

### A Mini-Project

**At a glance** A piece of 'research' of approximately 6 pages (1800 words) containing information taken from various preferably contrasting sources, analysed and commented. The work consists of Title Page, Table of Contents, Introduction, Main Text, Conclusion and Bibliography.

**Objectives:**

- to encourage the student to work independently on a subject which genuinely interests him/her;
- to give practice at using libraries, and also the Internet;
- to allow the student, not the teacher, to be 'the expert';
- to develop the techniques needed to give a presentation;
- to develop self-evaluation strategies;
- to learn to programme one's time in view of a distant deadline;
- to start to learn the techniques which will be required in writing papers at university;
- to develop word-processing skills;
- to learn more English.

**Level:** Ideally students would have a solid linguistic base before embarking on this kind of work. In practice we find it is possible to work usefully at a level of A2+/B1 with students who have done 2-2½ years of English at 3/4 lessons a week.

**Material:** Books, brochures, Internet.

**Timetable:** Since the preparation of the written material must be largely done outside class, this is seen as virtually a full-year activity. A possible time-scale for the school year could be:

• Decision about topic	End of September
• Provisional bibliography	End of October
• Collection and organization of material	October/November
• Writing rough draft	December/January
• Handing in rough draft	Mid-February
• Oral presentations	March-May
• Handing in final version	End of May

### Introduction

The Swiss "Plan d'Études Cadre" / "Piano Quadro degli Studi" for the 'liceo' / 'Gymnasium' lays considerable stress on the need for the learner to be able to personalise not only his/her curriculum, but also the learning process within the chosen subjects. While the newest textbooks invariably incorporate the latest thinking on L2 presentation and learning, many suffer from the defect of being

designed for a wide range of users from many cultures, and they therefore have to avoid all risk of causing cultural offence. The result is often a lack of immediacy in the appeal of the textbook to the learner. The concept of the mini-project as a contrast to work with the textbook is therefore a personalisation of the course and an attempt to create a higher level of motivation in the learner.

## Guidelines and assessment criteria

Very clear and complete written instructions need to be given at the outset. Nevertheless, many students have difficulty in understanding that a paper has to be done in a certain way, according to certain standards. These instructions should make it clear that they will be required to work in this way at university. They also need to understand assessment criteria from the outset, so as to have a clear final goal.

## Choice of topic

It is better to allow the students as much freedom as possible. The more they feel that their particular interests are respected, the more motivated they will be to do a genuine piece of research. Nevertheless, certain limits need to be set, and certain topics politely vetoed: 'tattooing', 'body piercing', 'heavy metal music', 'the history of my favourite ice hockey club', 'Disneyworld', etc., may indeed be of great interest to the student, but poor subjects for further research in schools which specifically prepare young people for tertiary studies. A very small selection of subjects chosen by my students over the last 8 years shows that our young people today have a wide range of interests:

## A selection of titles chosen by students over an 8-year period

1066; 1968; Advertising; Alpine Lakes; Alvar Aalto; Amazonia; Amish; Ancient Myths; Angels; Aran Islands; Argentina; Athens; Australia - Perth; Australian history; Bach Flowers; Beer; Berlin; Bosnia; Mario Botta; .... Tchaikovsky; Tea; Terre des Hommes; Time; Tobacco & Health; Turkey & the Kurds; TV Violence; UNICEF; Van Gogh; Venus; Vivisection; Volcanoes; Wine; Witchcraft; Wolves; Women in Islam; Working children; WWF; Young Mozart; Yunnan.

## Preparing the bibliography

The students often have difficulty in understanding the importance of the bibliography. They need to see that this is their starting-point, that items can always be added or subtracted from the bibliography right up until the final presentation of the final draft.

## Preparing the rough draft

This is the most difficult part of the exercise for the learners. They invariably need help with most, if not all, of the following points:

1. summarising or reformulating material read in another language in simple English;
2. simplifying and reformulating material read in English;
3. documenting sources at all times;
4. organizing the material in a logical sequence and avoiding repetition;
5. learning to organize their time so as to hand in small sections of the work, and thereby avoid repetition of the same language mistakes;
6. adopting a critical attitude towards their sources, particularly on the Internet;
7. using word processing software efficiently;
8. grammar!

## Plagiarism

In spite of very full instructions, there are always one or two students who learn the hard way that this is not permissible. It is a useful learning experience.

## Final version

The final version of the written paper can be handed in before or after the oral presentation, and should be virtually free of language errors. It is very important that the students understand that even if they are weak linguistically, they can still do an excellent job provided that they hand in their work in good time to be corrected before the deadline. Realistically, there are one or two students every year who fail to meet the deadlines, and lose points in consequence. This is also excellent preparation for the kind of self-discipline that they will need at university.

## Assessment of the Written Paper

*Rough version:* Is the main body of the mini-project (excluding table of contents, introduction and conclusion) complete with source references?

*Title page:* Is all the necessary information here: name, address, class, title of work, teacher's name?

*Bibliography:* Is this correctly laid out? Is it complete?  
*Table of Contents:* Does this show page numbers for the separate headings?

*Sources:* Are these fully documented in the form of footnotes or other? Are quotes formatted correctly?

*Length:* Are there about 1,800 of the student's own words?

*Illustrations:* Are these pertinent and helpful to the reader?

*Content:* Is the information correct, interesting ...?

## Evaluation

There has been some discussion in our canton (Ticino) as to whether this kind of work should receive a mark at all. The classes with whom I have done this have all agreed that not only should there be a mark, but that it should count double in view of the amount of time and energy that is required.

## Oral presentations

Students are told that they will be expected to speak for 7 or 8 minutes minimum and that they must be able to lead a discussion and answer questions from the floor for a further 7 or 8 minutes. This modest requirement is designed to allay the fears of those who are terrified at the thought of trying to impart information in a foreign language. In practice, the presentations are always much longer than this, and 20 minutes seems to be the minimum time required. A great deal of help is needed from the teacher in order to prepare the students for this ordeal.

## Filming

In order to maximise effort and participation I have always filmed these oral presentations, and have copied the result for the students, inviting them to assess their own performance. This, of course, is done at home, so there is every incentive to take this seriously. Each student in the class is also given the following sheet, and invited to offer his/her own assessment, avoiding banalities such as 'good', 'very good', and offering constructive criticism. The rest of the class are also told that the success of the presentation will also partly depend on their willingness and ability to debate the topic in the question time that follows the presentation. It frequently happens that the presenter, in spite of all encouragement to the contrary, tries to read or recite from memory a prepared text, with boredom and/or incomprehension visible on the faces of the listeners. Then, at question time, the prepared text is no longer usable, and a lively discussion takes place with communicative skills much in evidence.

Since most students have never undergone the experience of being filmed, it is essential to have some practice at this. They should be able to see the difference between natural communication using notes, and the problems of boredom

and incomprehension that arise when the presentation is read or memorised. They may also need practice at using the OHP and in selecting visual or audio material to support their talk.

## Assessment

The oral presentation is an excellent opportunity for self-assessment. The presenter has the comments of classmates, which I prefer not to look at, the video copy of the presentation, the assessment form, and finally the teacher's comments. The students should be invited to do their self-assessment before looking at or hearing what the teacher has to say. There is invariably almost total agreement here about the good and bad points.

## Assessment criteria

These are based fundamentally on the premise that it is not what you say which reaches the audience, but how you say it. This is reflected in the self-assessment form reproduced here:

## Oral presentation assessment form

*Observer's Name:* Nicholas Willis

*Date:* 6 May 1999

*Presentation title:* **Ex-Yugoslavia**

*Presentated by:* xxxx

Criteria	Comments	-/+
<b>Body language and contact with audience:</b> eye contact, gestures, tics, smile, posture and position, visual material	When you were reading you lost eye contact, and it was a bit more difficult to follow what you were saying. Fortunately, most of the time you weren't reading. You moved around, and used the retro-projector. Your transparencies were interesting. In fact, it seems that you told people a lot of things they didn't know.	(-) + +
<b>Voice:</b> speed, volume, intonation, hesitation	Speed, volume and intonation were all OK. You speak English very clearly. There was a bit of 'er, er', but this didn't irritate. In fact, it gave us time to digest your information. In particular, you spoke clearly and slowly when you were explaining the alphabet. This was very important, as it was quite a complicated thing.	+ + +
<b>Control of subject:</b> conviction, logical sequence, amount of information, panic, waffle, handling of questions	Obviously you are convinced about this. You gave us a suitable amount of information. In fact, you spoke for about 8 minutes, which was fine. Your handling of questions was a bit variable. Sometimes you answered easily and naturally, as when I asked you about growing up in Rijeka; but you had difficulty in keeping the conversation going. Later you got a lot of us involved when you started talking about the language, and you had a good answer to Simone's question.	+ + (+) (-) +
<b>Language:</b> register, vocabulary, pronunciation, structural accuracy	Register and vocabulary generally OK. You've got the vowel sounds generally right in English, but you made some pronunciation mistakes: region, Catholicism, characterize, earthquake, monarchy, opened. The grammar was also mainly OK, but I heard a few mistakes: letters <del>who</del> are the same...; I want __ say; people thinks; strange foreign languages.	+ + (-) (+) (-)

This was an interesting presentation from which I think we all learnt something. You put quite a lot of effort into preparing it, and I think you can be satisfied with the result.

Suggestions: Watch the video. Try to notice the mistakes. **5**

## Relevance to the ELP (European Language Portfolio)

The preparation of the written text falls within certain descriptors at practically all levels from A2 upwards, but it is the Oral Presentation which seems to give the students the clearest idea of what they are able to do with the language. However, the medium- to long-term destination

of this work is clearly in the **Dossier**. Some students have shown their written work to other interested parties, but the most satisfying feedback has come from those who have filmed themselves or who have been filmed later and have been able to compare their own performance on tape with earlier efforts.

## Student feedback

### Positive

#### Written

- You can choose the subject
- You learn a lot about it
- You learn a lot of new words
- You learn how to structure a 'research'
- You get useful practice with the computer

#### Spoken

- Presentations are especially positive for shy people
- Doing the presentation shows me that I can speak English
- The speaker is spontaneous
- The speaker shows that he 'loves' his subject
- You can learn from the mistakes of those who do the first presentations
- It's good to see your mistakes on video
- The presentation is good for people who don't normally participate in the lesson

I leave the final word to a very shy girl who wrote the following 6 months after finishing school (my translation from the Italian): "... Believe me when I tell you that in 4 years at the liceo my mini-project on ..... was the finest and

### Negative

#### Written

- You don't learn more about other people's mini-projects (*Solution: a digest handed out to the class*)
- The teacher shouldn't penalise delays (*Oh yes, he should*)
- The teacher shouldn't evaluate the technical side because some people have difficulty using the computer (*No. Work has to be technically correct, too*)

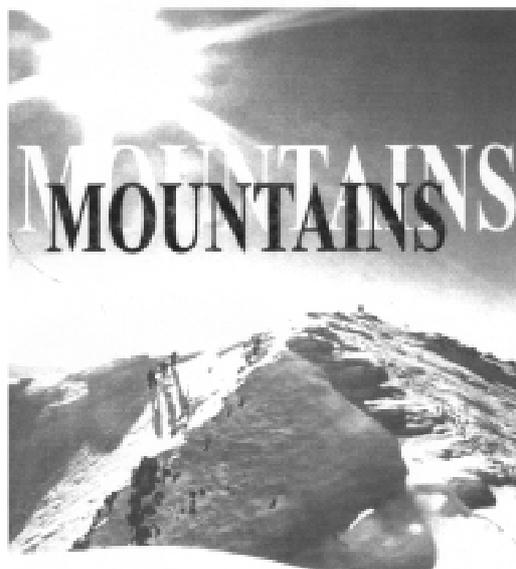
#### Spoken

- Risk of panic: afraid of everybody watching (*Solution: 2<sup>nd</sup> time better than the 1<sup>st</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> time better than the 2<sup>nd</sup>*)
- Presentations are sometimes difficult to understand, especially when read (*Solution: don't read! Use notes!*)

most interesting thing I did, and also that which gave me the greatest satisfaction. In fact I often turn over the pages and I feel proud of what I did (and I assure you that this is not insignificant)..."

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MINI-PROJECT



Anno scolastico 2001/02  
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# Thai Boxing



mini project

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mini project

Two examples of mini-projects by Liceo Cantonale in Bellinzona.