

INSPIRING IMAGINATION: DIGITAL PROJECTS AS A POST-READING ACTIVITY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LESSONS

Lina Yanbastieva-Petrova¹, Shumen University, Bulgaria

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Abstract: *This paper explores the role of education in equipping students with the diverse skills needed for success in the 21st century, with a focus on mastering reading skills and digital literacy. It highlights the advantages of sparking students' imagination and curiosity and the benefits of implementing project-based learning principles in foreign language classrooms, where learners enhance language proficiency while developing critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and other "21st-century skills". The paper also examines some key principles of teaching reading, focusing on the use of post-reading activities to inspire imagination and creative expression through working on digital projects. Some practical ideas for utilizing educational platforms in these tasks are discussed, with examples drawn from projects created by students from an innovative class at Yoan Ekzarh Balgarski Secondary School, Shumen. The results indicate that working on post-reading digital projects not only improved students' reading comprehension and language skills but also enhanced their confidence and motivation in using various educational platforms for creating digital content, such as mozaBook and Buncee. Students demonstrated improved teamwork skills and problem-solving abilities when engaged in designing digital projects, which facilitated deeper learning and greater retention of information. The study concludes that integrating digital project-based learning principles into reading instruction can significantly enrich students' educational experience by supporting skill development relevant to the challenges of the modern world. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating creative and interactive methods in foreign language teaching to better prepare students for future academic and career success.*

Key words: *reading skills, digital literacy, imagination, project-based learning, foreign language teaching*

Introduction

The primary goal of education should be to equip students with a wide range of skills so that they are prepared for life beyond graduation. Mastering both reading skills and digital literacy, along with other competencies, is essential for being successful in the 21st century's rapidly changing landscape. Implementing project-based learning principles in the foreign language classroom is a powerful tool to achieve this, as it not only reinforces language proficiency

¹ Lina Yanbastieva-Petrova is a head teacher of English as a foreign language at Yoan Ekzarh Balgarski High School, Shumen and a PhD student at the Department of English Studies at Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen. Her main professional and research interests are in the realm of integrating modern technologies and project-based learning principles in the process of language teaching and acquisition. E-mail: L.milcheva@abv.bg

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but also encourages critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. By engaging in meaningful, real-world projects, students can develop the practical skills and adaptive mindset necessary for future success.

This paper explores some of the key principles in teaching reading, with a particular focus on the role of post-reading activities in encouraging learners to critically analyze the texts they have read and inspiring their imagination through creative tasks. The aim is to provide ideas on how to “ignite” students’ imagination and creativity to create digital posters and projects during the post-reading stage of foreign language lessons. The paper also discusses the basic functionalities of some online educational platforms and software solutions, which can be used in a foreign language classroom to create these digital products. The project examples presented were developed by students from an innovative class at Yoan Ekzarh Balgarski Secondary School, Shumen, who progressed through 5th, 6th, and 7th grades from the 2021/2022 to 2023/2024 academic years.

Teaching reading in foreign language classes

Reading has always been vital for education and lifelong learning – it provides learners with access to information on various topics, enhances critical thinking skills, and improves concentration. Developing reading skills is also closely related to building vocabulary knowledge and improving comprehension, which leads to enhancing both students’ written and verbal communication abilities. Fluent readers are also believed to “make greater progress and attain greater development in all academic areas” (Anderson, 1999, p. 1)

In his book *How to Teach English*, Jeremy Harmer (2001) enlists several reasons why reading is considered important by both teachers and students. Students realise that they need to understand written English texts “either for their careers, for study purposes or simply for pleasure” (Harmer, 2001, p. 68), while foreign language teachers agree that reading helps with language acquisition, since it provides “opportunities to study language: vocabulary, grammar, punctuation” (Harmer, 2001, p. 68) and text organization, and also serves as a foundation for developing writing skills. Another important feature of written texts is that they can serve as a source for introducing various topics, encourage discussions, “excite imaginative responses and be the springboard for well-rounded, fascinating lessons” (Harmer, 2001, p. 68).

To assist students in acquiring the skills of effective skimming, scanning, and reading for detail, foreign language teachers need to have in mind some key principles behind the teaching of reading. Harmer (2001) suggests a list of six principles underlying reading instruction. The first one states that “reading is not a passive skill” (Harmer, 2001, p. 70) since it involves not only the understanding of meanings of words, but also the ability to use one’s imagination in order to see the images these words are drawing, to understand the arguments implied within the text, and to build up an opinion about them. According to the second principle, “students need to be engaged with what they are reading” (Harmer,

2001, p. 70) so as to understand the text better. The third principle emphasizes the importance of encouraging language learners to engage with the content of the text and not only with its language. The fourth principle suggests that prediction plays an important role, because it helps readers get ready for the “active process of reading”. The fifth principle “Match the task to the topic” indicates that reading tasks should be meaningful and aligned with the content of the text, since the effectiveness of a reading lesson depends on matching the task to the topic, with thoughtful questions and creative challenges that make even simple texts stimulating. Harmer’s sixth principle states that “Good teachers exploit reading texts to the full” (Harmer, 2001, p. 71) suggesting that the text should be incorporated into discussions and subsequent tasks, using it to explore topics, to study language, and to activate learning.

All these principles indicate the need of a well-organised teaching sequence of a foreign language lesson aiming at developing students’ reading skills. Many foreign language methodologists and researchers (e.g. Brown, 2000; Harmer, 2007; Ivanova, 2017) would agree that an effective reading lesson should consist of three main stages: pre-reading, while-reading (or during-reading), and post-reading (or after-reading). A reading lesson organized following this structure is considered to ensure a thorough exploration and understanding of the reading material.

During the *pre-reading stage*, the focus is on activating prior knowledge and setting clear reading goals to prepare students for understanding the content of the text better. In *Becoming an English Language Teacher: from Theory to Practice*, Ivanova (2017) suggests that at this stage, teachers can attract students’ attention by introducing the topic in an interesting manner or by asking them to share their opinion on an issue related to the text. Reviewing and pre-teaching key vocabulary at this stage can also significantly improve text comprehension.

In the *while-reading stage*, various techniques for effective reading can be implemented to help students engage with the text and understand it better. Learners are often asked to first skim the text (reading for gist) and then read it again for details – i.e. scanning. Typical activities at this stage involve checking whether pre-made predictions about the content of the text are correct, arranging images or events chronologically based on the information in the text, note-taking, finding proof in the text in support of their answers, etc.

The *post-reading stage* can play an important role in language development as it provides opportunities for “integration of reading with other skills” (Ivanova, 2017, p. 87), such as speaking and writing. This phase usually involves discussion, reflection, personalization, interactive and creative activities to consolidate comprehension and encourage deeper engagement with the content of the text (Ivanova, 2017).

When discussing the characteristic features of a “good” reading task, David Nunan (1999) references a list of criteria proposed by Davies (1995). Two of these

criteria particularly support the integration of project-based work in the post-reading stage. One criterion is that an effective reading task should involve “the students interacting with the text and with each other,” while another criterion is that it “frequently involves the transfer of information from text to a visual or diagrammatic representation” (Nunan, 1999, p. 262).

Integrating project work in general, and creating digital projects in particular, into the post-reading stage can further enrich the learning experience, as students can apply their understanding through multimedia and interactive formats, thus developing essential digital literacy skills. Such projects not only help developing language proficiency but also align with 21st century educational needs, preparing students for a technologically advanced and collaborative world, fostering skills crucial for future success.

Digital literacy – a requirement in the 21st century

Over the past few decades, the focus on teaching essential skills for the 21st century has been transforming education globally. Language teachers need to foster a range of essential skills in their students, including critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration and communication, creativity and imagination, as well as an understanding of citizenship. They should also cultivate leadership abilities, a commitment to continuous personal growth, and last but not least – digital literacy.

One of the earliest and most widely recognised definitions of “digital literacy” comes from Paul Gilster, who describes it as “the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers” (Gilster, 1997, p. 1). Although being digitally literate is a relatively new requirement compared to being a fluent reader, developing digital literacy from an early age is important in the 21st century for both personal and professional reasons. To begin with, teaching students how to find, use, and critically assess the reliability of information available on the Internet is essential in an information-rich society like ours. This aspect of digital literacy has much to do with well-developed reading skills. Being digitally literate also involves the ability to adapt to new technologies and encourages the desire for continuous learning. Moreover, employers expect their employees to be digitally literate, since this is believed to ensure that they can perform tasks more effectively and adapt more easily to the constantly advancing ICTs (information and communication technologies) and digital environments, thus remaining competitive in the job market. Last but not least, digital tools facilitate communication and collaboration across geographical boundaries, and digital literacy guarantees their effective usage.

The influence of texts on students’ imagination

According to Madeleine R. Grumet (1988) imagination plays an important role in reading and in making sense of texts by transforming the visual perception of words into coherent understanding. She also points out that the reader often

believes that what they see in their “‘mind’s eye’ is a private vision, split off from what others know and feel” (Grumet, 1988, p. 129). In her book *Imagination and Literacy: A Teacher’s Search for the Heart of Learning*, Karen Gallas argues that “to read a text with understanding and insight, we must move inside the text, pulling our life along with us and incorporating the text and our lives into a new understanding of the world” (Gallas, 2003, p. 20). The author uses the concept of “The Look” as a physical manifestation of children’s deep engagement with stories, serving as a window into children’s minds, revealing their ability to transport themselves to different times and places through the power of imagination (Gallas, 2003).

Such engagement, while perhaps not as profound, is evident when students interact with an intriguing text during a foreign language lesson. This illustrates the potential of channeling students’ imagination into creating digital projects, where they can expand on and express their understanding of the text by converting their creative insights into multimedia formats.

Harnessing imagination by creating digital projects

Implementing project-based learning principles in foreign language classes can be a practical way to tap into students’ imagination and motivate creativity among them. In *Thinking through project-based learning: Guiding deeper inquiry*, Krauss and Boss (2013) state that learners “who meet the standards know how to read carefully for understanding” and “can harness their own creativity and use digital tools to produce original work that engages audiences” (Krauss & Boss, 2013, p. 73). They also imply that project-based learning is a valuable method for helping students achieve essential goals across various subjects, not just in English, since language skills are foundational and naturally integrate with other disciplines, making interdisciplinary projects ideal for promoting 21st-century skills.

Building on this underlying concept, as well as on Harmer’s aforementioned principles of encouraging students to engage with the content of a reading text and responding to it, the project-based approach can be effectively extended into the post-reading stage of a foreign language lesson.

Creating digital posters, designing interactive presentations, and collaborating on thematic research as part of foreign language education allow students to explore interesting topics and express themselves creatively while practicing English or another foreign language. There are various online platforms and software solutions available, which students can use in the classroom in order to bring these projects to life, further enhancing their connection to the text while combining meaningful language practice and creative expression.

mozaBook: a dynamic tool for language learners and educators

One such educational platform is mozaWeb, where the presentation software mozaBook can be downloaded. The Bulgarian Ministry of Education and

Science has granted all teachers and students three-year access to the platform through its “Digital Backpack” project. Users can access educational resources via the MOZAIK web module in their digital backpacks or by logging in directly at www.mozaweb.bg. To log in, they have to click the edu.mon button and enter their official credentials, including @edu.mon.bg.

Teachers have been provided with the Mozaik TEACHER license, a personalized user license tailored specifically for educators. This license is tied to the individual teacher’s account, allowing access to the full range of Mozaik content on any compatible device. Whether using a computer, notebook, tablet, or smartphone, teachers can seamlessly access mozaBook and the mozaWeb educational platform across multiple devices. The flexibility of this license makes it ideal for educators who work across various personal and school devices. However, while you can log in from any device, your account can only be active on one device at a time.

Students have been provided with the Mozaik STUDENT license, a user license specifically designed for their needs. Like the teacher license, the one for students is linked to the individual’s account, granting access to the entire Mozaik content library on any compatible device. Whether using a computer, notebook, tablet, or smartphone, students can easily navigate and utilize mozaBook and the mozaWeb educational platform across multiple devices. This flexibility ensures that students can engage with their educational resources wherever they are. However, similar to the teacher license, students can only be logged into their account on one device at a time.

Teachers and students in Bulgaria access their mozaWeb accounts using their edu.mon.bg credentials. This personal login provides free access to the platform, facilitating the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) and content and language integrated learning (CLIL). With a Mozaik TEACHER account, educators can create inspiring, engaging and interactive presentations using the platform’s extensive media library, which includes hundreds of images, videos, audio files, 3D scenes, animations, and digital lessons. Teachers can also use various tools and educational games available on the platform. Many of these resources can be customized to meet the specific needs of individual learners. Some tools and games are designed specifically for language learners, while others offer broader applications, integrating knowledge from various subject areas. Teachers can also assign tasks as homework or use the ‘classwork control panel’ to share resources, tools, and assignments directly to students’ devices during class, enhancing both in-class participation and independent study.

Students with a Mozaik STUDENT license have full access to all resources available on mozaWeb. Students can also download and use the mozaBook software. Although mozaBook is primarily designed for educators as a presentation tool, learners can also take advantage of its features and create their own digital interactive presentations. By incorporating the platform’s extensive

resources, such as the abovementioned images, videos, 3D scenes, and more, students can use their imagination and create engaging presentations as products of project assignments. They can also share their digital creations with teachers and classmates.

Creating digital posters on UNESCO sites in Bulgaria with mozaBook

In a recent project activity conducted during the 2023/2024 academic year within the duration of two English language lessons, 7th graders from an innovative class at Yoan Ekzarh Balgarski Secondary School in Shumen engaged in an enriching exploration of Bulgaria's UNESCO World Heritage sites. The lessons were on the topic "Explore Bulgaria's UNESCO Treasures" – part of the English as a Foreign Language curriculum, within the thematic area "Bulgaria and the World – Culture", which covers historical landmarks in Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

The lessons began with a video from Mozaik's media library, displayed on the interactive board in the classroom. This aimed to capture students' interest and set the stage for the topic of the lesson. Students watched the video and answered questions about UNESCO, such as what its abbreviation stands for and when the organization was founded. Following this, they matched images of Bulgaria's UNESCO World Heritage sites to their corresponding names. They then engaged in various reading tasks aimed at developing their A2-level reading skills, in line with both the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the national educational standards. These tasks included reading a text about the main aims of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and determining the truthfulness of several statements, a task format used in national English language exams. Students were then asked to log into Quizizz (an online educational platform available at www.quizizz.com) using the school laptops or their personal mobile phones, in order to read about some Bulgarian UNESCO sites and answer multiple-choice questions about them. After these activities, students completed a worksheet similar to the format found in the Cambridge English Exam A2 Key, Paper 1: Reading and Writing: Part 5. This worksheet required them to fill in missing words in short texts about the UNESCO sites in Bulgaria, reinforcing their understanding and application of the vocabulary and concepts they had studied during the lesson sequence.

In the post-reading stage, students were asked to create digital posters using mozaBook (Fig. 1). Working in small groups, they were instructed to design a digital poster about one of Bulgaria's UNESCO cultural sites. They had to include an image of the site and three facts about it, drawing from their previous readings and 3D scenes viewed during the lesson. They also had to integrate knowledge from three subject areas: English, History, and Computer Modelling and Information Technologies. While working on their projects, learners could listen to classical music, which aimed at further sparking their imagination and encouraging their creativity.

Group Work

1. Work in groups.

2. Use mozaBook to create a poster about one of the UNESCO cultural sites in Bulgaria.

Your poster should contain: !!!

- an image of the cultural site
- three facts about the cultural site

3. Use your own ideas and the facts from the worksheet.

4. Present your group work to the class.






Fig. 1 Project work instructions

Each group then presented their poster to the class, an essential part of the project work. Public speaking is a skill that many adults find challenging, often due to a lack of practice and confidence developed during the period of their school education. By encouraging students to present their work in front of their peers, teachers can help them build the confidence and communication skills necessary for effective public speaking. Developing these presentation skills from an early age not only prepares students for future academic and professional environments but also helps them learn how to express their ideas clearly and confidently in different settings. Figure 2 displays a digital poster created by one of the groups on the topic “Exploring Bulgaria’s UNESCO Treasures: The Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari.”



Exploring Bulgaria's UNESCO Treasures:



The Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari



The Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari was built in the 3rd century BC.

It has unique architecture and decoration.

It was included in the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1985.

Fig. 2 Exploring Bulgaria’s UNESCO Treasures – a digital poster

Creating digital posters with Buncee

Every English Language curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education and Science highlights that ICT should be actively integrated into lesson activities. Although the Ministry offers free access to certain platforms to achieve this, some teachers prefer using alternative ones. This preference may stem from their familiarity with these tools or from a desire to better meet their students' needs. Since the 2021/2022 academic year, the students from the aforementioned innovative class have been creating digital posters as part of the post-reading stage of their English language lessons, both in class and as homework assignments in English. At that time, the "Digital Backpack" project had not yet been implemented, so teachers were actively looking for ways to make learning more interactive and engaging for students, especially in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many students to study in an online environment and "allowed English teachers to learn different technology platforms" (Hasumi & Chui, 2024, p. 8). One effective solution turned out to be the online educational platform Buncee, which has demonstrated its value in enhancing students' engagement and fostering a more interactive learning experience.

Buncee (<https://app.edu.buncee.com/>) is an online educational platform which enhances students' engagement and creativity by allowing users to create interactive presentations, digital posters, and stories using a wide range of multimedia elements, such as images, videos, and Buncee art (3D images, animations, stickers, messages, emoji). It offers attractive templates, collaborative project features, and tools for assessment and feedback. It also enables students to build digital portfolios and allows for easy sharing and publishing of completed projects, making it a useful tool for interactive learning. There is a free version available, but its features are limited and may not fully meet classroom needs. For example, it allows users to create only up to 100 Buncee presentations, provides limited access to templates and does not allow creating classes. For more comprehensive features, there are affordable monthly and yearly plans. For instance, the Classroom Lite plan costs \$10 per month and allows users to create unlimited Buncees, provides access to all templates, and everything in the Premium Plan. Most importantly, it allows teachers to create classrooms, assign tasks to students and monitor their progress. This plan supports up to 50 students.

When they were in fifth grade, students studied various holidays and traditions from Bulgaria and English-speaking countries as part of the curriculum's thematic area "Bulgaria and the World: Festivals and Traditions." After learning and reading about specific celebrations, they often used Buncee to create digital posters or greeting cards. For example, following a lesson on the origins of Thanksgiving Day, they worked in groups to design digital posters about what they were grateful for (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 "I am grateful for..." – a digital poster

For Mother's Day, each student created and sent an individual digital postcard to their mother via a link (Fig. 4). These simple project tasks helped students to enrich their knowledge about different traditions, to gain experience in using certain platforms, and to creatively engage with the classroom material.



Fig. 4 A digital postcard for Mother's Day

One of the projects students worked on when they were in sixth grade was aligned with the curriculum's thematic area, "My Daily Life: Sports and Healthy Living." Following a blog-style reading text about sports, students had to create a digital poster describing their favourite sport. This assignment required them to engage with the text and integrate reading comprehension with writing skills, while also using their imagination, creativity, and digital literacy skills. They had to introduce their chosen sport, explain its key rules, share personal experiences, and include relevant visuals. The project encouraged creativity in design and clarity in presentation. Posters had to be made using Buncee and submitted to the platform by a set deadline. Figure 5 showcases one of the students' projects on football.

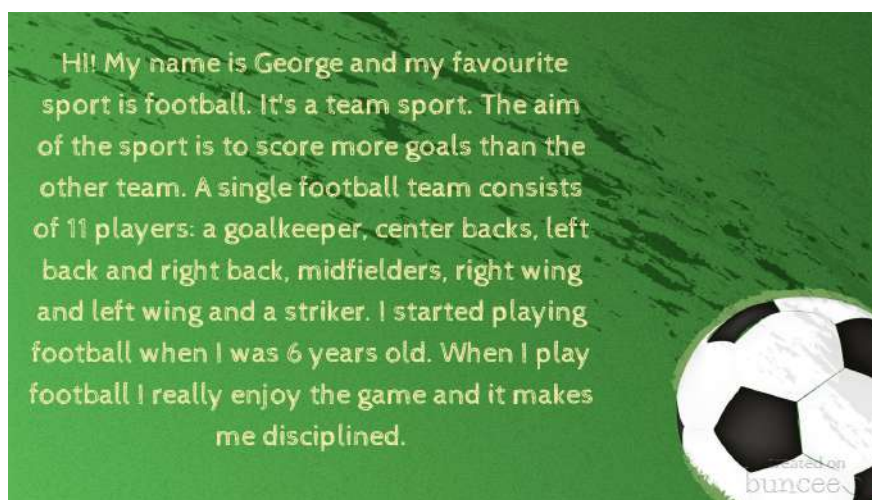


Fig. 5 "My Favourite Sport" – a digital poster

Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating project-based learning principles into the foreign language classroom is a highly effective approach to equipping students with the essential skills required for success in the 21st century. By focusing on post-reading activities that spark imagination and provoke creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy, educators can significantly enhance both language proficiency and overall student engagement in the learning process. The showcased digital posters developed by students from Yoan Ekzarh Balgarski Secondary School serve as a testament to the effectiveness of this method, illustrating how real-world tasks can ignite students' imagination and encourage deeper connections with the material. The use of digital platforms and tools in creating these projects not only reinforces the practical application of language skills but is also a step towards preparing students for the rapidly evolving digital landscape. As the educational environment continues to change, it is important that educators use such innovative teaching strategies. By doing so, they can ensure that students are linguistically competent, technologically skilled, and better prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

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