelo, 2016); and c) students can share their knowledge with large audiences (Pedwell et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the use of 'real' posters in the ELS presents a way of allowing students to merge their individual internet search with some quality time with their classmates. In addition, it bridges the gap between students of high and low-income families, who have little or no access to technical devices.

Research methodology

A qualitative and quantitative research design was used to collect data using a survey as an instrument. The survey consisted of 15 questions, organized in the following way: 10 multiple choice questions where students could choose one answer only; 4 multiple choice questions where they could choose between one and three answers; and one open-ended question.

The participants were chosen through the convenient sampling method. All the 200 students at the English Language School were included in the survey. There were 120 boys and 80 girls, aged between 18 and 25. Their language proficiency ranged between A2 and B1, according to the CEFR for languages. The students came from several countries, including North Macedonia, Turkey, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Serbia. Many of the students came from middle- or low-class families, from both rural and urban areas.

The procedure of the research poster presentation project was as follows:

Week 1

Step 1: Students were provided with background information on making posters. Both the visual and language aspect were covered. Students from the Faculty of Art and Design at IBU gave a presentation on making posters in front of all ELS students. ELS teachers informed students on ways of finding necessary information.

Step 2: Students were divided in groups of 4 to 5. Teachers gave students a list of topics to choose from. However, students were allowed to suggest their own topics.

Week 2

Step 3: Students worked after classes on their posters for one week.

Step 4: Teachers gave instructions on how groups should present their posters in front of their classmates and in front of a wider audience. They also explained the criteria used for choosing the best poster in class.

Step 5: Teachers checked posters and students' presentation notes for language mistakes.

Week 3

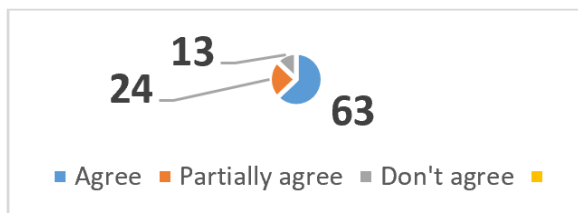
Step 6: Each group presented their poster in front of their classmates. The teacher chose the best poster or posters based on the assessment grid, which had previously been shown to students.

Step 7: The best posters from each class were displayed in the ELS hall and a poster competition is organized. A jury consisting of two assistants from the Faculty of Art and Design choose the first three best posters.

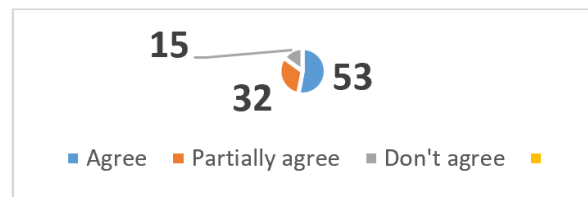
Results and discussion

The results of the survey with the students from the English Language School are shown in the charts below.

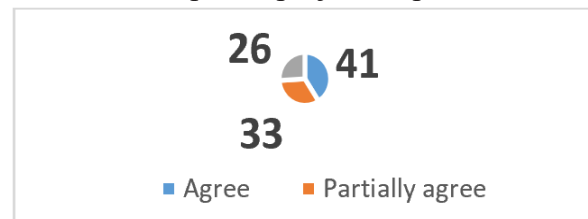
1. I enjoyed working in a group.



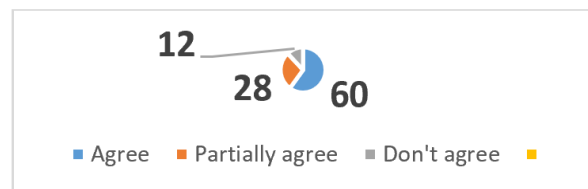
2. The poster project helped me develop my skill of listening to other students' point of view.



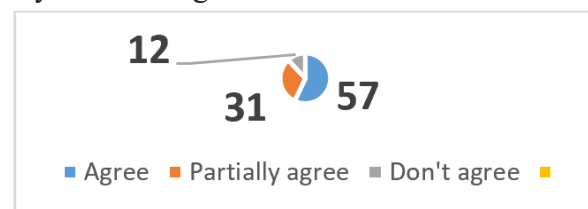
3. The poster project helped me



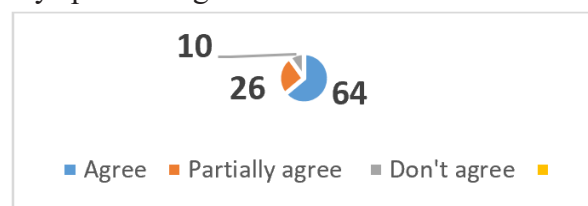
4. The poster project helped me improve my develop my time-management skills. research skills.



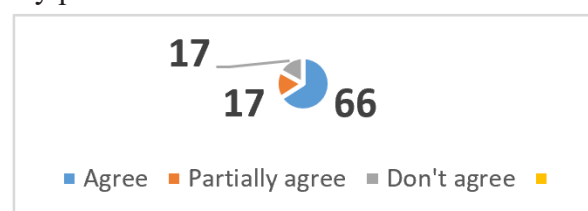
5. The poster project helped me improve my written English.



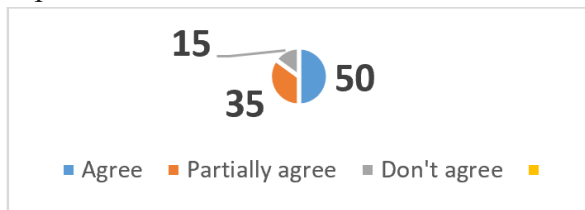
6. The poster project helped me improve my spoken English.



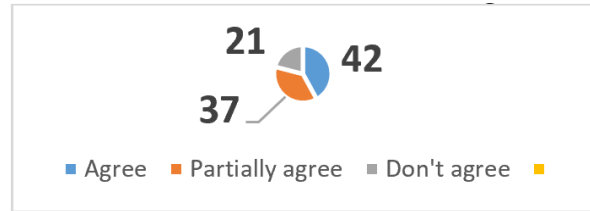
7. The poster project helped me improve my presentation skills



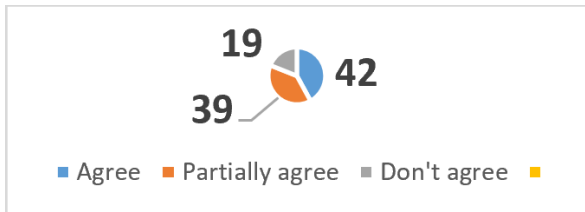
8. This project was a useful learning experience.



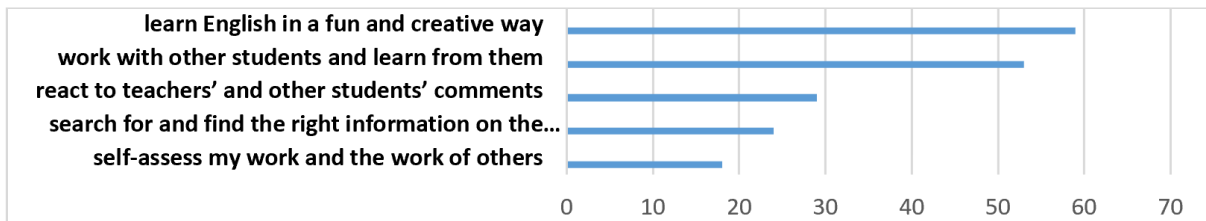
10. This poster project links theory to practice better than traditional teaching methods.



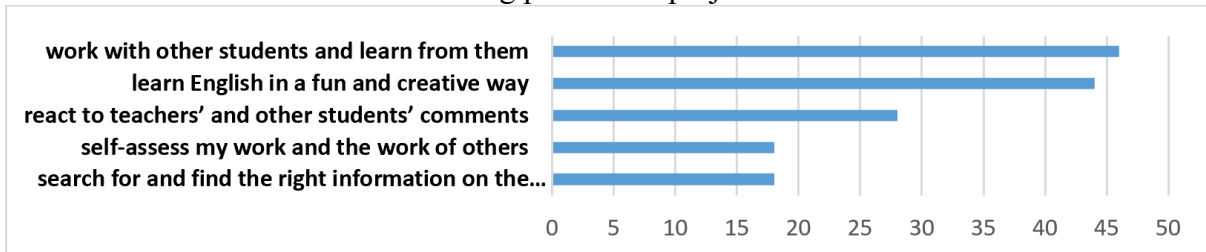
9. I prefer posters to traditional teaching.



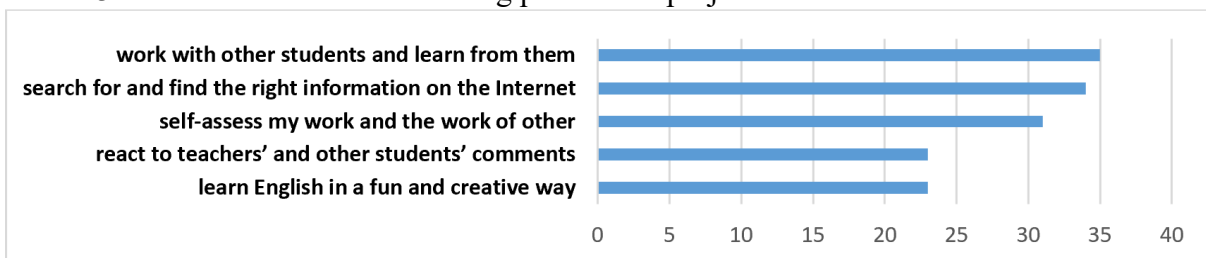
11. What is/ are the most important thing(s) you learned in this project?



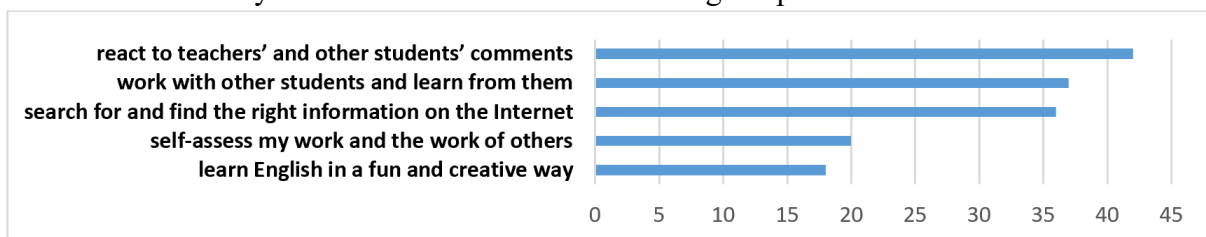
12. What was the most interesting part in this project?



13. What was the least interesting part of this project?



14. What did you find most difficult while making the poster?



15. How could the English Language School change the poster project to make it better?

Most of the students failed to provide answers to this question. Only 5 students suggested that it is the teachers who should choose the best posters because they were involved in the continuous assessment, while 4 students recommended that teachers check all posters for plagiarism prior to the competition, since one of the competing posters was later found to be plagiarized. Another four students said that teachers should intervene more often in students work as they progress with the project in order to urge the less active students to be more involved with the making of the project.

The results show that the majority of the students enjoyed working in a group. The poster project helped more than half of them in developing their skill of listening to other students' point of view. Approximately 60% of the respondents believe the poster project helped them improve their written and spoken English, and nearly the same percentage think the project enhanced their presentation and research skills. Less than half of the learners agreed that they developed their time-management skills through the poster presentation project (42%) and the same number replied they preferred posters to traditional teaching. Half of the students found the project a useful experience, with 35% partially agreeing to this statement.

The greatest benefit of working on the poster project was learning English in a fun and creative way, followed by working with other students and learning from them. The same was chosen as the most interesting part of the project. It is interesting to mention that collaboration with the other students was also chosen as the least interesting thing about the project, together with searching for and finding the right information on the internet, as well as assessing their own work and the work of others. The most difficult aspect of the poster project was knowing how to react to teachers' and other students' comments, followed by cooperating with the other students in the group and being able to find the necessary information.

According to the survey results more than half of the students agree with the aims of the research poster project, approximately a third of the students partially agree and less than 20% of the students do not agree with its aims. Most students chose learning English in

a fun and creative way and improving their team work skills both as the most important and the most interesting things they learned in the course of making and presenting, which is line with the previously mentioned aims of the poster project. Students chose working with others and looking for and finding the right information on the internet as the least interesting things. What students found most difficult was reacting to teachers' and other students' comments, as well as working with other students and learning from them.

The results helped the researcher answer the three research questions. Regarding the first question, the students had an overall positive experience with the research poster presentation project because they improved their language skills as well as their research, presentation and time-management skills. They were able to learn with and from their classmates, which made the process of learning English enjoyable and creative.

Concerning the second research question most students encountered difficulties in three main areas. The first one was accepting comments and remarks from their teachers and fellow students. The second one was effectively collaborating with the other students in the group, and the third challenge they faced was having the right research skills necessary for finding the right information when searching the internet. These findings indicate the need for training students how to provide and understand constructive feedback on their or other people's work, as well as for developing students' critical thinking skills, which would eventually facilitate the search for the information they need.

The third research question referred to ways of making the research poster presentation projects more effective. The small number of answers may be attributed to the following factors: 1) the relatively low language proficiency of the students involved in the project; 2) the fact that this was their first research poster with an academic approach; and 3) their lack of highly developed critical thinking skills. Students' suggestions mainly focused on the procedure for choosing the best poster. With technology at hand it is easy to find poster ideas and copy them. Therefore, image plagiarism checking programs should be used in order to detect potentially plagiarized posters. Fairness is another aspect of choosing the best poster. Teachers are directly involved and familiar with the work of the students in all the groups, which renders them adequately qualified for

choosing the best posters. Students' remarks demonstrate the importance of the competitive aspect of the research poster presentation, which seems to be a motivational factor for all students participating in the project. One more issue that should teachers should focus on is ways of increasing students' engagement by constantly monitoring students' work and the progress they are making. This could be done through checklists for all the students in each group. The items in the lists would include the activities each student has performed on a weekly basis, accompanied by a self-assessment grid, so that students can reflect on their work and be objective about their engagement in the project and the level of involvement of the other students.

Conclusion

Students are generally in favour of alternative methods of teaching, such as learning English through making and presenting posters. Furthermore, teachers should be more aware of the fact that students have not had much previous experience with team and research work and therefore need additional training to help them collaborate better and to learn how to respond to other people's comments and assessment of their work.

Further recommendations

Future studies may focus on the effectiveness of research poster projects through experimental designs. Additionally, particular language skills or 21st century skills that can be developed through research poster projects could be analyzed. Another aspect that could be explored is whether research posters can be used across different levels of language proficiency. Finally, the importance of research posters in higher education could be investigated into more detail.

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