

The Application of Project-based Language Learning on Integrated Practice

English Course in a Chinese Secondary School

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Abstract:

Project-based language learning (PBL) is a language teaching method which organizes instructional activities by doing projects and it is suggested to be an effective way to facilitate students' language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development. More and more language teachers begin to focus on PBL and conduct a lot of studies to explore the application of PBL in different settings of ESL/EFL field. However, there is still very limited application of PBL in basic English education in mainland China and it is difficult to promote PBL in the context of basic English education in mainland China due to the focus on more traditional language teaching methods which are examination-oriented. This paper takes integrated practice English course as the carrier and explores the application of PBL in basic English education in mainland China.

Key words: project, project-based learning, project-based language learning, integrated practice English course, English teaching

I. Introduction

Project-based language learning (PBL) is a language teaching method which organizes instructional activities by doing projects and it is suggested to be an effective way to facilitate students' language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development^[1]. PBL stems from project-based learning (PBL) and it is the application of PBL in second/ foreign language education. Since the mid-1970, PBL has been introduced into English as a second/ foreign language (ESL/EFL) field as a way to reflect the principles of learner-centered teaching and learning by tasks and it has become a part of the English curriculum teaching in the multiple teaching environments^[2]. Then PBL derives from PBL gradually and becomes an important language teaching method in ESL/EFL field. So far, the application of PBL in ESL learning contexts has been studied widely, but the relevant studies on PBL in EFL learning contexts are relatively fewer. However, there are some significant differences between ESL learning context and EFL learning contexts and it is crucial to explore the application of PBL further in different EFL learning contexts^[3].

As EFL learning context, basic English education in mainland China has some typical features. Firstly, basic English education in mainland China is still examination-oriented and English classroom instruction is conducted around the content of English tests, while students are required to memorize vocabulary and grammar by rote learning and complete written English exercise to increase their scores in English tests, which is isolated from real-life language using subsequently students develop so-called "mute English" and

they cannot use English communicatively and properly in their real life^[4]. Secondly, English classroom instruction is still teacher-centered in basic English education in mainland China and English teachers are responsible for students' English learning^[5], while students just receive language passively from their English teachers, complete the assignments given by English teachers and learn English under the management and the guidance of English teacher. Thus it is difficult for students to learn English independently. Due to the above problems, there is still very limited application of PBL in basic English education in mainland China and PBL becomes a marginalized language teaching method^[6]. But it is very important to bring in PBL to basic English education in mainland China because the main purpose for students to learn English is to obtain communicative competence rather than memorize language structure and pass some key English tests in EFL learning context. PBL can offer English learners the authentic and interactive context to use English to interact with native speakers or native texts and improves their communicative competence. Hence, this paper takes integrated practice English course as the carrier and explores how to conduct PBL in the context of basic English education in mainland China.

II. Literature review

As ESL/EFL field moved away from traditional teacher-centered teaching methods to student-centered methods, PBL was introduced into ESL/EFL field as a way to reflect the principles of learner-centered teaching in 1970s. PBL is student-centered and it can provide students with the chance to make decisions for their learning and manage their learning^[7]. On the other hand, there is gap between classroom language study and real-life language use so that students cannot use language they learn in the classroom properly in their real life (Fried-booth, 1997). PBL can fill in this gap and help students change from the meaningless drilling, the rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules and individual work to more real-life-connected language learning. Although the research on PBL started with anecdotal evidence from various ESL/EFL learning contexts, many linguists attempt to construct the theoretical system of PBL and explore the application of PBL in different ESL/EFL learning contexts, such as Zhang (2010) summarizes the features of PBL^[8], Simpson (2011) validates the effects of PBL in Thailand EFL learning context^[9] and Zarra (2013) conducts PBL in Spain ESL learning context^[10].

This paper argues how to conduct PBL in the context of basic English education in mainland China which is teacher-centered and examination-oriented to make a shift on English teaching paradigm from traditional teacher-centered instruction to communicative and student-centered instruction and bridge the gap between classroom language learning and real-life language using. PBL offers one possible way to achieve the above goals, so it begins to attract the attention from some English teaching experts and some English teachers in basic English education in mainland China gradually and they conduct some empirical studies to validate the effects of PBL, such as Wang (2012) conducts a case study to examine the effectiveness of PBL on students' writing skills in a senior high school in Beijing China^[11] and Lv (2015) implements a teaching experiment to testify the effects of PBL on students' language learning in mainland China^[12]. However, fewer studies are conducted to explore the application of PBL in the context basic English education in mainland China systematically and localize PBL, which is unbeneficial to promote it further.

III. The context in conducting PBL

The researcher selects a secondary school in Ningbo to explore how to apply PBL in basic English education in mainland China successfully. In this secondary school, most of students' English competence is average and the focus of English classroom teaching is to impart language knowledge and practice students' language skills based on the requirements of English examinations, so the students have fewer chances to participate in PBL in this secondary school. Under the support of principal of this secondary school, the

researcher sets up an English selected course for students in Grade One---integrated practice English course to conduct PBL in 12 weeks and there are two lessons with 80 minutes every week. Integrated practice English course is a comprehensive and practical English course in which students take English as the tool to convey information and communicate with other people and use inter-disciplinary knowledge and skills to complete the authentic tasks and solve the real-life problems under the guidance of English teacher. There are 45 students to select this course, including 21 boys and 24 girls. The ages of 45 participants are between 16 and 17 years old and they have been studying English for more than six years and they have mastered basic language knowledge and language skills. All the participants are not familiar with PBL and they have never participated in PBL.

IV. The steps in conducting PBL

Stoller (1997) proposes a ten-step model to guide language teachers to implement PBL in English classroom teaching^[13], which is suggested to be a straightforward to design projects in the different levels of ESL/EFL classroom teaching^[14]. From then on, the ten-step model of PBL becomes a paradigm to conduct PBL gradually and it has been adopted by many language teachers in the different ESL/EFL learning contexts, such as Zarra (2013) in Spain ESL learning context^[15] and Kim (2015) in Korean EFL learning context^[16]. The ten-step model of PBL mainly includes three stages: planning stage, implementation stage and culmination stage. In the planning stage, students negotiate with teacher to choose a project topic and agree on the final project product, students and teacher shape the project together and teacher offers students language support on the collection of information in the classroom. In the implementation stage, students need to go out of classroom to collect information, teacher offers students language support on the analysis and compilation of information, students analyze and compile information and teacher offers students language support on the culminating activities. In the culmination stage, students present their final products and assess their projects in the classroom.

The ten-step model of PBL developed by stoller (1997) defines the roles of language teachers and students in PBL clearly and designs the specific language intervention steps to offer students language support in the different stages of PBL. However, there are some tiny drawbacks in this new teaching mode of PBL: firstly, it doesn't include the leading-in activities, which can help students to be accustomed to PBL; secondly, it doesn't design the specific language intervention step on making the final products in which students need the language support to guarantee the language accuracy of their project products; thirdly, it ignores the roles of language teachers in the culmination stage to some extent because language teachers not only need to assess the students' performance in PBL and organize students to reflect the learning process and the learning product, but also need to conduct the explicit language teaching to help students consolidate and internalize the language knowledge which they learn in PBL; lastly, it neglects the other demands of students in the different stages of PBL besides language, such as skills, strategies.

The researcher modifies the ten-step model of PBL developed by stoller (1997) and proposes a new model to implement PBL (Figure 1) to make for the deficiencies of the ten-step model of PBL and agree with the learning context of basic English education in mainland China. English classroom instruction is still teacher-centered in basic English education in mainland China^[17]. Students learn English under the management and the guidance of English teachers and they have fewer chances to manage their English learning and make the decisions for their English learning. PBL is different from this traditional language teaching method and it requires students to conduct autonomous learning and cooperative learning rather than receive knowledge passively from English teachers, which may make some students inadaptive to

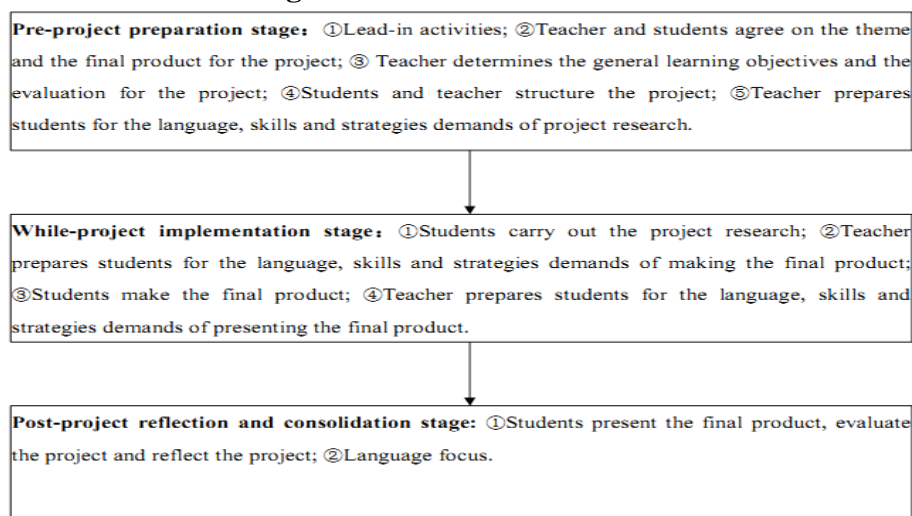
PBLL in the context of basic English education in mainland China. Therefore, PBLL needs to be bi-subject under the background of basic English education in mainland China, that is, both language teacher and the student are the subjects of PBLL. The new model of PBLL is bi-subject, which not only highlights the central status of students and presents students with the proper autonomy, but also strengthens the directing role of language teachers further.

Compared with the ten-step model of PBLL developed by Stoller (1997), in the pre-project preparation stage, the researcher adds two teaching procedures (lead-in activities; teacher determines the general learning objectives and the evaluation for the project), integrates two teaching steps with a teaching step (agree on the theme and the final product for the project) and changes the prior teaching step (teacher prepares students for the language demands of information gathering) into (teacher prepares students for the language, skills and strategies demands of project research).

“Lead-in activities” should be designed to build a bridge stretching from traditional directive teaching environment to an unknown PBLL environment and get students to be accustomed to PBLL, such as language teachers can make a brief introduction of PBLL and require students to use language to complete some small tasks in the real life before conducting PBLL. “Teacher determines the general learning objectives and the evaluation for the project” is to strengthen the directing role of language teachers because students have fewer experience in determining the learning objectives and the evaluation for their learning. The reason for integrating the selection of project theme with the selection of project final product is they are interrelated and they can be determined together. In addition, the author integrates information gathering, information compiling and information analyzing with one teaching step—project research because these three steps are often overlapped and it is difficult to separate them with each other completely.

At while-project implementation stage, the author also adds a teaching step (prepare students for the language, skills and strategies demands of making the final product) to guarantee the language accuracy of their final products. At post-project reflection and consolidation stage, the author designs a special teaching step (language focus) to help students consolidate language knowledge learning which occurs in PBLL.

Figure 1—The new model of PBLL



Based on this new model of PBLL, the researcher guides 45 participants to conduct PBLL in a secondary school in Ningbo. Haines (1989) divides project into four categories—information and research projects,

survey projects, production projects and performance/ organizational projects^[18]. Considering the teaching requirements and students' actual situation, the researcher selects two kinds of projects and designs two corresponding projects for students in the experimental group. The first project is a survey project which requires students to interview 15-20 students to collect the relevant data around a topic and present the results of data through PPT document and oral presentation, while the second project is a information and research project which asks students to select a destination and design a one-day travel plan and present the project products through PPT document and give an oral presentation. The first project is comparatively easy and students can spend less time completing this project smoothly to get accustomed to PBLL gradually, while the second project is a difficult and complicated project and it refers to extensive language knowledge and content knowledge as well as deep-level integrated skills which are above the current capacity of students so that they need to spend more time and more energy completing this project. In order to help them complete the second project successfully, the researcher will offer students more guidance and assistance on language, skills and strategies. Because students need to use the computer and the internet to complete their projects and many students have a little access to the internet and the computer, the researcher chooses to conduct PBLL in the computer laboratory of school. Students have two hours to use the internet and the computer in the computer laboratory to complete their projects.

In the first week, the researcher gave 45 participants in the experimental group a brief lecture on PBLL. Then the researcher explained the reasons why to implement PBLL further in this course and led in the first project—survey project. The researcher and students chose the students' daily life as the general topic of project and selected PPT documents as the final projects. Next, the researcher told the participants the concrete requirements, described the implementation procedure, stated the general learning objectives and the assessment standards of the project and presented students with the sample of the final product. Before the class, the researcher had asked the students to organize the project group and select a student as the leader of every project group. Every project group had 4-6 members and there were eight project groups. Every project group conducted the group discussion to choose the sub-topic under the range of the general project topic, while the researcher participated in their group discussion and agreed on the sub-topic with them. After determining the sub-topic, every project group began to design five interview questions and the corresponding options, while the researcher checked and revised the interview questions and the corresponding options. Then, every project group made the project plan and completed worksheet A. The researcher taught students some relevant words, phrases and the sentence patterns which might be used in the interview and took one sample of final project product as the example to tell students how to analyze and process the data. Students mainly used their spare time to collect, analyze and process the data.

In the second week, the students had collected, analyzed and processed the data in their spare time. The researcher took one sample of final project product as the example to teach students how to write the text message of PPT documents with the processed data. On the other hand, the researcher taught students some relevant words, phrases and sentence patterns. Then every project group began to write the text message of PPT documents and every group member needed to complete a part of writing task. After 25 minutes, all the project groups accomplished the first draft of text messages of PPT documents and the researcher illustrated how to revise the text message of PPT documents from the view of language and content. Next, every project group revised the text messages of their PPT documents and handed in the text messages of their PPT documents after class. The researcher offered students the feedbacks and comments and students modified the text message of their PPT documents according to the researcher's comments. Till they got the confirmation on text message of their PPT documents from the researcher, every project group set out to

make their PPT documents in their spare time. The researcher provided students with the feedbacks on their PPT documents and they modified their PPT documents.

In the third week, every project group had finished their PPT documents and the researcher needed to prepare students for the language, skills and strategies demands of presenting the final product, such as explained how to select the content of oral presentation from their PPT documents and imparted some skills of oral presentation to students. Then every project group began to select the content of oral presentation and write the first draft of oral presentation. Next the researcher demonstrated how to revise the transcripts in the oral presentation, while all the project groups began to revise their transcripts of oral presentation carefully. When the class was over, every project group handed in their transcripts of oral presentations and the researcher presented them with the feedbacks after class. Based on these feedbacks, they revised and polished their oral presentation again after class. After completing the revision of transcripts of oral presentations, every project group started to practice their oral presentation. Every noon, the researcher required two project groups to come to the teacher office and helped them to practice their oral presentations. Finally, the researcher selected two students from every project group to show the oral presentation of their project group in 3-4 minutes. Moreover, the researcher reviewed the PPT document of every project group and referred to the rubric to give the corresponding scores and the comments in this week.

In the fourth week, every project group showed their oral presentations in turn, while the researcher observed the performance of every project group in the oral presentations and gave the scores and the comments based on the rubric. When students finished their oral presentations, the researcher reported the scores of their PPT documents and oral presentations to students and made a summary for this project. Then the students were presented with the rubric to assess individual performance and group members' performance in this project.

In the fifth week, the researcher selected some key language knowledge from students' PPT documents and oral presentations to conduct the explicit language instruction and designed some written exercises for students to help them consolidate and internalize language knowledge learning in PBL. Then the researcher led in the second project. Firstly, the researcher and students chose a one-day travelling plan as the general topic of project and selected PPT documents as the final projects. Secondly, the researcher explained the concrete requirements of the second project to students and described the implementation procedure of this project briefly. Thirdly, the researcher stated the general learning objectives and the assessment standards to students and presented students with the sample of the final product. Fourthly, the researcher analyzed the basic components and the content of the final product and began to help every project group shape their projects. Every project group conducted the group discussion to choose a city to make a one-day travelling plan, make their project plan and complete worksheet B. Later, the researcher taught students some relevant words, phrases and the sentence patterns which might be used in the project research, recommended some relevant websites, told them how to deal with language difficulties through the internet and explained how to collect, analyze and process the data.

In the sixth week, the students continued to collect, analyze and process the data, while the researcher offered students guidance on language, data collection, data analysis and data processing. In the seventh and eighth weeks, every project group set out to make the first draft of their PPT documents in the class and every member was responsible for a part of writing task. When they had some difficulties on language,

content and the manufacturing techniques of PPT documents, they could consult to the peers, the researcher and the internet. In the eighth week, every project group completed the first draft of their PPT documents.

In the ninth week, it came to the stage of revising the PPT documents. Firstly, the researcher took the PPT document of a project group as an example and demonstrated how to revise it from the view of language, content and the manufacturing techniques of PPT documents. Then every project group carried out the mutual revision on their PPT documents among the group members and every group member revised their individual work based on the feedbacks from their peers. When the class was over, they submitted their PPT documents. After the class, the researcher helped students revise their PPT documents, while students revised and polished their PPT documents again according to the feedbacks of the researcher.

In the tenth week, every project group reviewed and modified their PPT documents again and the researcher presented them with feedbacks. After 30 minutes, every project group finished the final modification of their PPT documents and they started to prepare for their oral presentations. The researcher offered students some guidance on the language, skills and strategies about presenting the final product, such as told them how to choose the content of oral presentation from their PPT documents and how to write the transcripts of their oral presentations and imparted some skills of oral presentation. Then every project group set out to choose the content of oral presentations from their PPT documents and write the transcripts of the oral presentations. Two days later, all the project groups submitted their transcripts of the oral presentations, while the researcher revised their transcripts and offered them the feedbacks. According to the researcher's feedback, they revised their transcripts of the oral presentation. After completing the revision of transcripts of their oral presentations, they practiced their oral presentations. Every noon, the researcher required two project groups to come to the teacher office and guided them to practice their oral presentations. The rest members of every project group were required to show the oral presentations in 8 minutes. Moreover, the researcher reviewed the PPT documents of every project group and referred to the rubric to give the corresponding scores and the comments in this week.

In the eleventh week, the first four project groups showed their oral presentations in turn and the researcher observed their overall performance in the oral presentations to give the corresponding scores and the comments based on the rubric. When students finished their oral presentations, the researcher reported the scores of their PPT documents and oral presentations to students and conducted the instruction of language knowledge which were selected from the PPT documents and oral presentations of these four project groups.

In the twelfth week, the rest four project groups showed their oral presentations in turn and the researcher gave the corresponding scores and the comments based on the rubric. When students finished their oral presentations, the researcher reported the scores of their PPT documents and oral presentations to students. Then the students were presented with the rubric to assess individual performance and group members' performance in this project. Next, the researcher continued to conduct the instruction of language knowledge which were selected from the PPT documents and oral presentations of these four project groups and made a summary for this project.

V. The pedagogical implications

Firstly, PBL needs to be bi-subject in the context of basic English education in mainland China. Students have been accustomed to traditional English classroom teaching mode which is teacher-centered in basic English education in mainland China, so it is difficult for them to manage their learning and complete the

project independently without the guidance of English teachers in PBL. Thus English teachers and students are the subjects of PBL. On the one hand, English teachers need to play a directing role in PBL, make the overall learning objectives of PBL, design the framework of PBL, lead students to complete the project step by step and keep the proper control to students' learning. Meanwhile, English teachers need to offer students necessary guidance on languages, content and integrated skills at the different stages of PBL, especially for the students with the poor language ability. On the other hand, students are supposed to be given the proper autonomy to make the decisions for their projects, manage their projects and assess their projects. When students adapt to PBL gradually and they are familiar with PBL, they can be granted more autonomy.

Secondly, there are two main ways to implement PBL in the context of basic English education in mainland China. The first main way is to integrate PBL with daily English classroom teaching and make PBL become a part of daily English classroom teaching. The second main way is to separate PBL from daily English classroom teaching and implement PBL in the elective. Compared with the first way, the second one is more proper to implement PBL and more beneficial for the regular implementation of PBL in secondary schools in Ningbo China because the elective can get the educational system guarantee from the administrative departments of education and the material guarantee from secondary schools which the implementation of PBL is in need.

Thirdly, English teachers should make the limited learning objectives and focus on the achievement of key learning objectives in PBL. PBL is suggested to promote students' language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development meanwhile which include many components. But it very difficult for English teachers to regard all the components of PBL as the learning objectives and focus on the achievement of all learning objectives, which may distract the attentions of English teachers, make English teachers ignore some important learning objectives and bring students the heavy learning burden at the same time. Thus when English teachers make the learning objectives of PBL, they should define the limited learning objectives and select some key learning objectives so as to take the effective measures to achieve these learning objectives.

Fourthly, English teachers should make rules for the use of mother tongue in PBL. On the one hand, it is difficult for students to use English in the whole process of implementing PBL due to the limitation of their language competence. On the other hand, students may not be accustomed to using English in their real life to communicate with peers. Thus many students tend to use mother tongue to communicate with peers about the implementation of project, especially in EFL learning context. English teachers had better make the clear rules for the use of mother tongue in PBL, such as the manufacture of project products and the oral presentation of project products must be completed in English, students can use their mother tongue to share their ideas with peers and negotiate with their peers sometimes.

Fifthly, English teachers had better cooperate with the teachers of other subjects to implement PBL. PBL refers to the interdisciplinary knowledge which English teachers are not familiar with so that they can't offer students professional guidance on the content of project and lead students to make the deep exploration on the project topics. Therefore, the best way to solve this problem is English teachers can cooperate with teachers of other subjects to guide students to complete the projects. English teachers offer students the guidance on language, while the teachers of other subjects can provide students with the guidance on

content.

VI. Conclusion

After participating in PBL, all the participants propose PBL can promote their language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development and most of participants have the positive perceptions on PBL, while some participants have the negative perceptions on PBL because they are not accustomed to PBL, it is difficult for them to complete their projects, they lack of enough English materials and spare time to complete their projects and PBL can't help them master language knowledge which they need to pass some important English tests. According to the current situations of basic English education in mainland China, it is improper to take PBL as one of the mainstream English teaching methods and conduct PBL widely in basic English education in mainland China because English teachers and students lack of material conditions and environment to implement PBL and PBL doesn't match with the current examination system. But it is proper to take PBL as the supplement of the traditional English classroom teaching method and incorporate PBL into the daily English classroom instruction because PBL can increase the novelty of English classroom instruction, bridge the gap between classroom language learning and real-life language using and promote students' language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development.

The further research should focus on the theoretical research of PBL further and explore how to localize PBL to meet the needs of basic English education in mainland China. On the other hand, more empirical studies of PBL are in need to examine the effects of PBL on students' language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development in the context of basic English education in mainland China. In addition, the exploration on the teaching practice of PBL should be stresses further to look for more feasible and more effective ways to implement PBL in basic English education in mainland China.

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