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# Project-Based Learning (PBL) in English Classroom for Engineering Students

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article deals with the implementation of project-based learning in English classes for undergraduate engineering students. These undergraduate learners are a target group of first years hailing from various schools of engineering - mechanical and civil, computer science, electrical and electronics, electronics and communication, software - who have completed their plus two or secondary school leaving certificate programme. The theory class teaching and learning finds application in this project work. This method focuses on enabling second language learners to benefit from enhancing their language skills either in a group or through an individual task assigned to them. A periodic review is scheduled to monitor the progress of every student. The students get together frequently for discussion with their peers and their professors and every stage is evaluated for creativity and progress in their content and fluency using language and technology as tools at the time of their periodic presentation. The final evaluation assesses their individual language learning outcome.*

**Keywords:** *project-based learning, communication, language skills, creativity, technology*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Project-based learning (PBL) is synonymous with experiential learning. As stated by Fragoulis(2009), learners acquire knowledge after experiencing or doing something new; it strongly abides by 'learning by doing'. One of the best ways to evaluate the learning process is implementing project-based learning as part of the curriculum. This method of giving projects – individual or group – provides a plethora of opportunities to students who come from various mediums of acquiring English as their second language. India, with its diverse regional languages scenario, churns out student community who find comfort in the midst of their mother tongue speakers. They prefer conversing in their native tongue rather than in English which is their medium of instruction. Very few learners make an attempt to practise or apply their classroom teaching and learning. In such occasions, project-based learning is the best way to motivate learners to take up small-scale research and explore the possibilities of experiential learning. In other words, project-based learning helps learners to explore and experience real-life situations.

## **WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?**

According to Wurdinger and Carlson (2010), experiential learning supports students in applying their knowledge and conceptual understanding to real-world problems and situations. The presence of teacher is that of a facilitator and the classroom, the laboratory or any other ideal ambience would serve as an appropriate setting to thrash out their ideas or concepts and think or rethink on the chosen project. PBL gradually takes shape into a guided teaching and learning process for both the teacher and the learners. Students who take up PBL reflect, research, rethink, reiterate, relate and realize their end product from a new perspective.

The project method enables students to experience real-life situations when entrusted with tasks such as 'projects' for group activity. A pragmatic or practical teaching-learning method lays open countless avenues to application-oriented learning. According to Chrysafidis (2005), implementation of projects to students is based on a) promotion of manual activity instead of memorization and verbalism; b) learners' active participation in the learning process; and c) exploitation of facts relating to the immediate reality as a source of learning. In addition, learners exposed to such activities fare well in performance-related tasks, active participation in classroom-based activities, cross-cultural approach and a systematic study of problems or crises related to everyday life.

Benefits to students would be in the form of an increase in the level of their confidence and independence acquired during such group activities. Any research work or project work encourages students to demonstrate problem-solving and decision-making skills. Being an authentic activity, when projects are assigned to learners it turns out to be a purposeful and meaningful activity emphasizing authentic language use. More participatory and interactive opportunities are created leading learners to more peer-guided learning and research activities. All such authentic tasks or real-world tasks connect them to activities such as reading newspapers, researching in the library and exploring for previous samples or articles, making an attempt to collaborate and listen to others' opinions, taking up leadership and since it is a heterogeneous group enables and develops their peer group sharing.

The integration of all four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – offers more interesting benefits. For those who have a poor vocabulary, they are pushed into a situation to learn the classroom language which happens to be the medium of instruction. In a group activity, even one of the introverted students is motivated to offer his/her points which he or she did not have courage to share in the midst of 40 or 60 students. As stated by Dornyei (2001:100-101), the success of improving group dynamism is high when students are given a project. It provides a platform for achieving 'a rare synthesis of academic and social goals.'

### **GEN Y LEARNERS AND TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATED LEARNING**

The oft used term 'Gen Y' has gained popularity mostly among the student community. What with the technology boom bringing in its stride the mobile technology and its multifarious uses at their finger tips! It appears that the whole world now has a huge repertoire of knowledge access at the swipe of a touch screen. Your knowledge factory accompanies you everywhere and there is no dearth of information at all. Hence, as teachers we need to make the most of our opportunities provided by internet and other allied tech tricks to engage these digital natives.

Academic assignments are woven together for learners with interest in technology and who are better known as 'netizens' or tech-savvy or Gen Y learners. They are able to associate their learning with anything that has a touch of technology to it. Integrating their object of interest in classroom activities will definitely be well received by these young learners. The means of communication meant only for casual connectivity with friends and relatives can be planned in an organized manner to enhance one's communicative skills. Such is the power of technology when our Gen Y learners are motivated to use their favourite electronic gadgets as one of the communicating tools.

Interactive sessions are one among the many technology-aided methods that goes beyond the classroom boundaries. Flipped classroom tasks, a time saver, can be uploaded in advance. This enables the students to do a thorough research so that they are not kept in the dark about the forthcoming class sessions or topics. Their pre-class reading or such preparatory methods give them more access to either online or library resources. Another added advantage is that technology serves as a key to open the doors of the reading realms to research-oriented minds and hones their analytical and comprehending skills. In addition, they like to multitask, enjoy being connected to networking, especially fast networking system.

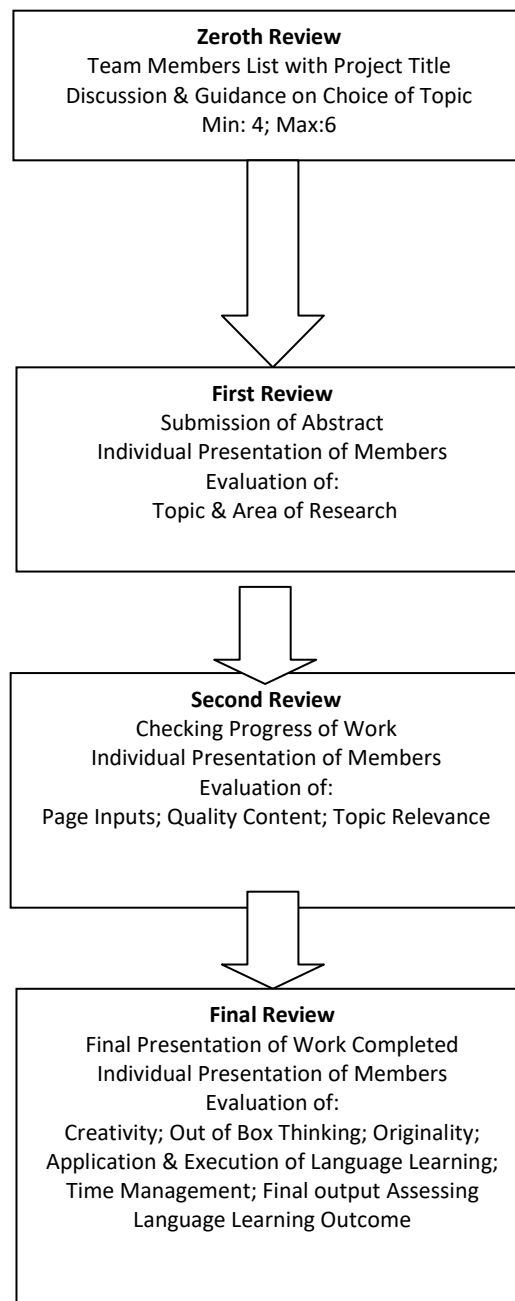
These digital natives thrive on instant results or outcomes from their e-resources. Keeping in mind such 'quaint' qualities of our fast learners, we should become 'Digital Immigrants.' Apart from devising and designing tasks which borders on out-of-the-box thinking, we teachers should quickly rise up to these challenges by creating tasks to sustain their learning interests. Another aspect that netizens of this advancing and ever-increasing internet age need to take care of is their attention span. They are focused only when they do things that interest them a lot. Hence, as teachers we must channelize their thought process to venture in to more research-based learning. What best practice but project-based learning that can offer such opportunities!

### **ROLE OF TEACHERS**

The teacher dons the role of a monitor when project-based learning becomes part of the curriculum. A flexible system can be taken up by explaining clearly the roles of students during their project-based learning. A strict schedule of review is to be adhered to by teachers and students as well. Also, as teachers, we always walk an extra mile to guide our students even on non-scheduled days.

The choice of topics or of team members or methodology must be given a free rein. But the final outcome which happens to be the language learning outcome as the end-product must not be side tracked(FIG. 1).

**FIG. 1 PBL review process**



It can always start with a zeroth review where students can be asked to report with their team members of their choice along with the topic of their interest. The next review, Review 1, can be scheduled to listen to a brief individual presentation of every member. This will set the trend within the team to plan, propose, prepare an abstract, guide and delegate, and finally share individual responsibility. In addition, other than increasing the opportunity for individual responsibility, it helps them choose areas of their own interest which would

only make the work very interesting for them and adds a touch of genuinity. It also helps them identify their area of skills which they are good at and apply their theoretical learning.

The second review can be organized to check on the progress and it acts as an eye opener for the respective teams to know their stand - whether they are on the right track or not. The third and the final review would involve a power point presentation. And in this meeting again individual members of the team can highlight and present their findings for final evaluation. To make it more informative or receive inputs from experts, an intra school audience can be arranged so the students will have an extra motivation to present their final presentation in style.

The final session can be an open house gathering so the audience comprising peer groups as well as experts will either turn out to be a discussion, assessment of individual and group contributions, appreciating out of the box thinking and creativity, identifying and correcting errors, application-oriented learning through the projects, difficulties faced due to language barriers, overcoming setbacks during researching for their topics, during surveys at all levels, effective implementation of methodologies and recommendations offered at the end of their presentation.

### **PROJECTS UNDERTAKEN BY ENGINEERING STUDENTS**

When listing topics for first year engineering students, a flexible option is the best strategy to be followed. In an engineering scenario, language is always the last wrung in the ladder of student priorities. Unless students are given a free rein and made to understand that this project-based learning will cover a wide range of skill sets, they will not come forward to contribute and show participatory efforts.

Projects such as survey related and technology integrated would be very popular among young minds or Gen Y students. It is apparent from the popularity of mobiles and gaming devices, any topic bordering on these or used as one of the tools will always be very widely received by the student community. In order to make students comfortable, my target group is always encouraged to bring in their favourite topics and nothing more than a slight tweak to it made them feel very responsible and enthusiastic. A two-way approach gained popularity - one it was their own topic that was accepted; second it happened to be their pet project or title which took great shape with their own sincere efforts. Instead of a long-term project, a semester's duration makes their attempts a fast track one.

The paper envisages to highlight the academic enthusiasm of engineering students towards PBL and brings to the fore the kind of projects executed by them with their technological frame of mind. Students' project titles ranged from general, language and literature related to those that were focused on vocabulary improvement, survey related and on improving communication skills. The following are some of the most frequently taken up topics but with a touch of innovation and creativity to it every time. The sample projects listed below and TABLE1 show the varied interests and genres that can be focused upon by teachers as well as students.

### **SAMPLE PROJECTS**

#### **GENERAL**

- Travelogues
- 100 Things that Changed the World
- Visual Memorizing Techniques – Using Mnemonics
- Creating Exclusive Technical Magazines – Domain/School Specific – Automobiles, Apps, AI

#### **VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT**

- Ambigram Cloud
- Theme-Based Word Clouds Using Colour Codes
- Vocabulary Improvement using Mnemonics
- Interactive Crosswords – Online

#### **LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

- Writing a Collection of Short Stories on Social Issues
- Idiomatic Expressions - Transliteration of Mother Tongue or Identifying Equivalent Ones

- Analysis of Speeches of Great Men and Women
- Novella – Creating New Characters to Enhance the Already Popular Novel

### SURVEY RELATED - USING QUESTIONNAIRES OR INTERVIEWS

- Survey of Campus Life
- Profiling Teachers/Friends/Family Members
- Calligraphy – Survey of Handwriting Samples – Peer Group and Others
- Review of Electronic Gadgets/Movies/Novels
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### DOCUMENTARY PREPARATION

- Watching documentaries and preparing scripts for commentators
- Giving voice over for select documentaries
- Watching Movies/Documentaries and Writing Subtitles
- Writing Movie Reviews

The listed topics in TABLE 1 can be taken up by students who are confident and can be categorized into Average or Quick Learner Group. Except for serial numbers 7, 8, 10, 13, 16, and 20 other topics will definitely be handled with ease and a high rated performance by Average and Quick Learner Groups. As seen in most cases, the presentations of individuals improve at every review stage – it takes the form of preparing simple PowerPoint slides and the relevant contents, PowerPoint slides with audio-video attachments, increase in confidence level while going on stage to present the progress of their work, better articulation, improved pronunciation and accents, more organized thinking and rationalization and analysis, well-channelised and productive team work. In fact, a majority of the students were in for a pleasant surprise and felt more than satisfied to see their work taking shape in the form of print.

**TABLE 1. List of sample projects on various genres**

General				
S.No.	Sample Project Title	Slow Learner	Average Learner	Quick Learner
1	Travelogues	-	√	√
2	100 Things that Changed the World	-	√	√
3	Visual Memorizing Techniques – Using Mnemonics	-	-	√
4	Creating Exclusive Technical Magazines – Domain/School Specific – Automobiles, Apps, AI	-	-	√
Vocabulary Development				
S.No.	Sample Project Title	Slow Learner	Average Learner	Quick Learner
5	Ambigram Cloud	√	√	√
6	Theme-Based Word Clouds – Using Colour Codes	-	√	√
7	Vocabulary Improvement Using Mnemonics	√	√	√
8	Interactive Crosswords – Online	√	√	√
Language and Literature				
S.No.	Sample Project Title	Slow Learner	Average Learner	Quick Learner
9	Writing a Collection of Short Stories on Social Issues	-	√	√
10	Idiomatic Expressions – Transliteration of Mother Tongue or Identifying Equivalent Ones	√	√	√
11	Analysis of Speech Contents of Great Men and Women	-	√	√
12	Novella – Creating New Characters to Enhance the Already Popular Novel	-	√	√

Survey Related – Using Questionnaires or Interviews				
S.No.	Sample Project Title	Slow Learner	Average Learner	Quick Learner
13	Survey of Campus Life	√	√	√
14	Profiling Teachers/ Friends/ Family Members	-	√	√
15	Calligraphy – Surveying Collected Handwriting Samples – Peer Group and Others	-	√	√
16	Review of Electronic Gadgets/Movies/Novels	√	√	√
Documentary and Script Preparation				
S.No.	Sample Project Title	Slow Learner	Average Learner	Quick Learner
17	Watching Documentaries and Preparing Scripts for Commentators	-	√	√
18	Giving voice over for select documentaries	-	√	√
19	Watching Movies and Writing Subtitles	-	√	√
20	Writing Movie Reviews on Box Office Hits	√	√	√

At the end of these projects, there is a definite improvement in the four language skills – listening, reading, writing and speaking (TABLE 2). Students get hands on experience of browsing in the library and accessing internet resources. Before attempting this project, their net surfing was only a random access information. Whereas now, a topic on hand, it emphasizes on learner-centered teaching and learning. Students are found to be more than willing in executing this learner-centered activity and these projects serve as a platform to identify their interests and needs and accordingly choose their topics. Freedom to choose their team members again lessens their academic burden and there appears to be more interdisciplinary knowledge sharing. Communicative competence is pushed to the forefront and critical analysis and transcoding of collected information or data as the end product and presenting arguments to authenticate their researches. Few of them enjoyed sharing information sources to other groups as well. This turned out to be intra-group sharing and at every review meeting both learners and the teachers benefitted a lot.

**TABLE 2. List of sample projects and the four skills involved – listening, speaking, reading, writing (LSRW)**

General					
S.No.	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
1	Travelogues	√	√	√	√
2	100 Things that Changed the World	√	√	√	√
3	Visual Memorizing Techniques – Using Mnemonics	-	√	√	√
4	Creating Exclusive Technical Magazines – Domain/School Specific – Automobiles, Apps, AI	-	√	√	√
Vocabulary Development					
S.No.	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
5	Ambigram Cloud	√	√	√	√
6	Theme-Based Word Clouds – Using Colour Codes	√	√	√	√
7	Vocabulary Improvement Using Mnemonics	√	√	√	√
8	Interactive Crosswords – Online	√	√	√	√
Language and Literature					

S.No.	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
9	Writing a Collection of Short Stories on Social Issues		√	√	√
10	Idiomatic Expressions – Transliteration of Mother Tongue or Identifying Equivalent Ones	√	√	√	√
11	Analysis of Speech Contents of Great Men and Women	√	√	√	√
12	Novella – Creating New Characters to Enhance the Already Popular Novel	-	√	√	√
<b>Survey Related – Using Questionnaires or Interviews</b>					
S.No.	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
13	Survey of Campus Life	√	√	√	√
14	Profiling Teachers/ Friends/ Family Members	√	√	√	√
15	Calligraphy – Surveying Collected Handwriting Samples – Peer Group and Others	-	√	√	√
16	Review of Electronic Gadgets/Movies/Novels	√	√	√	√
<b>Documentary and Script Preparation</b>					
S.No.	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
17	Watching Documentaries and Preparing Scripts for Commentators	√	√	√	√
18	Giving voice over for select documentaries	√	√	√	√
19	Watching Movies or Documentaries and Writing Subtitles	√	√	√	√
20	Writing Movie Reviews	√	√	√	√

### DESIGNING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR SLOW LEARNERS

Teachers handle a heterogeneous group all the time. The smart learners always leave behind the slow learners. Once such slow learners are identified, we need to tone down the level so that these learners do not feel let down or label themselves as an under-performing group. They can be approached individually or be grouped with like-minded team members. Peer and self-assessment among this group will help bridge the gap with that of the fast-performers.

They can work in much smaller groups, spend time working individually, then come back together regularly either to share their findings with their peers or to approach the teachers for appropriate and timely guidance for channelizing their progress.

It is mandatory for teachers and learners to be realistic enough to move from simple to difficult projects (TABLE 3). For instance, transcoding a simple graph or bar chart can be extremely helpful in their research projects. From research findings they will be able to discuss evidences in order to find the best support to their argument. A more guided practice is the key to create a successful learning ambience for these learners.

The biggest challenge for teachers can be the process of close monitoring of these slow learners in their already busy schedule. Learners from the second-language acquisition stream require more attention. An effective system needs to be in place for continuous assessment to ensure the development and improvement on the part of the slow learners. It is mandatory for teachers to monitor learners and assess the outcome of such effective support and mentoring. In a nutshell, the communicative aspect of the learners gains more focus enabling them to read, comprehend, identify, analyse, compare, network both via people as well as the technology on hand.

**TABLE 3. Suggested PBL topics for slow learners**

General					
S.No	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
1	Writing Simple Instructions for Selected & Simple Origami Products	-	√	√	√
2	Writing Brochures for Local Tourist Resorts	-	√	√	√
3	Popularity of Fast Food Eateries or Restaurants	-	√	√	√
4	Comparing Lives of Great Achievers in Science & Technology	-	√	√	√
Vocabulary Development					
S.No	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
5	Words – Origin and Spelling	√	√	√	√
6	Terms and Definitions	-	√	√	√
7	Most Difficult Words to Pronounce	√	√	√	√
8	Crosswords – Simple to Difficult	-	√	√	√
Language and Literature					
S.No	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
9	Reading Collection of Short Stories and Summarising	√	√	√	√
10	Idioms of Colours, Food, Numbers, Body Parts	√	√	√	√
11	Writing One-Act Plays	-	√	√	-
12	British vs American English	-	√	√	√
Survey Related – Using Questionnaires or Interviews					
S.No	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
13	Review on Any Product of Their Choice	√	√	√	√
14	Survey of Handwriting Samples	-	√	√	√
15	Collecting Data on Most Frequently Visited Place in their Region	-	√	√	√
16	Review of Cross-Cultural Differences and Similarities using a Questionnaire	√	√	√	√
Communication Skills					
S.No	Sample Project Title	Listening (L)	Reading (R)	Writing (W)	Speaking (S)
17	Communication Skills using Audio and Video Recording	√	√	√	√
18	Video recording of casual conversations of 4 members	-	√	√	√
19	General Self Introduction	-	√	√	√
20	Speaking About Your Family and Friends	√	√	√	√

Sample project details mentioned in Tables 1, 2 and 3 offer realistic and very down-to-earth topics for PBL. Like the old adage, ‘Old wine in new bottles,’ the projects undertaken by the students have been tried and tested for its workability. Initially, students took it up on the pretext it would entail less work. But once they



started working on the topics, they decided to add their original touch to make it the most talked about project of their peer group. For instance, in TABLE 2, item 5 titled Ambigram – Word Cloud was just a list of theme-based words collected by the first batch of students. The second batch went a step further to enhance it with appropriate shapes to befit their different word lists. The next batch added colour to the collection of words reflecting every theme. Therefore, though topics may appear to be oft-repeated, the right amount of interest and motivation modifies even the oldest of teaching or learning methods. Innovation can take place on both sides - the learner and the teacher as well – making it an open-ended learning and teaching.

### EVALUATION

Evaluation of PBL helps teachers to assess whether the initial aims and the goals or objectives have been achieved by the learners. It also entails the implementation of the objectives stated and the individual and group experience in the form of data collected using appropriate tools as per the requirement of the projects. For instance, a survey-related project necessitates the use of a questionnaire. Hence, students learn to use such mechanisms for collecting, analyzing and compiling data for final presentation.

Customizing the evaluation pattern is another aspect which gains various dimensions. Based on the group handled by them, teachers can alter the distribution of marks for the various parameters decided. Even the parameters undergo a change depending on the group of learners. Flexible parameters or criteria can be created and the final decision can be made on the basis of the results acquired from a diagnostic test which will simplify the task of assessing the level of our learner groups.

The target group's performance can be assessed on two different levels – one their oral presentation and on another level their hardcopy in the form of a full-fledged project submission. In both cases, learners' outcome is based on the following: content, organization, cohesion, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation and spelling; in the oral presentation proficiency and fluency, confidence level, rapport and interactive level with the team members with focus on the social and collaborative skills, precise and concise way of sharing information, verbal and non-verbal competency exhibited by individuals, and time management.

### Project-Based Learning – Pros and Cons

Implementing PBL for engineering students has its own advantages. When free rein is provided in language classroom, learners of technical know-how can apply it in core papers as well. It is an integrated effort of learners to find a platform to express their creative skills. 'It hits all the major elements of the higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy: analysis, evaluation, and creation' (Wolpert-Gawron: 2013). PBL in English language opens avenues for using technology in language classrooms. It is the ultimate and most effective way to explore writing, reading and presentation skills at a higher level of thinking. Learners blend both core and non-core subjects and the final product would have its individual and unique signature of the team of learners. More focus is on higher order thinking and communicative abilities. The only snag would be the assessment process which could be easily dealt with, if flexible criteria for evaluation are made available or customized by the teachers themselves.

Any well-organised plans go haywire. Likewise, PBLs do have issues in areas such as adhering to schedules or sharing responsibilities or time management. The initial interest sometimes is never sustained and blame games become common among team members when work is not completed on the day of review. That is why, as teachers and monitors, we need to be with our learners from start to finish line.

### Conclusion

Project-based Learning is a double-edged sword and both the teacher and the taught benefit. The former enhances on effective teaching and implementing innovative teaching methodologies, whereas the latter on the other hand are like soft clay waiting to be molded into and be flexible enough for continuing professional development(Hayes: 2014).Projects pose a challenge to learners; it encourages them to cull out information – relevant pieces to fix as in a jigsaw puzzle. In addition, retrieving information prods them to paraphrase the content they have read or referred to and provides a platform to express their original version as in guided presentation – writing or speaking (Bransford, Brown and Cocking: 2000).

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The world of technology has given language teachers ample opportunity and in María Luisa Pérez Cañado's(2009) words 'to check the pulse of what is happening with their object of study.' It prepares our learners to face an English-speaking world and motivates us, teachers and learners as well, to connect with 'relevant English.' What best place than the social media to prepare us for such challenges beyond the learning boundaries.

In a technologically advanced world access to knowledge is easy. Even if one has access to knowledge, the learner must know when, where, why and how to apply such information. In fact, learners must learn to adapt themselves and they need to develop the ability to teach themselves, that is self-learning through knowledge process. 'Students do not learn from what you do; but from what you have them do' (Edwards: 2002).

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