A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO PROMOTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, RETENTION AND ACHIEVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Rose Papworth, rpapworth@uni-svishtov.bg
Lecturer in English, Department of Foreign Languages
The D. A. Tsenov Academy, Svishtov, Bulgaria

Abstract: This article details a social constructivist-based methodology to learning English as a foreign language via a multi-disciplinary approach. The approach used bases learning in a novel, real-world situation so that learners can benefit from the experience of learning and gaining tacit knowledge within a scenario that is designed to enhance motivation. The two groups of students under study were given a year-long project to complete where they had to use not only their language skills, but skills they had developed in other modules from their programme of education such as project planning, project management, planning and holding meetings, producing project reports and working within a collaborative framework. The teaching and research methods in this study aim to improve student engagement with subject materials via added-value and added interest through the use of a practical project, which, in turn, is hoped to improve class retention and student achievement.

Keywords: planning, multi-discipline, social constructivism, motivation, retention, achievement
JEL: A22, A12

МУЛТИДИСЦИПЛИНАРЕН, СОЦИАЛНО-КОНСТРУКТИВИСТИЧЕН ПОДХОД ЗА НАСЪРЧАВАНЕ НА СТУДЕНТСКАТА АНГАЖИРАНОСТ, ЗАДЪРЖАНЕ В УЧЕБНИТЕ АУДИТОРИИ И ПО-ВИСОКИ ПОСТИЖЕНИЯ В СФЕРАТА НА ВИСШЕТО ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ

Резюме: Тази статия описва подробно социално-конструктивистично базирана методология за обучение по английски като чужд език чрез мултидисциплинарен подход. Подходът използва бази за обучение в нова, реална ситуация, така че студентите да могат да се възползват от опита на обучение и да натрупват тацитни знания в рамките на един сценарий, който има за цел да повиши мотивацията им. Двете групи от студенти подложени на проучване взеха участие в едногодишен проект, в който те трябваше да използват не само своите езикови умения, но и уменията придобити в други модули от тяхната образователна програма като: проектно планиране, управление на проекти, планиране и провеждане на срещи, подготвяне на доклади по проекти и работа в една обща съвместна рамка. Методите на обучение и изследвания в това проучване имат за цел засилване на студентската ангажираност с учебни материали по определена дисциплина чрез добавена стойност и разширяване на техния интерес чрез използване на практически

проект, който от своя страна цели задържане на студентите в учебните аудитории и повишаване на техните академични постижения.

Ключови думи: планиране, мулти-дисциплина, социален конструктивизъм, мотивация, задържане в учебните аудитории, постижения.

A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO PROMOTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, RETENTION AND ACHIEVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Rose Papworth, rpapworth@uni-svishtov.bg
Lecturer in English, Department of Foreign Languages
The D. A. Tsenov Academy, Svishtov, Bulgaria

Introduction:

Planning is a major element of business and a necessary skill for business students to develop. At an individual level, planning and monitoring any project becomes more effective via practical experience and subsequent reflection (Barry, 2014). Although university students are taught the theoretical methodologies of planning, monitoring and evaluating projects, they often do not have the opportunities to put theory into practice within a higher education institution, thus negating the possibility of trying out their newly learnt skills in a supportive environment where their inevitable errors will not prove mission-critical. Not only is the practical aspect of learning how to plan important for skill development, but, by using qualitative data from focus groups, it is also clear that students relish the chance to put their skills into action, which could lead to greater engagement with curriculum materials and concepts.

Action research is a methodology which is commonly used in educational research, whereby the pedagogical/andragogical (Knowles, 1984) issues are highlighted, solutions are formulated and then put into practice, and finally results are correlated and examined (Bradbury and Reason, 2009). This study will follow this model.

The two groups of students under study are in their third year of a Bachelor's degree in International Economic Relations and already have a good grasp of English as a second language, but have not had much opportunity to practice their language skills in a productive manner.

A social constructivist-based teaching and learning methodology was used for learning English as a foreign language via a multi-disciplinary approach. The aim of the research in this study is to improve student engagement with subject materials via added-value and added interest through the use of a practical project, which, in turn, is hoped to improve class retention and, ultimately, student achievement.

To facilitate this, the students were given a year-long project to complete where they must use not only their language skills, but skills they have developed in other modules from their programme of study such as project planning, project management, planning and holding meetings, producing project reports and working within a collaborative framework.

The majority in these two group of students can speak English at B2-C1 level and so have the confidence to hone and develop their existing language skills via a project-based teaching approach both within and external to the class environment. The particular approach used in this research may not be suitable for lower-ability students as completing the project requires students to be able to build on and make sense of their existing use of English within new contexts.

Andragogical issues:

The current methodologies used for teaching languages often owe much to behaviourism, which operates on a worldview of stimulus/response encouraged via positive or negative reinforcement (Skinner, 1953). Drill and practice play a significant part in the teaching and learning process which is then tested via a relevant examination. This usually involves grammar and vocabulary exercises followed by a written or sometimes oral test. Although behavioural theories of learning underpin all other learning theories (Reynolds et al., 2002), there are many aspects of learning that more behaviourist approaches largely ignore, as pure instruction cannot effectively 'deliver' learning – the social and experiential cognitive construction of knowledge must also be engaged to construct an effective learning opportunity.

Reynolds et al. (2002) also note that 'conventional' instruction via the 'tell and listen' lecture, "…dates back to the medieval period when books were in short supply and learned men were given the task of reading extracts to their students". Some fundamental deficiencies of the 'sage on the stage' model include a lack of constructive dialogue, a largely theoretical environment with little opportunity for action and experimentation, a disconnection of topics from tasks, and the fostering of a dependency relationship between learner and tutor which ultimately constructs a barrier to self-directed learning.

Students at university have already spent many years in high school studying under this methodology and quite often start to lose interest and motivation when confronted with much of the same at a higher education institution. When questioned, they, to a large degree, state that they find it hard to construct relevance between what they are learning and the practical arena – and especially with the other disciplines that they study. They lack engagement with the materials presented and subsequent examinations as they don't see how they will use the information in their later careers.

This leads to unmotivated students who are engaged in 'surface learning' (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) simply to gain grades. They also bemoan the opportunity to put what they have learnt into some sort of practical use in an educational setting in order to gain experience in an encouraging and reassuring environment, where any mistakes they may make will not have career or economic significance, unlike in the real world.

In short, as language tutors we are facing a problem of students who have already 'switched-off', and this can be demonstrated by poor attendance figures which inevitably leads to lower grades than our students could actually achieve.

Solutions:

In order to engage students more fully, we need them to be able to construct their own sense of significance and worth regarding learning a language and its practical, productive use. This relates to the theory of learning as knowledge construction – constructivists assert that knowledge is tacit and personal, with meaning constructed by the individual via experience. It follows the work of Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky. These theories are mainly concerned with social activity where learning takes place via dynamic interaction between the individual and their environment (Reynolds et al., 2002). Therefore, in this vein, knowledge only becomes useable by the individual when it has meaning for them derived from their own experience. The teacher becomes more of a facilitator – a 'guide on the side' – rather than a 'sage on the stage', which is the case with more cognitive theories of learning (Rogers, 1983).

When students feel they are involved in learning something useful which they can transfer into a business environment in their later endeavours, they are much more likely to engage with the subject matter. As much of language learning relies on drill and practice, this provides learners with a more novel situation. Indeed, Reynolds et al. (2002) state that, "Successful learning tends to happen when an individual reacts to opportunities. The result depends upon the individual's capacity and readiness to learn, and hence upon the task and setting." They reason that, "The more novel the task, the greater the understanding required and the more challenging the range of solutions, thus the greater the learning potential. Experience aids learning by making it possible to recognise and deal with novelty bound up in tasks – in other words to cope with new situations" (Reynolds et al., 2002). Indeed, Schon (1983) notes that familiarity with novel and commonly-used tasks allows learners to 'automate' these tasks, facilitating the progression from novice to expert via 'instinctive action' where an individual has gained enough tacit knowledge to deal with complex problems by transferring their skills and understanding to different situations that occur in the business environment. Therefore by involving students in novel, but commonly-used business practices, it significantly enhances learning towards effective operation in a business environment.

As early as 1929 concern was raised (Whitehead) that the way students learned in an academic environment resulted in a limited, 'inert' form of knowledge, useful only for passing examinations. More recently several theorists have argued that for knowledge to be active it should be learned in a meaningful context and through

active learning. The general term for this type of learning activity is situated learning, which is a methodology that falls into the category of constructivism. Situated learning proponents argue that knowledge cannot be taught in an abstract manner, and that to be useful, it must be situated in a relevant or "authentic" context (Maddux, Johnson, & Willis, 1997).

Anchored instruction, another constructivist approach, is an attempt to help students become more actively engaged in learning by situating or anchoring instruction around an interesting topic (Bransford *et al*, 2000). The learning environments are designed to provoke the kinds of thoughtful engagement that helps students develop effective thinking skills and attitudes that contribute to effective problem solving and critical thinking. Anchored instruction emphasises the need to provide students with opportunities to think about and work on problems and emphasises group or collaborative problem solving.

To this end, a student group project was used as the focus of teaching and learning, which, although including language lessons for appropriate vocabulary and grammar, focused on the students producing oral and written submissions which are clearly relevant to the business world using a multi-disciplinary approach. Therefore, skills can be transferred between subjects – such as planning, marketing, human resources management, project management and administration.

Concrete competencies gained from other disciplines were included – project management and the associated documents needed for control, monitoring and general time-management (Work Breakdown Structures, Gantt charts etc.), and documents needed to administrate and record meetings (agendas, minutes). By chairing a meeting or leading the project, students have to practically implement their team-working, people-management and negotiating skills. A final project report and presentation has to be completed at the end of the project to partly include a 'diary' of the activities undertaken and also to provide a reflective element to highlight what worked well and what went wrong, together with how work on the project could be improved in the future. This matches up with Kolb's (1984) ideas on 'experiential learning'. He highlights the importance of practice, action and experimentation – including making mistakes – within a four-stage 'learning cycle', as shown in Figure 1 below.
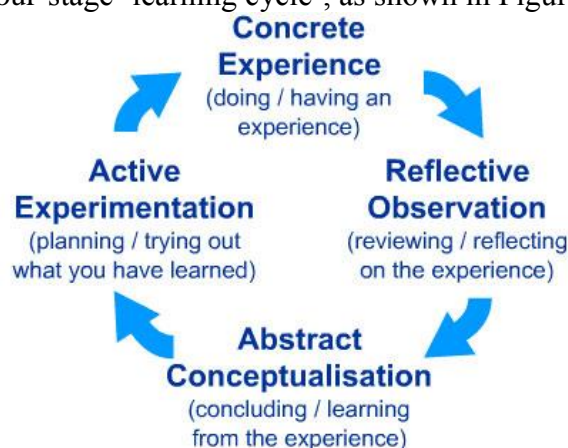

Figure 1: McLeod, S. A. (2013). Experiential learning cycle (adapted from Kolb 1984)

The learning cycle shows how experience is transformed via reflection into a learning event that then guides future activities through experimentation. It is important to note here, that, due to the cyclic nature of learning as portrayed here – as a process and not simply an outcome – reflection on learning will also take place via timely feedback from the lecturer after each meeting, leading to a short group, and then class discussion before each new step of the project begins. This is why regular meetings are important to use in the project, not just as a practical and productive element of English, but as milestones for students to pause and reflect on what they have done in order to better prepare for the next section of the project and the subsequent meeting. By having the project take place over the full academic year, formal grading also takes place halfway through the project, at the end of the first semester, which coincides with the end of the planning phase. Again, this is an important time when students can reflect on their performance and how and why they obtained certain grades in order to prepare for their progression to the second phase of the project where they are required to undertake the work as scheduled in a Gantt chart.

The theme of the project is also matched to other disciplines within their programme of study – to complete various advertising materials in different mediums - as this will correlate with the subject of marketing. Once again, this highlights the relevance and transferability of the skills learnt into the business environment, which aids engagement and motivation. Students can clearly visualise how their studies will benefit them in the future.

In the constructivist class, the focus tends to shift from the tutor to the students. The class is no longer a place where the teacher ("the sage on the stage") pours knowledge into passive students, who wait like empty vessels to be filled. In the constructivist model, the students are urged to be actively involved in their own process of learning – the tutor's role becomes "the guide on the side" (King, 1993).

Moreover, in social constructivist classes, collaborative learning is a process of peer interaction that is mediated and structured by the tutor. As Reynolds et al. (2002) note, "If learning is driven by experience then it must be in part a social process, since interaction between people is a powerful source of new experience". Discussion can be promoted by the presentation of specific concepts, problems or scenarios, and is guided by means of effectively directed questions, the introduction and clarification of concepts and information, and references to previously learned material (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976).

By participating in a group, students can socially construct meaning for themselves regarding the learning materials, not just by listening to a lecturer, but also through direct interaction with other group members and, indeed, with other groups. As Reynolds et al. (2002) confirm, "…observation of others' behaviour – their successes and failures – provide an important source of indirect experience that may be used to approximate desired behaviours". This is not a process of simply listening and regurgitating, but modifying current mistakes in line with group performance and expectation and then expounding this new knowledge in a practical manner. In short, students can also learn from each other. This behaviour may be encouraged by ensuring that everyone has to take an active part in meetings and in project production

activities, where everyone's part reflects on the team. This leads to individuals being more motivated to perform at their highest level by the need for peer approval, or fear of 'letting down the side'. Peer evaluation of group work (both internal and external to the individuals working team) also fosters a critical approach to learning where feedback on others or their own work can be reflected on and internalised more deeply, which again leads to a deeper, more personal construction of knowledge.

Via participating in a group project, meetings – which should include agendas and minutes – have to be structured, controlled and held in an appropriate manner using the correct, formal and polite style of language. This type of tacit, practical knowledge corresponds to Lam's (2000) theory of 'embedded' knowledge which is collectively and socially constructed, and concerns procedures and systems that are used in large organisations to overcome problems by employees who need to understand and adapt to change, maintain control and act effectively. These projects need to be planned and monitored, and regular progress reports need to be written and presented along with a final evaluation. Students can then clearly see the relevance of the skills they are articulating when compared to business practice – they can see <u>why</u> the subject matter they are learning is important and <u>how</u> they will use these skills in the future. In addition, they can envisage how their language studies relate to the other disciplines in their programme of study, such as planning, project management, human resources management and administration. This should lead to an increase in interest and motivation, and therefore deeper learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

In addition, by using groups of students to complete the project, the learners also put into practice another valuable tacit and transferrable skill – that of teamwork – via learning as social participation. As Reynolds et al. (2002) highlight, this is noteworthy and vital to future career success to students because, "…few tasks in an organisation are conducted in isolation from other employees, clients or suppliers, and many are conducted in teams".

By using a variety of assessment methods throughout the academic year – oral assessment via meetings and presentations, written assessment via agendas, minutes and reports – students have the opportunity to excel in areas where they are strongest, but also to improve their shortcomings. By knowing that they have to attend regular meetings, produce regular reports and present a final product across the semester, goal-oriented students who wish to obtain high grades will also feel a greater compulsion to attend. This can be especially highlighted by inviting an audience to the final presentation which includes relevant members of the public and professionals who can then comment on the project work from a perspective outside the academic institution – a perspective that is often highly valued by the students themselves as they perceive it to be more relevant to the 'real world'.

In summary, student engagement, retention and achievement is hoped to be improved by:
- Using an anchored project-based situated teaching and learning method to focus on readily transferrable and clearly stated business skills within a language-based teaching and learning environment;
- Using an inter-disciplinary approach to highlight the relevance and practicability of the subject matter;

- Using a variety of regular and practical assessments which are rooted in real-world practice throughout the academic year;
- Using group-based work and peer assessment to aid a deeper internal construction of knowledge via reflection on experiential learning.

Methods used:

Students were asked to form groups of four – an optimum number for brainstorming meetings. These groups have to produce two forms of advertising materials such as brochures, leaflets, videos or websites to advertise the potential of living in Bulgaria to UK pensioners. This is a marketing exercise, which obviously involves some research and requires lessons on how English is used in advertising. The timescale was over the whole academic year, broken down into a planning phase in the first semester and an active production phase in the second.

The first semester included lessons on using formal English to chair and participate in meetings (including how to facilitate brainstorming sessions), how to create and use agendas and minutes to plan and manage meetings and how to plan a project using work breakdown structure (WBS) charts and Gantt charts. Each group had to hold two meetings which were observed and graded by the tutor (one to establish the WBS and the other to create the Gantt chart), and each member was awarded individual marks based on participation and use of English. The groups allocated roles and responsibilities to individual members themselves, knowing that every member would then be given extra individual grades for these activities. These included chairing the meeting, creating the agendas, taking and producing minutes of the meetings, and creating the WBS and Gantt charts. Groups were also responsible for choosing the project deliverables (two forms of advertising media), planning and scheduling project activities for the next semester and allocating project roles and responsibilities when creating the deliverables in the next semester.

The second semester was the period when the project actually ran, and involved controlling, managing and revising the already established project plan and schedule. At the start of the semester, the previous semester's materials and grades were scrutinised and explained, and groups were given the chance to re-schedule their project based on last semester's experience. Lessons included how English is used in advertising, how to write a progress report and give an impromptu presentation in a meeting, how to write a final project report and how to present using visual and audio media. Two more meetings took place, where every group member had to create an individual progress report that took into account the project schedule and was also graded. The meetings were graded in a similar manner to last semester. Finally, the group also had to hand in a final evaluative project report (which included internal group peer-assessment) and present this and their advertising materials to an audience – these were also graded, with the presentation being peer-assessed by the other groups. The audience also included British pensioners who are currently living in Bulgaria, who were encouraged to give their opinions on the student's work, ask questions and make suggestions.

Limitations:

Due to the differences in group dynamics and cohort, improvement in grades is difficult to compare with any real efficacy students who have learnt under a non-constructivist methodology and those who have been involved in this project. It may be that one group had a higher level of ability in English even before they started higher education than another. Therefore, it seems more pertinent to compare the grades from the same group between the 2nd year with more traditional instruction and the 3rd year multi-disciplinary approach.

Attendance, however, can be compared with more relevancy, as this has been linked directly to motivation in a number of studies such as Schalkwyk, Menkveld and Ruiters (2010), Fjortoft (2005) and Dolnicar (2005).

Obviously, the small group of students under study can only provide a snapshot of data – a much larger sample across a broader range of years and abilities would provide a better data sample for objective analysis. However, the more qualitative data obtained via focus groups provides a valuable insight into the motivations and opinions of the cohort.

Results:

Evaluation of the success of this action research was undertaken using both a qualitative and quantitative approach. Focus groups elicited attitudes to learning and teaching techniques for languages before, during and after the project session under study. Grades and attendance figures can be compared with previous groups for the same year, as well as with the groups under study for their previous session and the session under research.

Before the semester started, at the end of the previous academic year, the students were given the opportunity to be part of a focus group to discuss what they felt they needed or wanted to learn in English. This was actually initiated by the lecturer, as they felt the students could be better engaged with the lessons and wanted to know what they would be motivated to study. The majority of the students all reiterated the same main points:

- They were fed up and bored with 'the same old exercises' – e.g. grammar, vocabulary, listening and speaking in class – as they were similar to those they had been doing during school years;
- Although they appreciated the previous role play and presentation assignments as a way of practicing speaking skills, they felt as though they were constrained by a false situation and wanted to do more 'free form' speaking;
- They wanted to learn more practical skills that they would need in later life.

A brainstorming session was then held, and between the students and the lecturer, the main skills, functions and methodologies used in the project were formulated. The students seemed excited to, "do something different", and stated that they looked forward to having a lot more speaking to do. The ideas for creating a project that involved meetings, project management and marketing came partly from student suggestions based on subjects they were covering in their study programme. The only

worry they had was that working in a group would result in a group mark, which they perceived as being potentially unfair on those who wanted good grades and who would end up shouldering the main burden of the workload. Therefore, the idea of individual grades for performance in meetings – based on how Cambridge English group speaking assessments are graded – and individual grades for written output or taking specific roles was mooted and accepted. This led to the idea of four students to a group – for each meeting having one as Chair, one as minute-taker, one to create the agenda and one to create the project management documents in the first semester. This would give students the experience with holding meetings in an appropriate manner before the second semester, where they would have to undertake and report on their project roles in addition to holding progress meetings, thus creating a spiral of learning.

The first semester went well, starting with allowing the students to form their own working groups. Academic content started with lessons in how to hold, document and speak formally at meetings, before moving on to the purpose of and to how to complete a WBS and Gantt chart. Meetings were held after the first session of lessons on holding meetings and the WBS. Feedback was then given to the group before continuing with lessons on how to improve on their English based on this observation and feedback from the first round of meetings. Finally, the second round of meetings were held and further feedback delivered.

All groups struggled to organise and document their first meeting appropriately and stated they found it difficult as they had no experience of this in the real world. Some also admitted that they maybe had not paid as much attention in class as they should have as they normally, "found getting good grades in English easy", with regular grammar and vocabulary tests. This soon changed as they realised the use of English in formal meetings and the structure and wording of the relevant documents are very specific and required them to concentrate.

Students that paid the most attention in class inevitably obtained higher grades, due to their observance of functional formal English and structure of documents. However, students that normally felt the least motivated attended for not only the meetings (they quite often only attend to take tests), but attended a large amount of input sessions as they felt they would, "look stupid in front of everyone", if they didn't.

After the first semester, students participated in another focus group to obtain feedback on the methods used up to that point - the results were positive. Students reported enjoying the autonomy and practical aspects of the project, and valued highly the chance to use their English in a practical manner. They indicated that their motivation to attend and learn increased due to their perception that the skills they were developing are important in the 'real world' of business.

One complication in the second semester was that some group members left early to participate in work experience 'brigades' abroad. However, this was taken into account by allowing the groups to re-schedule their project plan, roles and responsibilities appropriately at the start of the semester. Academic content included writing progress reports, project reports, and how English is used in marketing and

advertising. Two formal progress meetings were held by each group during the semester, although they obviously met up informally outside this. Students produced various media which included websites, brochures and posters which they displayed during a formal presentation on the project, finally handing in a project report.

At the focus group held at the end of the second semester, students were positive about the whole experience – they particularly liked the opportunity to present to a critical audience from outside the Academy – although they mentioned that it was hard to keep on top of all the work they had to do. Most stated that they felt they had acquired and, most importantly, practiced useful skills. There were many comments along the lines that the semester had been more interesting than 'normal' lessons, but that being assessed on functional components felt much harder. Several students noted that they would have liked, "more practice", with meetings, indicated that a practice role play session would have helped as they really had no experience of being in that situation.

Attendance definitely improved – sometimes only certain members of the groups would come to the taught sessions, but the information they gained there seemed to be then circulated within the group so that all members received the information they needed to complete the project successfully. The meetings were fully attended, and some groups asked for informal consultations with the lecturer on project documents and their own progress – something that never happened when using a more behaviourist teaching method followed by a standard written or oral language test. Indeed, some groups reported taking and having more pride in their work, as they felt more responsible for the output. **Students were classified into groups according to their attendance history for the previous 3rd year groups who learnt via a more traditional approach, and the current 3rd year involved in the project.** The current modal attendance group had 80-89% attendance with 74% of students attending at least 50% of their classes. The median attendance was 68%. For the previous 3rd year, the modal attendance group had 50-59% attendance with 40% of students attending at least 50% of their classes and the median attendance was 38%.

Looking at the grades in Table 1, comparing the same three groups in the second and third year of their studies reveals the following:

Table 1
Grade differences between years with the same groups: 1st iteration

Grade differences between years with the same groups: 1st iteration						
Group names:	45		46		47	
Academic year	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
2013/2014 (2nd)	4.380952	5	5.375	6	3.8	4
2014/2015 (3rd)	4.947368	5	5.4375	5.5	4	4

On the whole, this shows a slight improvement for all three groups.

The second year of implementation:

For the second year of implementation, concerns elicited from the previous year's focus groups were taken into account.

More lesson time was scheduled to review group progress on a regular and informal basis, just to ensure work on the various elements was continuing at an appropriate rate. Although the 'formal' project group meetings in the second semester are there to assess actual project progress against the Gantt charts, this only occurs twice due to lesson time constraints – 1.5 hours every week over 14 weeks each semester for 2 semesters. Therefore, taking the time to chat with each group for 10 minutes every week ensured that questions could be asked and answered regarding the project work, but also helped the lecturer to encourage groups to assess their workload realistically and not leave everything to the last minute. This was especially helpful during the first semester, when students had many questions due to their unfamiliarity with this method of teaching and learning together with the level of autonomy involved.

In the first semester of the first iteration, students had reported some confusion with how to schedule meetings with an agenda and how to actually proceed to hold a meeting in practice. To alleviate this, more lessons were scheduled that specifically addressed, not just the formal language structures used in meetings, but specific practical role play with brainstorming, leading meetings and using tentative suggestions. This worked really well. As was obvious not only from the way that students took on board various phrases and structures, but the way in which they were subsequently successfully used in their graded meetings.

An agenda 'template' that could be altered an amended by the students was created and distributed to all groups by the lecturer, and this really helped students develop and structure their own. This was evidenced by the fact that their first attempts at creating their own agendas were much more successful than in the previous iteration.

The same was produced for minutes, with an example set of minutes distributed for each group.

The lesson before each scheduled meeting, the lecturer also went through a 'checklist' of what was expected to be produced for each meeting, and had the students repeat was expected from the leader of a meeting – especially the order of events at the start of a meeting. The group members responsible for producing each written element - agenda, minutes, and the various diagrams, charts and reports – were also identified and the lecturer ensured that each one was familiar with and understood the purpose of the format of their respective document.

Again, this really helped to alleviate confusion both with the way in which the documents should be structured and the language used to create them, and with the actual reason that these documents were being produced and how they would be subsequently used for the group.

There was a significant improvement as a result both in the formal language spoken within the meetings and used within the written documents.

The lesson on advertising English in the second semester for the production of the marketing elements was changed to more closely relate to the materials being produced by each group, rather than being a general lesson. Specific elements of advertising language were noted for use in specific sections of the documents that each group was producing. The language of advertising, being more familiar and informal – and, indeed, sometimes poetic in the use of adverbs and adjectives – was also contrasted with the formal English that was used in the meetings. This helped the students understand the different ways in which English was expected to be used in the various productive elements to the projects. The schedule also included time set aside for each group to bring the lecturer their work in progress and to seek advice and confirmation regarding the production of their marketing materials. This helped improve the way that English was used within the advertisements.

Examples of progress reports were distributed and discussed, as every student was expected to present these at each meeting in the second semester in order to report on each individual team member's progress with their assigned project tasks as compared to the Gantt chart. More time was taken within the lesson to elicit examples from the students, to ensure checking of understanding.

Again, for the final evaluative report and presentation, templates were distributed and the students were able to bring in their work in progress, so that they could continue or alter their production, as necessary. More time was spent on identifying the objectives of a final report/presentation, what questions should be answered within it, and why evaluations of projects are important for future success, together with recommendations. Indeed, the format of the final report was closely linked to the way in which reports are expected to be formulated for the CAE (which many of the class were studying for) which helped with consistency.

As a result, the production of both the written and oral elements for the second iteration was at a higher level than the first.

The number of students leaving for work in the brigades abroad was once again an issue in the second semester, but this was assuaged somewhat by the introduction of a large group of Erasmus students who could then take over the roles and responsibilities of group members who had left. The situation also highlighted perfectly the necessity of project documentation and consistency of format and language.

For the second iteration, the feedback via focus groups was once again positive – especially from the Erasmus students – where the general opinion was that this was the first time they were actually using English in a practical and productive manner, and, as a result, felt that the whole experience had been beneficial.

Grades improved compared to the previous study year, and attendance also continued to be high, although slightly lower than the first iteration, with figures adjusted for early leavers due to the work brigades abroad. **Again, students were**

classified into groups according to their attendance history. The modal attendance group had 70-79% attendance with 70% of students attending at least 50% of their classes. The median attendance was 62%.

Table 2
Grade differences between years with the same groups: 2nd iteration

Grade differences between years with the same groups: 2nd iteration						
Group names:	41		42		43	
Academic year	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
2014/2015 (2nd)	3	3	3.24	2	4	4
2015/2016 (3rd)	5	5	5.05	6	5.16	5.5

One negative aspect that was noted was the fact that two project groups realised that this sort of learning meant that they had to continue their English studies and production of materials outside the class in order to gain successful grades. Therefore - as they admitted in the final focus group – they elected not to attend lessons and simply attend the re-sit exams in order to pass the unit instead. These 'strategic learners' had also demonstrated the same approach in their previous year at the university, so this was disappointing but not entirely unexpected. We believe that, rather than highlighting a deficiency in the teaching and learning approach, this demonstrates that the possibility for a student to obtain a high grade even if they only attend re-sit exams needs re-examining as it can benefit those students who would rather not put in the hard work necessary to improve their knowledge via learning but simply want to get the grades to obtain a certificate. However, this is beyond the scope of this research, and is more an issue of what the state and universities in Bulgaria believe the purpose of higher education is.

Conclusion and recommendations:

This research has been a learning process for both lecturers and students. Something we, as lecturers, have taken away from this is that students have to be very clear in their own mind of exactly what they need to achieve and that a lot of time needs to be devoted to re-iterating learning outcomes of previous lessons alongside on-going support. However, this sort of clarification process should be expected, as this is exactly the role of a 'facilitator' in a constructivist class. Therefore, planning lessons and activities should be a structured and well-thought out process that needs considerable deliberation, especially if time is constrained, in order to support these needs.

The students welcomed the autonomy and practical aspects of learning English in this way and admitted engaging more fully with the lesson content not just to gain grades, but also because they believed that the content, being related to the other business disciplines they were studying, would be an essential element in their future ambitions and so was therefore useful to learn. However, this meant that the burden of learning and developing was partly in their own hands – especially the production of graded elements – which some students had issues with. Certain students just

needed to get used to working more outside the class and structuring their own study practices, whilst a minority of others simply didn't see studying in their own time as something they wanted or needed to do and so avoided taking part. This is not just an issue of motivation, as the education system permits students to gain grades via re-sit examinations.

In conclusion, the vast majority of students reported engaging more with the learning materials, especially outside the class, as they felt the subjects were practical and relevant. Retention improved on the whole, as did achievement, which were the main aims of this research.

Via this data we hope to show that the students under study have become more engaged and motivated by using a constructivist teaching and learning methodology, as well as improving their attendance and ultimately gaining higher grades. We feel certain that this sort of situated, anchored and multi-disciplinary approach could be expanded into other subject areas and programmes of study with similarly successful results.

References and Bibliography:

Atherton, J. S. (2013) *Learning and Teaching; Behaviourism* [online], http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/behaviour.htm (Accessed 20 March 2015)

Barry, T. R. (2014) *Top 10 Qualities of a Project Manager* [online]„ Project Smart, http://cdn.projectsmart.co.uk/pdf/top-10-qualities-of-a-project-manager.pdf (Accessed 20 March 2015)

Bennis, W. (1997) *Learning to Lead*, MA, Addison-Wesley

Biggs, J. (1999) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, SHRE and Open University Press

Bradbury, H. and Reason, P. (2009) *Action Research* [online]„ Education.com, http://www.education.com/reference/article/action-research/ (Accessed 20 March 2015)

Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., Cocking, R. R., Donovan, M. S., & Pellegrino, J. W. (Eds.) (2000) *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington DC, National Academy Press.

Dolnicar, S. (2005). *Should We Still Lecture or Just Post Examination Questions on the Web?: the nature of the shift towards pragmatism in undergraduate lecture attendance.* Quality in Higher Education, 11(2), pp. 103-115.

Entwistle , N. (1988) *Styles of Learning and Teaching*, David Fulton.

Fjortoft, N. (2005). *Students' Motivations for Class Attendance*. American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 69(1-5), pp. 107.

King, A. (1993) From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side, *College Teaching* Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter, 1993), pp. 30-35, Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Knowles, M. (1984) *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species (3rd Ed.),* Houston, Gulf Publishing.

Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning. Experience as the source of learning and development.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.

Lam, A. (2000) 'Tacit knowledge, organization studies, and societal institutions, an integrated framework'*, Organizational Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp487-513.

Laurillard, D. (1993) *Rethinking University Teaching, a framework for the effective use of educational technology*, Routledge.

Maddux, C. D., Johnson, D. L. and Willis, J. (1997) *Educational Computing: Learning with Tomorrow's Technologies,* Allyn and Bacon

McLeod, S. A. (2013). Kolb – Learning Styles [online]. http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html (Accessed 18 March 2016)

Prosser, M. and Trigwell, K. (1999) *Understanding Learning and Teaching, on Deep and Surface Learning*, Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, chapter 4.

Ramsden, P. (1992). Learning to Teach in Higher Education, Routledge.

Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2008). *The handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage

Reynolds, J., Caley, L. and Mason, R. (2002) *How do people learn?* Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, London.

Rogers, C. R. (1983) *Freedom to Learn,* 2nd edition. Columbus, Ohio, Charles E, Merrill Publishing Company.

Schon, D. A. (1983) *The reflective practitioner. How professionals think in action.*New York, Basic Books.

Skinner, B. F. (1953) *Science and Human Behaviour* [online], B. F. Skinner Foundation,   http://www.bfskinner.org/product/science-and-human-behavior-pdf/ (Accessed 20 March 2015)

Van Schalkwyk, S., Menkveld, H. and Ruiters, J., (2010). *What's the story with class attendance? First-year students: statistics and perspectives.* South African Journal of Higher Education, 24(4), pp. 630-645.

Whitehead, A. N. (1929) *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*. New York: Macmillan Company

Wood, D., Bruner, J., & Ross, G. (1976) The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 17, 89-100