English Teachers' Perceptions of Project-based Language Learning in Secondary Schools in Ningbo China

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ABSTRACT

The perceptions of language teachers on project-based language learning (PBLL) is important as negative perceptions will affect the adoption and promotion of PBLL in a particular English learning context. The educational culture of basic English education in mainland China is teacher, classroom, textbook and examination-oriented which is opposite to the principles of conducting PBLL, which may cause negative perceptions among language teachers of PBLL. Therefore, this study adopts a mixed methods approach in the investigation of English teachers' perceptions of PBLL in 9 secondary schools in Ningbo China. A questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews were employed to gather the relevant data from 265 English teachers. The results of data indicate that: (1) PBLL can be promoted in secondary schools in Ningbo further due to the positive perceptions of PBLL of most of English teachers, but it is proper for English teachers to take PBLL as a supplement to the traditional classroom instruction in English; (2) the educational culture may affect the perceptions of language teachers of PBLL to some extent, but it is not a determinant factor; (3) the social environment factor may affect language teachers' perceptions of PBLL, such as the economic development and the English education quality of a district.

Keywords: project; project-based learning; project-based language learning; English language teaching; teaching perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Project-based language learning (PBLL) is a language teaching method which organizes instructional activities around projects and is promoted as an effective way of facilitating students' language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development (Fried-booth 1997, Stoller 1997, Beckett & Slater 2005). PBLL originates from project-based learning (PBL) and it is the application of PBL in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL). PBLL can integrate language with content and requires students to use language to make the investigation or do the research around a topic to get the relevant content knowledge and make realistic products (Zhang 2015). On the other hand, PBLL can expose students to different integrated skills and students need to use different integrated skills to complete their projects, such as problem-solving skill, critical-thinking skill, computer-operating skill, skill of collecting information and skill of processing information (Wang 2011).

PBLL entered into basic English education in mainland China and some English textbooks of secondary school attempted to bring in PBLL and incorporated an optional teaching section titled *"Project"* into every unit in 2005 to develop students' overall language competence (Liu 2006), such as *"New Senior English for Chinese Students"* (NSEFCS) and *"Advanced with English"*. Although PBLL has been in basic English education in mainland China for more than ten years, few studies have been conducted to

investigate the perceptions of Chinese English teachers of PBLL (Yao 2010, Gong 2012), i.e. beliefs or opinions held by language teachers about PBLL, which are crucial to monitor in adopting and promoting PBLL in a particular ESL/EFL learning context (Kim 2015, Liao 2016). The educational culture of basic English education in mainland China is teacher-centred, classroom-centred, textbook-centred and examination-oriented (Yi 2010), which is different from the principles of conducting PBLL. Kemahlıoğlu (2010) proposes that the clash of educational cultures may cause the negative reactions of language teachers to PBLL. Hence this study takes the secondary schools in Ningbo as the research context and investigates the perceptions of English teachers of PBLL in secondary schools in Ningbo. In order to reach this research aim, the research questions were formulated:

1) Can English teachers accept PBLL in secondary schools in Ningbo?
2) Is PBLL feasible in secondary schools in Ningbo?
3) Are English teachers familiar with PBLL in secondary schools in Ningbo?

The results of this study may offer some insights to the producers of English textbooks and English teaching experts in assessing the suitability of PBLL in basic English education in mainland China, or in improving the presentation of the projects suggested in the textbook, as well as providing guidance to teachers in using them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional educational culture is teacher-centred, classroom-centred, textbook-centred and examination-oriented in many ESL/EFL learning contexts (Martinez 2010, Wang 2011, Simpson 2011). PBLL is student-centred and requires students to go out of the classroom and learn English from the authentic materials. Moreover, PBLL is unbeneficial to help students master basic language knowledge and practice test-taking skills which they need to pass English tests (Tims 2009). There is a big gap between the traditional educational culture and PBLL, so it is necessary to investigate language teachers' perceptions of PBLL in the traditional educational culture. Some linguists and language teachers have conducted some studies to explore this problem and obtain differing results.

Beckett (1999) conducted a study in a secondary school in Canada and discovered that two ESL teachers were impressed by the performance of students in PBLL and they had a positive evaluation of PBLL because it could realize the integration of language, content and integrated skills in a communicative way and develop students' critical-thinking, problem-solving skills and cooperative learning abilities. Moreover, PBLL could enable students to reflect on their shortcomings.

Similarly, Petersen (2008) and Ghazouani (2014) reported the positive perceptions of language teachers on PBLL in ESL learning context. In the study of Petersen (2008), thirty English teachers' perceptions of PBLL were generally positive with some mixed results in some aspects and they were supportive of applying PBLL in the adult ESL classroom in Victoria because PBLL could provide a meaningful context for students to learn English through various materials and enabled students to conduct cooperative learning and reflective learning and undertake different roles. As for the study of Ghazouani (2014), 27 out of 29 English teachers had a positive attitude to PBLL and regarded it as an effective language instructional approach to enhance students' creative writing skills in Emirati because PBLL presented students with a chance to choose the learning content of interest and exposed them to the challenging tasks which could enhance their motivation and improve their creativity.

In contrast to these positive perceptions of PBLL, two studies reported on the negative attitudes of language teachers to PBLL (Eyring 1989, Kim 2015). Eyring (1989) completed a case study to record one language teacher's experience on implementing PBLL in an ESL university context in USA The language teacher had some frustrations and tensions in PBLL and felt under-appreciated, discouraged and overwhelmed though she was impressed by the students' oral presentation skills and the authentic activities in PBLL. Because it was difficult to negotiate with students, guarantee their full participation and guide them to complete the project, she wanted to revert to the traditional language teaching mode which was teacher-centred and focused on reading, vocabulary and grammar. Kim (2015) carried out a case study to know students' and English teachers' reflections on PBLL in the EFL university context in South Korea and found language teacher had negative perceptions of PBLL and she was resistant to PBLL because of some challenges, including the change in the teacher's role, the high rate of absenteeism, the plagiarism in students' work and the large classes.

Two other studies were carried out in the Chinese EFL context and they had contrasting results (Yao 2010, Gong 2012). Yao (2010) conducted an investigation in three secondary schools in Suzhou China into the implementation of PBLL and 70 English teachers participated in it. The results of this study revealed that more than 60% of language teachers had positive perceptions of PBLL and they thought that PBLL reflected the principle of learning by doing and student-centred and stressed the community and the practicality of language and it could develop students' overall language ability. Gong (2012) carried out a similar study in three secondary schools in Xiangtan China and 30 English teachers attended to it. The results of this study indicated that language teachers had negative perceptions of PBLL generally because it was time-consuming and they didn't have enough teaching time to implement it, the language ability of many students was too weak to complete the project and PBLL did not match with the current examination system. The social environment factor may cause the contrasting results between two studies, such as the economic development and the English education quality of a district. Compared with Suzhou, the economic development lags behind and the quality of basic English education is relatively low in Xiangtan.

The results of these studies reveal that the perceptions of language teachers of PBLL play an important role in the promotion of PBLL in particular ESL/EFL learning contexts: if language teachers have positive perceptions of PBLL, it is relatively easy for language teachers to accept and conduct it and vice versa. On the other hand, the educational culture may affect the perceptions of language teachers of PBLL to some extent, but it is not a determinant factor. Moreover, the social environment factor may affect the perceptions of language teachers of PBLL. In order to validate these issues, this study takes secondary schools in Ningbo, which is a coastal city in mainland China as the research context to investigate the perceptions of language teachers of PBLL.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Ningbo is a coastal city located in Zhejiang Province in mainland China. The economic development of Ningbo is very rapid and it is the twentieth in the top 100 cities of 2017 in mainland China. Ningbo maintains the higher educational investment every year. English teachers in secondary schools are given many chances to participate in English classroom teaching training at home and abroad and get access to new English teaching concepts. Ningbo focuses on the development of basic English education and encourages English

teachers to conduct classroom teaching reform and develop students' overall language abilities. In 2006, Ningbo became one of the regions selected to showcase basic education reform in mainland China. Most of students begin to learn English from Grade three in primary school in Ningbo and many secondary schools employ foreigner English teachers to teach students English. English is regarded as an exam subject in the education system and the educational culture is teacher, classroom, textbook and examination-oriented in secondary schools in Ningbo, which is contrary to PBLL.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS

Ningbo secondary schools are classified into three bands by Ningbo Education Bureau based on the academic performance in university entrance examination: 1 is the best and 3 is the weakest. In the main urban area in Ningbo, there are about 26 secondary schools, including 8 in band 1, 12 in band 2 and 6 in band 3. Stratified sampling method was used to select English teachers from one third of these 26 secondary schools (nine schools) to complete a questionnaire, including 3 in band 1, 4 in band 2 and 2 in band 3. A total of 265 English teachers from these nine secondary schools participated in this study: 74 male and 191 female English teachers; 95 teaching Grade One, 83 teaching Grade Two and 87 teaching Grade three (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Background information of participants

Gender	Female	191
	Male	74
	One	95
Grade	Two	83
	Three	87
Total		265

Using the stratified random sampling method, nearly 2/3 of English teachers (172 English teachers) were selected to respond to questionnaires. Ten of the returned questionnaires were invalid because some items were not completed or the answers of all the items were the same in these ten questionnaires, so only 162 returned questionnaires were valid. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the representative statistical sample size of 270 respondents is 159, so the sample size of questionnaire respondents is reasonable and feasible. The age of these 162 English teachers ranged between 24 and 51 years and most of them have more than 5 years' working experience; 44 were male and 118 female; 57 taught Grade One, 50 taught Grade Two and 55 taught Grade Three. With regard to their general assessment of their students' language proficiency, 36 teachers believed their students' proficiency was good, 75 considered their students' proficiency average, while 51 considered their students' proficiency poor. Only 16 English teachers had received training in PBLL, while the others had never participated in any PBLL training.
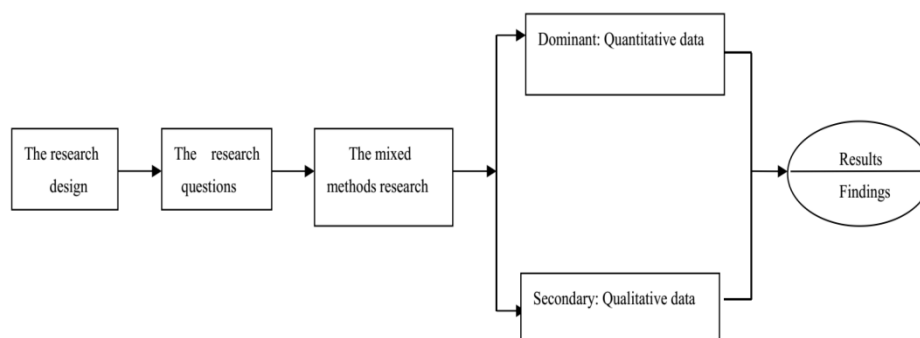
For the semi-structured interviews, the purposive random sampling method was employed to select interviewees from those English teachers who had been chosen to complete the questionnaire in these nine secondary schools. These 18 English teachers were between the ages of 30 and 42 years and most of them had more than 5 years' work experience; 5 were male and 13 female; 6 taught Grade One, 6 Grade Two and 6 Grade Three. As for the teachers' opinions of their students' language proficiency, 6 thought their students proficiency was good, 6 considered their students average, while 6 considered their students' proficiency poor. None of them had attended any relevant training in PBLL.

In this study, the mixed methods approach was employed to gather, explain and interpret the data. This approach uses qualitative and quantitative methods meanwhile in a

research design or in a research program (Caruth 2013), which integrates quantitative method with qualitative method to strengthen the reliability and the trustworthiness of the findings from the qualitative data and the quantitative data (Gerrish & Lacey 2010). There are six mixed methods design strategies—sequential explanatory, sequential exploratory, sequential transformative, concurrent triangulation, concurrent nested and concurrent transformative (Creswell & Plano Clark 2003). The researcher employed sequential explanatory to use qualitative results to explain and triangulate the findings of quantitative data in this study.

In order to answer the research question of this study and investigate the perceptions of English teachers of PBLL in secondary schools in Ningbo, the researcher designed English teacher questionnaire to get the relevant quantitative data, but the quantitative data couldn't offer the researcher more detailed and informed understanding. Thus the semi-structured interviews of English teachers were adopted to obtain the qualitative data, which could help the researcher explain and confirm the results from the questionnaire. The concrete research design of this study is presented in Figure 1. Moreover, the researcher took *"Project"* section in *"New Senior English for Chinese Students"* (NSEFCS) which was the main English textbook in secondary schools in Ningbo as the research medium to investigate the perceptions of English teachers of PBLL in secondary schools in Ningbo because *"Project"* section in NSEFCS may be the only access to PBLL as for most of English teachers.

FIGURE 1. The research design of this study

RESEARCH TOOLS

In this study, there are two main research tools to gather the relevant data, including English teacher questionnaire and the semi-structured interview of English teacher.

TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

English teacher questionnaire (*See Appendix A*) is a descriptive questionnaire adapted from Gong (2012). There are two parts in this questionnaire: part one is to obtain some background information about the English teachers, including gender, age, the grade level they are teaching, their working experience and their assessment of their students' language competence; the objective of part two is to obtain information about their perceptions of PBLL from three dimensions – English teachers' acceptance of PBLL (Items 1-2, 5), the feasibility of PBLL (Items 3-4) and English teachers' familiarity with PBLL (Item 6) and there are 6 single-choice questions in part two.

The reliability and the validity of English teacher questionnaire were examined through the retest and the expert review separately in this study. After completing the first draft of English teacher questionnaire, the researcher invited three university professors in English teaching in Zhejiang Province to evaluate it from the aspects of clarity, vocabulary,

sentence structure and content validity through giving the comments. After getting the comments from three experts in English teaching, the researcher adopted the cluster sampling method to choose a secondary school to conduct the first-round formal pilot study in Ningbo due to the large size of the sample and 25 English teachers participated in this pilot study. After two weeks, the researcher selected the same 25 English teachers to conduct the second-round formal pilot study. Then the researcher compared the results between the first-round pilot study and the second-round pilot study and founded that the results of these two-round pilot studies on every item were similar, such as item one (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Results of item one in two rounds of pilot study

Item one		Yes	No	Not sure
Is it necessary to design "project" section in NSEFC?	The first-round pilot study	17	6	2
	The second-round pilot study	18	6	1

THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

The purpose of the semi-structured interview of English teachers (see Appendix B) was to elaborate on and triangulate the findings from the English teacher questionnaire and all the questions of semi-structured interview of English teacher are the same with English teacher questionnaire of this study. There are six questions in the semi-structured interview of English teachers, which consist of three dimensions: the acceptance of PBLL (Items 1-2, 5), the feasibility of PBLL (Item 3-4) and English teachers' familiarity to PBLL (Item 6). The validity of the questions in semi-structured interview of English teachers was checked by three university professors in English teaching in Zhejiang Province. After completing the first draft of questions in the semi-structured interview of English teachers, the researcher invited three university professors in English teaching in Zhejiang Province to evaluate the questions from the aspects of clarity, vocabulary, sentence structure and content validity through giving the comments. They mentioned that the researcher needed to add the following questions on item 5. According to their suggestions, the researcher adjusted item 5 and three experts gave positive comments on these modifications. Then the researcher conducted the formal pilot study and employed the purposive sampling method to choose three participants who were from different grades and different levels of secondary schools in Ningbo. The results of the formal pilot study indicated that the questions of semi-structured interview of English teacher were validated.

DATA COLLECTION

After obtaining the permission from the school principals through phone, the researcher went to the selected nine secondary schools and conducted English teacher questionnaire and student questionnaire A. In every secondary school, all the English teachers were assembled in the meeting room. The researcher narrated the research purpose and explained how to respond this questionnaire firstly. Then English teacher questionnaire and the consent form were handed out. English teachers nearly used ten minutes to complete the questionnaire.

In the semi-structured interview of English teachers, the researcher selected two English teachers who had responded to questionnaire from every chosen secondary school through the purposive sampling method. All of the selected English teachers agreed to accept the semi-structured interview and completed the consent forms. Before conducting the interview with every participant, the researcher made a brief introduction of this study and *"project"* section (PBLL) firstly and encouraged every participant to express their thoughts freely. Following the interview guide, the researcher conducted the semi-structured interview

of English teachers in the available classrooms of every selected secondary school. The researcher recorded all the interviews and took some notes under their permissions. Every interview lasted 10-15 minutes.

DATA ANALYSIS

SPSS 22.0 was used to analyse the data of English teacher questionnaire and the frequency and the percentage of every option in every item were calculated to get the simple and basic data about the research questions separately. As for the data of semi- structured interview of English teacher, the content analysis was employed. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) state there are three kinds of content analysis— conventional content analysis, summative content analysis and directed content analysis. In the conventional content analysis, the coding categories are derived from the data directly without predetermined ideas or categories, while the preconceived codes will be employed to confirm or prove the prior theoretical framework in the directed content analysis. By contrast, the summative content analysis involves identifying, calculating and comparing certain words and content in the underlying context so as to make the comprehensive interpretation. The above three kinds of content analysis were used in the present study. The researcher followed the procedures of content analysis proposed by Gay and Airasian (2003) to analyse the qualitative data—preparation and organization stage, coding stage and interpreting stage.

Preparation and Organization stage: as for the data from the semi-structured interviews, the researcher transcribed the audio-taped data firstly and translated them into English; the researcher reviewed the transcripts of qualitative data constantly to be familiar with them; the data was organized based on the research questions and the similar data were organized and filed together.

Coding stage: the researcher reviewed the qualitative data and labelled the codes to identify the similarities and differences in the qualitative data (*pre-determined code:* overall language abilities, language learning affects, language learning abilities, integrated skills, content knowledge, etc; *new code*: individualized learning, duplicate content, non-language aspect, the support of English teacher and peers, etc.); all the qualitative data was broken into the codes and the similar codes were grouped into categories; then the researcher used categories and codes to present the findings to answer the research questions.

Interpreting stage: the researcher interpreted the data through the deductive and inductive process. The data from interpretation was employed to support either what the researcher had known, to connect with the previous studies' discoveries or to supplement the previous studies' discoveries. The method of reporting the results of qualitative data analysis was in quantitative and narrative style to triangulate and explain the results of quantitative data.

RESULTS

Six items are designed to answer three research questions in English teacher questionnaire: item 1-2 and 5 are for the first research question, item 3-4 are for the second research question and item 6 is for the third research question, which are the same with the semi-structured interview of English teachers.

RESULTS OF THE FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION

Item one is "Is it necessary to design 'project' section in NSEFC?" in the English teacher questionnaire. 69.7% of English teachers (113 English teachers) think it necessary, 17.9% of

English teachers (29 English teachers) think it unnecessary and the rest of English teachers (20 English teachers) state that it depends on the concrete situations. In the semi-structured interview of English teachers, 66.7% of English teachers (12 English teachers) think it necessary, 27.8% of the students (5 English teachers) think it unnecessary and 5.5% of English teachers (1 English teacher) states that it depends on the concrete situations, which can triangulate the results of item one in the English teacher questionnaire.

The statements of English teachers on this item in the semi-structured interview were coded and categorized and the corresponding examples were presented in Table 3. As for 12 English teachers who think it necessary, they can recognize the benefits of "project" section on students' language learning, content learning, integrated skills' development and individualized learning and they pay more attention to language learning in PBLL. 5 English teachers who think it unnecessary propose that they lack of material conditions (teaching time) to conduct it, the instruction of "project" section is not consistent with the educational culture of secondary schools in Ningbo which is examination-oriented and the content of it overlaps with the other parts of English textbook. Lacking of material conditions is one of main factors to interfere with English teachers to conduct the instruction of "project" section. 1 English teacher thinks that it depends on students' language competence.

TABLE 3. Statements of English teachers on item one in the semi-structured interview

Option	Category	Code	Frequency	Examples of English teachers' statements
Yes (12)	Language learning	Overall language abilities	10	Teacher 7: I think that the design of "project" section is good and it can improve students' overall language abilities.
	Language learning	Language learning affects	6	Teacher 3: "Project" provides students with an interesting carrier to learn English, improves their English learning interests and enables them to learn English actively.
	Language learning	Language learning abilities	4	Teacher 16: The process of completing the "project" is the process to develop students' autonomous learning abilities and cooperative learning abilities.
	Integrated skills' development	Integrated skills	5	Teacher 6: "Project" refers to different integrated skills and students can practice and enhance these integrated skills.
	Content learning	Content knowledge	4	Teacher 15: "Project" can realize the integration of different subjects, make students study more interdisciplinary knowledge and broaden their scopes of knowledge.
	Individualized learning	Individualized learning	2	Teacher 12: "Project" can meet the learning needs of different students, consider the learning abilities of different students and make full use of the talents of every student.
No (5)	Material conditions	Lack of teaching time	5	Teacher 2: English teachers don't have the time to implement the instruction of "project" from the view of teaching time arrangement.
	Educational culture	Irrelevant to English tests	3	Teacher 1: English classroom teaching in secondary schools is conducted around university entrance examination which tests students' listening skills, reading skills and writing skills, but the content of "project" has nothing to with the content of English tests.
	Student	Students' weak language competence	2	Teacher 18: "Project" has the higher requirements on students' language competence, but my students have the poor language competence and they can't complete the projects.
	Project	Duplicate content	1	Teacher 4: I think the content of "project" overlaps with the other parts of English textbook so it is unnecessary to design this part separately.
It all depends (1)	Student	Students' language competence	1	Teacher 5: It depends on students' language competence. "Project" is a good language learning activity for students with good language competence and it isn't difficult for them to complete, so it is necessary for them to design "project". But "project" will become a learning burden for students with poor language proficiency and they can't complete the project, so it is unnecessary for them to design "project".

Item two is "Is it appropriate to conduct the instruction 'project' section in the English classroom teaching of secondary schools?" in the English teacher questionnaire. 54.3% of English teachers (88 English teachers) think it appropriate, 14.2% of English teachers (23 English teachers) propose that it is inappropriate and 31.5% of English teachers (51 English teachers) state that it depends on the concrete situations. In the semi-structured interview of English teachers, 50% of English teachers (9 English teachers) think it appropriate, 22.2% of English teachers (4 English teacher) state that it is inappropriate and 27.8% of English teachers (5 English teachers) consider that it depends on the concrete situations, which can triangulate the results of item two in the English teacher questionnaire.

As for 9 English teachers who think it appropriate, they acknowledged the benefits of "project" section on students' language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development and non-language factor and they pay more attention to language learning in PBLL. 4 English teachers think it inappropriate due to the limitations of material conditions, the educational culture and the language competence of students. In addition, more English teachers (5 English teachers) state that it depends on the concrete situations due to the influence of the educational culture and students' language competence.

TABLE 4. Statements of English teachers on item two in the semi-structured interview

Option	Category	Code	Frequency	Examples of English teachers' statements
Yes (9)	Language learning	Overall language abilities	8	Teacher 9: When students complete the study of language knowledge in a unit, they need this kind of authentic learning activity to complete the language output so as to improve their overall language ability.
	Language learning	Language learning affects	5	Teacher 11: English classroom teaching in secondary schools is examination-oriented and the teaching content and the teaching way of it is very boring and dull, so it is easy for students to lose English learning interests and enthusiasm, but "project" can solve this problem, make students experience different English learning way and improve their English learning interests.
	Language learning	Language learning abilities	4	Teacher 3: Students need to complete their projects through individual work and group work, so it is beneficial to develop their autonomous learning abilities and cooperative learning abilities.
	Content learning	Content knowledge	5	Teacher 8: "Project" can make students have the deeper understanding of the topic of this unit.
	Integrated skills' development	Integrated skills	3	Teacher 7: "Project" can develop students' integrated skills, such as skills of collecting information, skills of processing information and problem-solving skills.
	Non-language aspect	Non-language aspect	1	Teacher 12: "Project" can integrate language factor with non-language factor, enable students to have more overall performance and make teacher-pupil relations and student-student relations become more harmonious.
No (4)	Material conditions	Lack of teaching time	4	Teacher 5: English teachers and students are very busy and they don't have the extra time to carry out PBLL under the new university entrance examination system.
	Educational culture	Irrelevant to English tests	2	Teacher 2: It is inappropriate to implement the instruction of "project" section in the English classroom instruction of secondary schools because English classroom instruction is examination-oriented and the content of "project" is not relevant to university entrance examination.
	Student	Students' weak language competence	2	Teacher 1: My students have the poor language competence and it is difficult for them to master the basic language knowledge in the daily English classroom, so it is inappropriate for them to conduct PBLL.
It all depends (5)	Students' situation	Students' language competence; Educational culture	3	Teacher 6: If the students have the good language proficiency and the university entrance examination is not a problem for them, it is appropriate for them to participate in "project".

Schools' situation	Educational culture	2	Teacher 15: "Project" section is appropriate for the schools in which students have the better performance in English tests and the cultivation of comprehensive ability is stressed.

Item five is "Are you willing to guide students to complete the 'project'?" in the English teacher questionnaire. 65.4% of English teachers (106 English teachers) state that they are willing, 16.7% of English t

eachers (27 English teachers) are not willing and 17.9% of English teachers (29 English teachers) think that it depends on the concrete situations. In the semi-structured interview of English teachers, 55.6% of English teachers (10 English teachers) state that they are willing, 22.2% of English teachers (4 English teachers) are not willing and 22.2% of English teachers (4 English teachers) propose that it depends on the concrete situations, which can triangulate the results of item five in the English teacher questionnaire.

The statements of English teachers on this item in the semi-structured interview were coded and categorized and the corresponding examples were listed in Table 5. 10 English teachers who are willing to guide students to complete the project because *"project"* section can facilitate students' simultaneous development on language, content and integrated skills. 4 English teachers who are unwilling because they lack of material conditions, the instruction of *"project"* section does not match with the educational culture and the language competence of students is too weak to complete the project. 4 English teachers state that it depends on the material conditions, students' language competence and the topic of project.

TABLE 5. Statements of English teachers on item four in the semi-structured interview

Option	Category	Code	Frequency	Examples of English teachers' statements
Yes (10)	Language learning	Overall language abilities	7	Teacher 10: As for language learning, language using is the most important. "Project" can enable students to use English in the real life and improve their overall language ability.
	Language learning	Language learning affects	6	Teacher 9: English learning should begin with the stimulation of learning interests and "project" can stimulate students' English learning interests quickly.
	Integrated skills' development	Integrated skills	5	Teacher 3: "Project" can develop students' integrated skills and overall quality.
	Content learning	Content knowledge	3	Teacher 16: "Project" can realize the knowledge integration of different subjects, enable students to obtain more extra-curricular knowledge and broaden their horizons.
No (4)	Material conditions	Lack of teaching time	4	Teacher 2: I need to catch up with the teaching schedule so that I don't have the extra time to guide students to complete the project.
	Material conditions	Big class size	1	Teacher 5: There are about fifty students in my class and I don't have the enough energy and time to guide all the students to complete the projects meanwhile.
	Educational culture	Irrelevant to English tests	2	Teacher 1: The content of "project" is irrelevant to the content of English tests and it can't improve students' scores, so I don't want to spend the limited teaching time guiding students to complete the project.
	Student	Weak language competence	2	Teacher 18: I am unwilling to guide students to implement "project" because my students have the poor language proficiency and they can't complete so difficult learning activity.
It all depends (4)	Material conditions	Teaching time	4	Teacher 4: If I have the enough teaching time, I want to guide students to implement "project" because "project" is beneficial to improve students' overall language ability.
	Student	Students' language competence	2	Teacher 13: If students can complete the project, I can have a try.
	Project	The topic of project	2	Teacher 8: If the topic of project is close to students' life and interests, I can guide students to complete this project.

RESULTS OF THE SECOND RESEARCH QUESTION

Item three is "What do you think of the overall difficulty of 'project' section?" in the English teacher questionnaire. 13.0% of English teachers (21 English teachers) think that it is very difficult, 56.8% of English teachers (92 English teachers) mention that it is difficult, 26.0% of English teachers (42 English teachers) deem it is moderate and over 4% of English teachers (7 English teachers) state that it is easy. In the semi- structured interview of English teachers, 16.7% of English teachers (3 English teachers) mention that it is very difficult, 55.6% of English teachers (10 English teachers) think that it is difficult, 27.7% of English teachers (5 English teachers) state that it is moderate and none of English teacher propose that it is easy, which can triangulate the results of item three in the English teacher questionnaire.

The statements of English teachers on this item in the semi-structured interview were coded and categorized and the corresponding examples were listed in Table 6. The core factor which affects English teachers' assessment on the difficulty of "project" section is students' language competence and it requires students to use language to complete the project in their daily life, which is a challenge for students in EFL learning context. Moreover, the support of English teachers and peers is beneficial to decrease the difficulty of it.

TABLE 6. Statements of English teachers on item three in the semi-structured interview

Option	Category	Code	Frequency	Examples of English teachers' statements
Very difficult (3)	Language	Language competence	3	Teacher 1: As for my students, project is very difficult learning task and their language competence is too weak.
Difficult (10)	Language	Language competence	7	Teacher 4: "Project" is a difficult and complicated learning task and it has higher requirements on students' language competence and overall quality, so students may have some difficulties completing it, especially for the students with poor language competence.
	Content	Content knowledge	3	Teacher 13: "Project" refers to knowledge of different subjects which students may not be familiar with, so it is a difficult learning activity.
	Integrated skills	Integrated skills	2	Teacher 7: "Project" requires students to use different integrated skills to complete their projects, which they rarely use in the classroom. Thus it is difficult for them to complete it.
Moderate (5)	Language	Language competence	4	Teacher 16: My students have the better language competence and I often design some small tasks which are close to project for my students and they complete these tasks very well, so the difficulty of project is proper.
	The support of English teacher and peers	The support of English teacher and peers	2	Teacher 12: Students need to cooperate with group members to complete their projects and they can undertake the tasks according to their individual abilities. Therefore, project is a moderate task.

Item four is "Under your guidance, can your students complete the 'project'?" in the English teacher questionnaire. 66.0% of the English teachers (107 English teachers) think that their students can complete it, 21.6% of the English teachers (35 English teachers) state that their students can't complete it and the rest of English teachers (20 English teachers) are not sure about it. In the semi-structured interview of English teachers, 72.2% of English teachers (13 English teachers) state that their students can complete it, 22.2% of English teachers (4 English teachers) claim that their students can't complete it and 5.6% of English teachers (1 English teachers) is not sure about it, which can triangulate the results of item four in the English teacher questionnaire.

The statements of English teachers on this item in the semi-structured interview were coded and categorized and the corresponding examples were listed in Table 7. The core factor which affects English teachers' assessment on the completion of project is students' language competence. Most of English teachers think that their students can complete it, which indicates that students have relatively better language competence in secondary schools in Ningbo compared with other cities or rural parts of mainland China. The other factors include the support of English teacher and peers, the material conditions and students' content knowledge.

TABLE 7. Statements of English teachers on item three in the semi-structured interview

Option	Category	Code	Frequency	Examples of English teachers' statements
Yes (13)	Language	Language competence	10	Teacher 11: My students have good language competence and they can complete the project.
	The support of English teacher and peers	The support of English teacher and peers	4	Teacher 14: "Project" is a cooperative learning task and students can cooperate with group members to complete it. In addition, when they encounter some difficulties, they can consult to their peers and English teachers.
No (4)	Language	Language competence	4	Teacher 6: The language competence of my students is too weak to complete the projects.
	Content	Content knowledge	2	Teacher 10: The knowledge scope of my students is very limited and they may have little understanding of topic knowledge, they can't complete this kind of learning tasks.
	Material conditions	Lack of learning resources	1	Teacher 2: It is difficult for my students to get the relevant English materials. Moreover, my students live in the dormitory of school and they have less access to the internet, so they can't complete the project.
Not sure (1)	English teacher	Unfamiliar with PBLL	1	Teacher 3: I have never implemented the instruction of "project" section and I don't know whether my students can complete it or not.

RESULTS OF THE THIRD RESEARCH QUESTION

Item six is "How much do you know about 'project' section?" in the English teacher questionnaire. 16.0% of English teachers (26 English teachers) have a lot of understanding, 31.5% of English teachers have some understanding and 52.5% of English teachers (85 English teachers) have little understanding. In the semi- structured interview of English teachers, 11.1% of English teachers (2 English teachers) have a lot of understanding, 33.4% of English teachers (6 English teachers) have some understanding and 55.5% of English teachers (10 English teachers) have little understanding, which can triangulate the results of item six in the English teacher questionnaire. All the English teachers have never attended any training about "project" section. As for English teachers who have a lot understanding or some understanding, they can get some information about it through English textbook *(NSEFCS)* and the internet *(Teacher 3: I am interested in "project" section and I have a lot understanding of it. I can obtain some information of "project" through "NSEFCS" and the internet)*.

DISCUSSION

In this study, most of English teachers have positive perceptions of PBLL: they can accept PBLL and they are willing to conduct it (*the first research question*); even though they think that the overall difficulty of "project" section in "*NSEFCS*" is difficult, they are sure that their students can complete the project under their guidance, which indicates that it is feasible to conduct PBLL in secondary schools in Ningbo to some extent (*the second research*

question); more than 45% of English teachers are familiar with PBLL and they obtain the relevant information through English textbook (*NSEFCS*) and the internet (*the third research question*). On the other hand, some English teachers have negative perceptions of PBLL: they do not accept PBLL and they think that their students cannot complete the project because students do not have enough language competence, content knowledge and learning resources. In the following, the researcher provides the interpretation from a social environment perspective and the overall educational culture in mainland China.

THE POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH TEACHERS

The positive perceptions of English teachers of PBLL may be related with the social environment factor. Ningbo is a coastal city and the international exchange of economy and culture is increasing rapidly so that English becomes become increasingly important and English teachers are encouraged to conduct classroom teaching reform to develop students' overall language abilities. English teachers are given more chances to attend to English teaching training at home and abroad to study new English teaching concepts (English teachers are required to participate in 360-hour English teaching training every 5 years). What's more important, the economic development of Ningbo is very rapid (Ningbo is the twentieth in the top 100 cities of 2017 in mainland China) and it maintains the higher educational investment on basic English education.

Therefore, the quality of basic English education is relatively better compared to other cities or rural parts of the country. English teachers have better teaching abilities and more advanced teaching concepts and students have better language competence. Based on the above reasons, more English teachers can accept PBLL and they are sure that their students can complete the project in secondary schools in Ningbo. But the acceptance of English teachers to PBLL and the number of English teachers who deem that their students can complete the project may decrease in some districts where the economic development lags behind and the quality of basic English education is relatively low, which can be validated in the study of Gong (2012). Gong (2012) found that nearly 70% of English teachers did not accept PBLL and near 60% of English teachers thought that it was hard for their students to complete the project in three secondary schools in Xiangtan China.

THE NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH TEACHERS

The negative perceptions of English teachers of PBLL may be related with the educational culture and the social environment factor. *The educational culture*: the educational culture of basic English education in mainland China is still examination-oriented and English classroom teaching is conducted around English tests, but PBLL does not match with the current examination system, so many English teachers are unwilling to carry out PBLL (Meng & Wang 2011); English teachers must complete the regular lesson schedule within the allocated time to help students prepare for English tests so that they do not have enough teaching time to conduct PBLL.

The social environment factor: English classroom teaching is conducted in big class and there are more than forty students in a class in most of secondary schools in Ningbo, so it is a big challenge for English teachers to guide so many students to conduct PBLL meanwhile (Simpson 2011); *"project"* section is an optional section in *"NSEFCS"* and fewer learning resources are offered to students except some simple instructions; there are still some students with poor language competence and they cannot complete the project in secondary schools in Ningbo. Moreover, Chinese students learn English in EFL learning context where the availability of English use outside of their classroom and English learning materials are limited (Li & Suleiman, 2017), this may further post barriers to English teachers.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates English teachers' perceptions of PBLL in secondary schools in Ningbo and three main findings are obtained. Firstly, PBLL can be promoted further in secondary schools in Ningbo due to the positive perceptions of most of language teachers of PBLL, but it is proper for English teachers to take PBLL as the supplement of the traditional English classroom instruction due to the influence of the educational culture and the social environment factor. The principles of conducting PBLL are opposite to the educational culture of basic English education in mainland China which is teacher, classroom, textbook and examination-oriented. English teachers and students face obstacles in some physical conditions while conducting PBLL, such as teaching time, learning resources and big class sizes; Chinese students are learning English in EFL learning context, which may affect English teachers to conduct PBLL to some extent.

Secondly, the educational culture may affect the perceptions of language teachers of PBLL to some extent, but it is not a determinant factor. In this study, most of language teachers are positive towards the implementation of PBLL, even though the educational culture is opposite to the principles of conducting PBLL in secondary schools in Ningbo. Thirdly, their positive perceptions of PBLL may be affected by the social environment factor, such as the economic development and the English education quality of a district. Hence the enabling social environment factors for PBLL learning need to be the focus in future studies. Moreover, the findings of this study should be validated by the future studies.

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APPENDIX A

ENGLISH TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire on "Project" section in NSEFC (English teacher)

Dear teachers, thanks for your attending to this survey. The purpose of this questionnaire is to investigate your perceptions and opinions on "Project" section in the workbook of NSEFC. Your answer is confidential and will be used in a research. Please answer frankly and circle your answers: **for example,** (1) **(male)** **2 (female)**

Noted: "Project" is a kind of open inquiry learning activity which usually requires students to go out of the classroom and cooperate with group members to carry out the research around a topic and collect the related information. Sometimes, they even need to participate in a social practice. The "project" section in every unit offers a comprehensive language practice activity around the topic of every unit and students need to use interdisciplinary knowledge and skills as well as spend some time and efforts to complete it.

PROJECT

A great person need not be famous. So your task is to look around your hometown and see if you can find anyone who has given up something (like time or money) to help others. Then write a short report about your research and read it to the class.

(A) Background information:

1. Gender:	1. Male 2. Female
2. Age:_____	
3. Working experience	1. 0-5 years 2. 6-10 years 3. 11-15 years 4. above 16 years
4. Grade:	1. One 2. Two 3. Three
5.Your students' English proficiency:	1. Good 2. Average 3. Poor
6. Have you ever attended to the training of "Project" section?	1. Yes 2. No

(B) Questions on your perceptions and your opinions on "project" section in **NSEFC:** You can only circle ONE answer.

1.   Is it necessary to design "project" section in NSEFC?

   1. Yes   2. No   3. It all depends

2.   Is it appropriate to conduct the instruction of "project" section in the English classroom teaching of secondary schools?

   1. Yes   2. No   3. It all depends

3.   What do you think of the overall difficulty of "project" section?

   1. Very difficult   2. Difficult   3. Moderate   4. Easy

4.   Under your guidance, can your students complete the "project"?

   1. Yes   2. No   3. Not sure

5.   Are you willing to guide students to complete the "project"?

   1. Yes   2. No   3. It all depends

6.   How much do you know about "project" section?

   1. I have a lot of understanding.   2. I have some understanding.   3. I have little understanding.

APPENDIX B

THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW OF ENGLISH TEACHERS

1.   Is it necessary to design "project" section in NSEFC? Why?
2.   Is it appropriate to conduct the instruction of "project" section in the English classroom instruction of secondary schools? Why?
3.   What do you think of the overall difficulty of "project" section? Why?
4.   Can your students complete the "project" under your guidance? Why?
5.   Are you willing to guide students to complete the "project"? Why?
6.   How much do you know about "project" section? Have you ever attended to the training of "project" section? If you know something of it, how do you get the relevant information?