Project-Based Learning in Chinese College English Listening and Speaking Course: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract

One of the most critical problems in EFL teaching is students' lack of authentic English environment. This paper explored the necessity and implementation of project-based learning (PBL) in Chinese college English listening and speaking class. The course included a ten-week semi-structured project consisting of five stages. In this course, the students had opportunities to practice English skills while applying English to do research and complete authentic tasks. Results showed that their motivation and autonomy of learning English were enhanced, and their ability of using their knowledge to acquire, analyze, and synthesize information was improved dramatically. Therefore, PBL is a viable and flexible alternative to traditional English teaching and learning. However, problems may occur such as group management, student participation, assessment and criteria, and time distribution, which needs further research.

Key words: Project-Based learning; English listening and speaking abilities; EFL learners, student-centered

INTRODUCTION

PBL (Project-Based Learning) is simply defined as "an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop" (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998). PBL is different from traditional instruction because it emphasizes learning through student-centered, interdisciplinary, and integrated activities in real world situations. Instead of using a rigid lesson plan that directs a learner down a specific path of learning outcomes or objectives, PBL allows in-depth investigation of a topic worth learning more about (Harris & Katz, 2001).

PBL is widely adopted by some developed countries of a new experiential learning. Constructivism believes that learning is an active process. It emphasizes the shift from the instruction of teacher-centeredness to that of student-centeredness. The purpose of PBL is to foster students' abilities for life-long learning through contextualizing learning by presenting them with problems to solve. In doing so, students' motivation and enthusiasm, their problem-solving abilities, research skills, sense of collaborations, resource management skills, longing for communication and information sharing, and language use awareness are progressively evident, and more important, such process of engaging in various levels of projects may turn their life experiences to advantage.

1. THE NECESSITY OF PBL IN COLLEGE ENGLISH LISTENING AND SPEAKING CLASS

College English listening and speaking class is a course focused on student-centeredness and practical teaching ideas. But in China, the passing rate of CET-4/6 is deemed as an important criterion that evaluates the teaching

and learning quality of a college or university from an administrator's perspective. Meanwhile it is also seen as a key factor in evaluating the teaching quality and accountability of a teacher. Therefore, traditional college English listening and speaking classes are often dominated by teachers. Students often follow the teacher's instruction to prepare for listening comprehension rather than listen to real English. When it comes to speaking, neither teacher nor students pay enough attention to it because it is not included in CET-4/6.

The latest College English Curriculum Requirements describe college English teaching goals as the cultivation of students' integrated use of English, particularly their proficiency in listening and speaking, the promotion of their competency to exchange information both orally and on paper, the strengthening of their self-directed learning abilities, the upgrading of their cultural awareness and attainments, and their adaptation to the needs of China's national economy development and international exchange. Even though curricular and lesson plans have been designed to implement these key approaches in language instruction, one of the most critical problems encountered by teachers especially at the university level is students' lack of adequate language background to complete tasks required in studying English (Chayanuvat, 2007). Therefore, it seems inevitable for many university teachers that they have to review basic knowledge such as grammar usage over and over again before they can proceed to English for daily routines and academic purposes.

In reality, however, studying English does not necessarily focus on syntactic accuracy or competency in grammar usage. Instead, giving opportunities to students to use as much English as they can in real life contexts should be critically considered, especially for EFL learners who have limited chances not only to be exposed to native English speakers, but also the opportunity to use English in their real life settings. To deal with this challenge, language teachers in China need to employ an appropriate English teaching and learning method that should encourage students to use language with an emphasis on communicative purposes in real world settings, rather than solely focus on accuracy as in traditional teaching. In other words, the students should be encouraged to convey messages more than be concerned about grammatical rules when they use English for communicative purposes.

PBL seems to match this English teaching and learning need. Research has indicated that PBL has the advantages of offering opportunities for students to learn language skills and content knowledge simultaneously (Beckett & Slater, 2005), enhancing learning motivation (Gu, 2002; Trabelsi, 2013), increasing self-efficacy (Mills, 2009), as well as fostering learner autonomy (Fang & Warschauer, 2004). Consistent with the Requirements, the importance of assessing and evaluating learners' language use，in particular their competence for oral communication and their written proficiency is emphasized no matter what

formats of evaluations are conducted. This to a large extent lays a foundation for adopting PBL as an effective instructional approach to enhance Chinese college students' English performance．

2. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PBL IN COLLEGE ENGLISH LISTENING AND SPEAKING CLASS

2.1 The Theoretical Basis of PBL
Worldwide, the implementation of PBL in language education started in the 1980s. The project work in language teaching focuses on: a) learners' participation in new knowledge gaining and exploration through communicative work with outside curricula, b) learners' outcome production and c) written or oral reports and presentations (Wrigley, 1998). So far, PBL in language learning is mainly implemented in the curricula for above-beginner level learners in the field of EFL teaching.

In China, some teachers also tried the project-based approach to the teaching of non-English majors. Gu and Fang (2003) reported their study during which Foreign Trade students investigated the resources and foreign trade services in Suzhou and came up with solutions in the form of written reports. They analyzed the effectiveness of the project in involving students in active, authentic, and reflective learning. Zhao (2004) ran a project-based course for doctoral candidates at Harbin Institute of Technology and concluded that the project had provided a context for students to learn how to use different language skills to meet various needs. Most importantly, the students learned how to collaborate and cooperate with others. Shang (2007) reported a content-based project with 63 business administration majors with a view to help them improve their business performance as well as English language. He claimed a major feature of the project work was the extensive use of materials directly from the culture being studied and language being used. He also reported the superior performance of these students in the Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM4), 2003.

These studies have showed that with adaptation and creativity, project work can be successful and rewarding in foreign language classrooms.

2.2 The Basic Phases of PBL
The basic phases found in most projects include selecting a topic, making plans, researching, developing products, and sharing results with others (Wrigley, 1998). Information gap activities, learner-to-learner interviews, role plays, simulations, field trips, contact assignments outside of class and process writing with peers prepare learners for project work.

Korkmaz & Kaptan (2000) evaluated the project-based learning in context of six steps. The processes and roles in these steps have been shown below:

Table 1
Six Steps in Project-Based Learning

Application Process	Things that will be done	Teachers' role	Students' role
1. Stating the subject and sub-subjects, organizing the groups	Students explore the resources and in order to create a frame for the project they state questions	He/she presents the general subject of the research and they guidance the explorations of the subjects and sub-subjects in groups.	They create interesting questions and categorise the problems. Also, they help creating project groups.
2. Groups create projects	Group members make a project plan. They ask questions as "Where are we going?", "What will we learn?", vs. They choose their roles in the project.	He/she helps to formulate the students' projects and makes meetings with group members. They also help pupils to find the necessary materials and equipment.	They plan what they work on, select the roles and define the contents of these roles.
3. Application of the project	Group members are organised and analyse the data and information.	He/she helps the students develop necessary working qualifications and also control controls the groups.	They explore questions for answers. Also, they organise the information and synthesise the findings and summarise them.
4. Planning of the presentation	The members define the essential points in their presentation and then decide on how to present the project.	He/she makes the students debate on the lesson plans and also they make them organise the presentations.	They make decisions on the key points and concepts of the project and make a project preparation plan. Also, they develop materials for the project.
5. Making the presentation	Presentations can be made in any (in different schools, classes, vs.) places.	He/she coordinates the students' presentations.	Students present their project and give feedback to their classmates.
6. Evaluation	Students share the feedback of everyone on their project. Both the students and the teacher share the project(s) with everyone.	He/she evaluate the project summaries and the students.	With the group members the students reflect what they learnt in the project process. They also join in the evaluation process of their own project.

PBL functions as a bridge between using English in class and using English in real life situations outside of class. According to Stein (1995), it does this by placing learners in situations that require authentic use of language in order to communicate (e.g., being part of a team or interviewing others). When learners work in pairs or in teams, they find they need skills to plan, organize, negotiate, make their points, and arrive at a consensus about issues such as what tasks to perform, who will be responsible for each task, and how information will be researched and presented. These skills have been identified by learners as important for living successful lives. Because of the collaborative nature of project work, development of these skills occurs even among learners at low levels of language proficiency. Within the group work integral to projects, individuals' strengths and preferred ways of learning (e.g., by reading, writing, listening, or speaking) strengthen the work of the team as a whole.

2.3 The Application Process of PBL

The review of literature led us to propose four principles for designing our project-based courses: a) the project should be related to the students' major and interest; b) it should be authentic so that the students will have opportunities to come into contact with society; c) it should combine English and practical skills which can be transferred to the students' work in the future; d) it should

improve the students' listening and speaking abilities.

The primary goal of this project was to provide a forum in which non-English majors could use their English and build their oral skills (including vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation). The secondary goals were to develop abilities for independent thinking, problem-solving and decision-making, the use of practical research skills, and the understanding of planning activities in general.

The course was planned as a ten-week semi-structured project consisting of five stages. Stage One (one week) was planning: Teaching plan of listening and speaking course was developed and eight projects were designed according to the eight units in the course book. Definition, objectives and evaluation methods of PBL were introduced to students. Students' grouping (6 in a group) were guided by the teacher and a leader was elected for each group. In Stage Two (two weeks), groups started the project by choosing a project according to their interests, and developing a project proposal. In the proposal, objectives, research questions, schedule, expected results and responsibility should be specified. Students reported their proposal in front of the class and revised it under the teacher's suggestions. Stage Three (four weeks) was devoted to conducting the surveys: the teacher introduced data collection methods, research methods, investigatory tools, PPT making, presentation

skills, written report writing method, and so on. Students collected data on and off campus and analyzed data with the teacher's help. Each group completed the first draft of report PPT. The teacher watched each group's rehearsal of presentation and made recommendations on pronunciation, intonation, expressions, gestures, etc..

In Stage Four (two weeks), each group made PPT presentations to the whole class. The teacher and other groups gave remarks according to the criteria provided. In the last stage (one week), they generated recommendations and finished a questionnaire to evaluate the course. The best project was chosen according to the score and this group got awards.

The course consisted of in-class participation and after-class assignments. The class format involved instruction (including vocabulary learning, planning and research skills), followed by group-work summaries to the class, and whole-class discussions. The students were instructed on how to design investigatory tools, but the teacher only served as a guide and assistant when the students were designing these tools. After the initial class, students appeared to quickly understand the role they were expected to play. After-class, the students were provided with new words, listening practice and some readings at the beginning of the project. The students were assigned to design the observation sheet and survey sheet. Throughout the project period, they were asked to provide English summaries of findings from the group observation and surveys.

All lessons were taught in English. Besides, many students approached teachers after class and by e-mail. For example, the teachers met with students for several hours on weekends to improve and finalize the design for the survey. Such teacher involvement not only increased the students' opportunities to listen to and speak English, but also helped develop an intimate student-teacher relationship.

3. REFLECTIONS AND EVALUATIONS

In the current study, PBL was implemented in the English listening and speaking course to encourage the students to link their language skills to their content knowledge. The most interesting finding regarding the implementation of the project-based activity was that the students found a balanced use of their language skills, knowledge about society and their majors in their project. However, this study has been unable to demonstrate a good implementation plan. These findings showed that the students needed better preparation for English presentations. A possible explanation for this might be that even though the students practiced English skills in class, they were not familiar with doing an English presentation in front of the class. Thus an adjustment of the implementation plan and an addition of instructional activities regarding English presentation practice are

needed for future implementation.

With respect to enhancement of students' language skills, the findings of the study are consistent with those of Srikrai (2008) and Simpson (2011) who found that students' language skills were enhanced through project-based activities. In the present study, the students perceived that their reading, writing, and speaking skills, as well as vocabulary knowledge and translation skill, were improved because they used these skills to acquire, analyze, and synthesize information as they worked on their project.

The results of the questionnaire showed that students in general had a positive attitude toward the project-based instruction. Students viewed that project-based instruction had the advantages of offering more opportunities for active learning, enhancing their English reading skills, and increasing their ability to use online resources. Almost one-quarter of the students expressed that the course was interesting. Others considered that the course had the advantage of learning things not included in the textbook, offering diverse ways of learning, and promoting learning motivation. In spite of these advantages, the participants also reported several challenges associated with the course such as requiring too much of their time and effort as well as having difficulty in making academic presentation.

At the end of the school term, most students showed an improvement in all four language skills. Their listening and speaking skills, in particular, had the greatest improvement. This was particularly important, since it is common for students to have good knowledge of the linguistic system of the target language, but little listening comprehension and speaking skills, because they are not provided with opportunities to participate in real and authentic communication activities.

Their social skills and collaborative skills improved dramatically, which is consistent with findings in other studies. After the project work students knew that being a team member entailed certain obligations, most of them developed skills for solving in-group conflicts, and learned to be responsible in relation to the roles assigned to them. Most importantly, all students, regardless of language performance, or motivational intensity seemed to have developed their cooperative skills. Also, their computer skills improved, mainly, the ability to use the Internet to search for information.

4. DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED

Perhaps for students and teachers from an educational setting such as China, the project-based approach simply clashes with the more traditional norms and instructional formats. Both teachers and learners are overwhelmed by the kind of changes that project-based instruction entails. However, if such approach can indeed help students to be responsible and autonomous learners, it is worthwhile investigating ways that can help them adjust to it. As

for the students, it is suggested that these learners need constant guidance, encouragement and support from teachers to help them overcome difficulties and take more responsibility for their own learning. For an improved future project-based course, one way to deal with students' problem of time management is to help them set achievable learning goals in a set time frame (e.g., two weeks) and to provide them with necessary assistance when they fail to achieve those goals.

The most serious problem related to the fact that students were not familiar with group work. At the beginning, although clear roles for group members were assigned, some students dominated the work, while others did little work. Also, some students did not use the target language for communication, but their mother tongue. The teachers remedied these problems by providing cognitive modeling, completing a task while thinking aloud, modeling and illustrating effective strategies and procedures for task completion.

Finally, some students had difficulty accepting the new role of the teacher as a facilitator and coordinator, and not as a source of knowledge and provider of solutions. At the beginning of project work some students felt uncomfortable with being given choices (e.g. topic selection, team formation), and were thus worried about project work. However, most of them soon realized that the teacher was there to support and assist them, albeit in a different way.

CONCLUSION

PBL is a new method of teaching, it is suitable for modern college English teaching model and cultivation of students' autonomous learning consciousness and effectively improving students' listening comprehension and speaking ability.

The study provides two important pedagogical implications. First, it is reasonable to include such a disciplinary-based project in an English class especially in EFL contexts where opportunities to use English are limited. Second, since PBL can encourage learners to use language skills learned from the English class and support learners' confidence in using English, using the project as part of the grading system seems reasonable. However, this study is an exploratory investigation about enhancement of learners' language skills through PBL. Generalizability of the study is thus limited. Future studies may focus on using a variety of project-based activities in the classroom and using other measures to examine learners' language skills enhancement. Many other projects can also be designed in similar ways for students at different levels in different contexts. These projects will give students more opportunities to learn and practice language skills and other skills.

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