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PROJECT-BASED LEARNING APPLIED TO THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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TEACH-IN EDUCATION

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TEACH-IN EDUCATION

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is about teaching English as a second or foreign language using Project-Based Learning (PBL). We approach this combination because many people seem to think about implementing PBL in their language classes and ask questions about how to do it, but feel that there aren't enough materials based on this methodology. In fact, most researchers and writers we have come across discuss the applications of PBL in the students' mother tongue to subjects such as Math, History, Literature, Social Studies, and Science. However, there are still few published works about the specifics of PBL in foreign language classes. Besides, it seems obvious to us that the main difficulty in developing projects in a second or foreign language lies exactly on the fact that communication may be hindered when students do not have enough knowledge in the target language.

With that in mind, the question that has driven us to write this book is: How do we apply PBL to the language classes at the same time that we teach students how to interact and communicate in the target language?

The idea in this book is therefore to offer language teachers a guide to get started in PBL without necessarily reinventing the wheel. As we all know, most language teachers need to rely on coursebooks to teach their classes, so we decided to prepare project samples based on the most common topics presented in

coursebooks, one for each grade (1st to 9th). The projects are only examples; they can actually be adapted to the language level of your students and to the resources you have available. But before presenting the projects, we describe how we think PBL should look like in the language classes, for we want to make sure that teachers understand the implications of applying this methodology to their activities, the differences from working in L1 (first language), and the importance of never forgetting that our object of study is the language itself.

OUR EXPERIENCE WITH PBL

We first came across PBL when we decided to introduce collaborative work and group work in our language classes. The idea of using this methodology seemed very challenging at first, but at the same time it kept coming back to us every time we looked for ways to make our classes less teacher-centered and our students more engaged in learning. After some research, we decided it was time to give it a try. We had a very good team of teachers who would be preparing projects based on topics from the coursebooks they had been using. Each teacher picked out a class to get started and it was agreed that the project would last only a month. During our teacher development meetings, we discussed our ideas, planned our schedules, designed activities and worksheets, prepared assessment rubrics, and decided on the driving questions we wanted to provide our students with. We also had time to exchange experiences and ask for help. There was plenty of room for teachers to talk about their frustrations, their difficulties, and the challenges involved in starting something students were not used to. Last, but not least, there was the fear of the unknown and the reservations about working with something that would depend so much on the students and that, at the same time, could fall apart completely if teachers were not prepared and guided properly.

Fortunately, at the end of our first experience, most of our teachers were very pleased with the results. They had noticed how students were engaged in learning, how much better they worked together, and how they enjoyed working on their projects. However, teachers also understood how much more still needed to be done if we truly wanted to offer a real PBL experience to our students. They noticed how they needed more time to prepare the lessons, how important ongoing assessment was if they wanted to be fair, and how easy it was to be sidetracked if they did not constantly remind students of their driving question.

It was particularly challenging to find PBL materials and ideas designed specifically for the language class. Most of the input we found covered experiences that used the students' mother tongue in subjects such as Social Studies, Science, and Language Arts. There was little information about successful experiences in contexts such as ours in Brazil, in which English is taught as a foreign language.

We also searched for schools in Brazil that were successful in applying PBL and exchanged ideas with their coordinators. We found out that it was, indeed, possible to use this methodology in the language classes. It would take time and effort, but the results could be truly rewarding.

We are currently still working hard to make PBL thrive in our school. Of course we face challenges, but if we look back at how it started and how things look right now, we have come a long way. The most important aspect of it all is to see that most of our teachers have embarked on this journey through and through, especially after they realized how positively PBL has changed their students' attitude to learning: they tend to be more motivated to learn something they choose to learn. Indeed, projects can have that effect on students once they are the ones to ask the questions. Besides that, students have to find answers to their questions by themselves and with the teacher's guidance, not control. In our

language context, this means teachers will give students the tools to communicate while the latter will have to find the answers they need and produce meaningful things with the help of the provided tools. The surprises ahead are part of the learning curve and we are more than ready to ride it together.

PBL HAS BEEN AROUND FOR A LONG TIME

PBL is not something that has appeared suddenly, nor is it a new teaching methodology. Many philosophers and educators have discussed it before: Socrates (470-399 BC), John Dewey (1859-1952), Carl Rogers (1902-1987), Lev Vygostsky (1896-1934) and many others have stressed the importance of placing students at the center of their learning while providing them with opportunities to investigate and propose solutions to real-life problems.

It all comes down to what we today call the 21st century skills: the main objective of learning is to be able to make connections between what is happening inside the schools and real life. Unfortunately, our classes nowadays have little link to life outside the school walls, making it harder for students to be engaged in meaningful learning.

If you have been teaching English long enough, you have surely thought about developing a project with your students, or even tried it. "Let's close this unit with a project!" is a sentence that most of us have said. In situations like these, the teacher usually prepares something around the topic that is being studied. It takes about two or three classes for students to develop the project, and the idea, more often than not, comes from the teacher. All students do is gather information they have been given and summarize what has been exposed to them by showing a poster, giving a quick oral presentation, or creating a collage.

Although there is nothing wrong with such activities – in fact, they are very good ways to recollect information and even to assess students' production –, the concepts involving PBL are more complex and thorough than that.

There are many ways to describe PBL, but some of its features are common in most definitions. Thomas (2000) collects ideas from different sources to come up with the following:

> *(…) projects are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems, that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision-making, or investigative activities; give students the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminate in realistic products or presentations. (p. 1).*

There is a difference between making projects with your students at the end of a unit as a wrap-up activity and actually working with Project-Based Learning as an approach to teaching. Larmer and Mergendoller (2010) compare short-term projects and PBL to dessert and main course: the former "is served" at the end of a unit, as "dessert", in order to assess what students have learned; the latter, on the other hand, is how students are going to learn. It is the "main course".

If PBL is the main approach through which learning will happen, then the word *process* must be for us a constant reminder that everything in PBL is about *how* students got to a product, and not so much about the product *itself*.

Even though the final product cannot be used as the only means of assessment, it is still one of the biggest differences between using traditional methods and using PBL. It is important to understand that, when using PBL, the ultimate goal is to have students design and present a product, or a solution that can make a difference, be it by educating others, by raising awareness to important issues, by informing and proposing solutions to real-life problems, and, most importantly, by inspiring others to
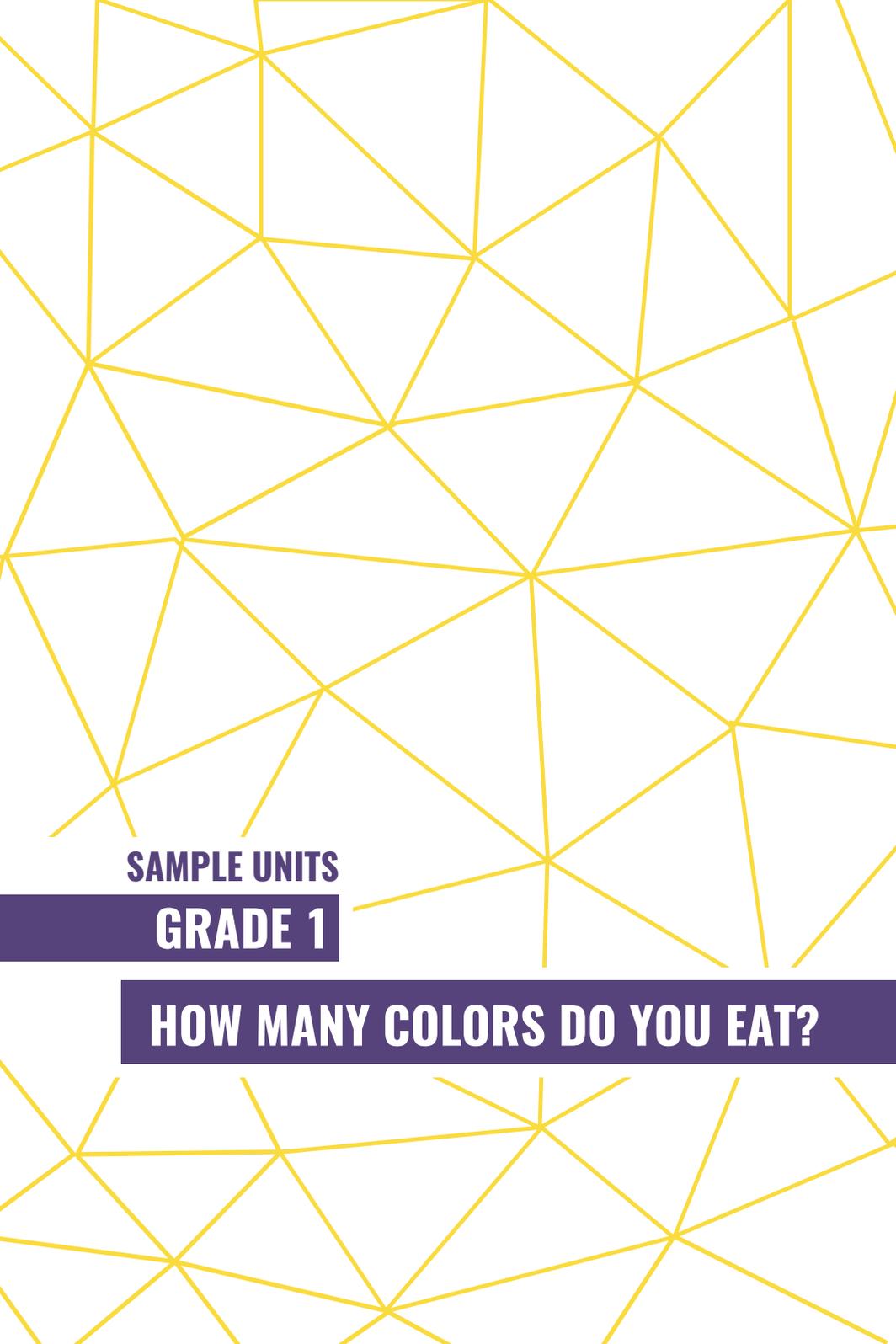
SAMPLE UNITS

GRADE 1

HOW MANY COLORS DO YOU EAT?

Driving question

HOW MANY COLORS DO YOU EAT?

Objective

While learning about healthy eating habits, students will identify, list and explore the different colors foods can be and what they like to eat, as well as create something based on them. The main objective of this project is to have students present their favorite foods and understand that a colorful plate is usually a healthy one. You can explore this topic through activities in which concrete experiences rule, such as collages, food tastings, field trips to the supermarket, gardening, etc. At this age level, it is still crucial to develop activities in which students are the focus.

This topic can be closely related to their own experience with food at home, but it can also be a dangerous territory to explore. Therefore, be aware of possible allergies or dietary restrictions due to medical, religious, moral or political reasons (vegetarian and vegan). For food tastings, it is wise to stick to the basics, such as tasty fruits, crackers, and juices.

> **NOTE**
>
> As we are working with young learners, we understand that they will mostly use the lower-order thinking skills from Bloom's taxonomy. Nevertheless, they will create something according to their age group during the project, moving up the ladder and developing higher-order thinking skills, too.

Why this topic?

Children love to talk about themselves and their likes and dislikes. They are beginning to experiment with new foods and to decide what they like or do not like to eat. Their eating habits may be influenced by TV, internet, school peers and social media, so raising awareness of the importance of eating healthy is essential at this age. From the linguistic point of view, vocabulary related to colors, foods and drinks, as well as language to express likes and dislikes are not only a must for beginners, but they also make it very easy for the teacher to work exclusively in English without having to fall back on student's mother tongue.

Length of the project

This project can take ten to twelve classes, depending on how long your classes are and how much time you can spend on the project. We are considering classes that are 45 to 50 minutes long.

Getting students involved

Use the surprise box explained in the **Teacher's procedures** to get students involved.

This is a typical example of an impacting "entry event", which, according to Montgomery (2014), aims to capture learners' attention, stimulate curiosity, evoke questions, and elicit "need-to-knows".

As stated in the introduction of this book (page 12), we need to take into account our students' likes and dislikes to engage them in the project. Teachers should provide hands-on resources and opportunities for students to live the language.

Learning goals

PROJECT THEME	HEALTHY FOOD
21ST CENTURY SKILLS	• Analytical thinking. • Creating. • Collaborating. • Communicating.
COURSEBOOK CONTENTS	Food and Colors.
PURPOSE	Students will list, identify and analyse foods and colors in order to determine if they have a healthy or unhealthy diet.
NUMBER OF CLASSES	10 to 12 classes.
RESOURCES THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT	• Introduction video for motivation. • Flashcards related to food and colors. • Field trip to the supermarket. • *Worksheets* related to food and colors. • Video related to green gardens. • *KWL chart* for healthy and unhealthy foods. • Bar graph. • Foods for tasting (cake, biscuits, fruit, fruit juice, cheese, carrots, cucumber, chocolate, bread and butter).
USE OF LANGUAGE	▪ *I like...* ▪ *I don't like...* ▪ *My favorite food is...* ▪ *My favorite color is...* ▪ *... is healthy.* ▪ *... is unhealthy.* ▪ *There are many... in the supermarket.* ▪ *... is sweet.* ▪ *... is sour.* ▪ *I eat... for breakfast/lunch/dinner.* ▪ *My meals are colorful.* ▪ *... students like...*

PROJECT THEME	HEALTHY FOOD
INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY	• What are your favorite foods? • What are you favorite colors? • What color is… ? • Describe your favorite dish. • Do you like supermarkets? Why? • What do your parents buy at the supermarket? • Do you like green gardens? Why? • Is your plate colorful? • Is a colorful plate always healthy?
OUTCOME	• List food and colors. • Identify healthy foods and relate them to colors. • Explore different tastes. • Classify food and colors. • Reflect upon quality time.
CROSS-CURRICULAR TOPIC	Maths and Science.
REFLECTION	▪ Is my plate a healthy plate? ▪ Are all colorful plates healthy? ▪ Do I have quality time with my family during meals? ▪ Eating is not just about providing necessary energy for daily activities but it is a social activity, too.
PRODUCT	Student's drawings, posters, exhibition about their eating habits and the colors they eat.
AUDIENCE	Classmates at the school and at the school canteen.