

## THE APPLICATION OF PROJECT-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING IN BASIC ENGLISH EDUCATION IN MAINLAND CHINA

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**Abstract:** *Project-based language learning (PBL) is a language teaching method which organizes instructional activities by doing projects. Many language teachers regard PBL as a powerful and effective language teaching method and conduct a lot of studies to explore the application of PBL in the different ESL/EFL learning contexts. However, PBL needs to be adapted and localized to cater to the features of local language teachers, students and local learning context when it is brought in a particular ESL/EFL learning context. So far, fewer studies have been conducted to explore the application and the localization of PBL in basic English education in mainland China. Therefore, this paper constructs a new model of PBL based on the features of basic English education in mainland China and follows this model to conduct PBL in a secondary school in Ningbo China. The experimental results reveals that the new model of PBL can promote students' language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development, which manifests that the new model of PBL is feasible and reasonable.*

**Key words:** *Project, Project-based learning, Project-based language learning, Basic English education; English instruction.*

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## **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 (Sawsan, 2014; Kim, 2015). PBL stems from project-based learning (PBL) and it is the application of PBL in English as a second/ foreign language (ESL/EFL) field. Since the mid-1970, PBL has been brought into 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 (Hedge, 2000). Many language teachers regard PBL as a powerful and effective language teaching method to promote students' language learning and conduct a lot of studies to explore the application of PBL in the different ESL/EFL learning contexts (Tims, 2009; Ballantyne, 2013; Grant, 2017). However, PBL needs to be adapted and localized to cater to the features of local language teachers, students and local learning context when it is brought in a particular ESL/EFL learning context (Simpson, 2011; Wu, 2012). In basic English education in mainland China, PBL is still a new language teaching method and fewer studies are conducted to explore the application and the localization of PBL. Therefore, this paper refers to the ten-step model of PBL developed by Stoller (1997), constructs a new model of PBL based on the features of basic English education in mainland China and follows this model to conduct PBL in a secondary school in Ningbo to explore the application and the localization of PBL in basic English education in mainland China.

## **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 (Stoller, 2006). On the other hand, PBL can fill the gap between classroom language study and real-life language use (Fried-booth, 1997; Liu, 2006) 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. Therefore, it begins to attract the attention of some English teachers in basic English education in mainland China and they carry out some empirical studies to validate the effects of PBL on students' language learning (Song, 2008; Wang, 2012; Wen, 2015; Lv, 2015).

Song (2008) applied PBL to English newspaper teaching in a middle school in mainland China to stimulate students' motivation and interest in reading English newspapers and improve their reading skills and English proficiency. The results of this study indicated that PBL could help students improve their motivation to read English newspaper and their reading ability, enhance their autonomous learning ability and make students have cross-cultural awareness gradually. Wang (2012) completed a case study to examine the effectiveness of PBL on students' writing skills in a senior high school in mainland China. The results of this study revealed that PBL could improve students' writing ability, increase their writing motivation and change their attitudes and perceptions towards English writing.

Wen (2015) implemented a teaching experiment to explore the effects of PBL on students' language learning in a junior high school in mainland China. The findings of this study

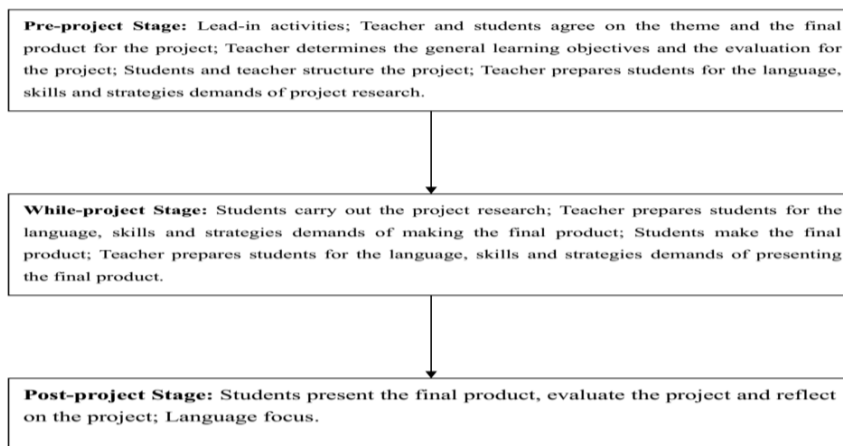
included: PBLT could improve students' language learning motivation and interests and make students have the positive language learning attitudes; PBLT could enhance language knowledge learning and improve their language skills; students had the positive perceptions on PBLT and they liked it. Lv (2015) implemented a teaching experiment to testify the effectiveness of PBLT to English classroom teaching in a secondary school in mainland China and the results of this study indicated that PBLT was a better way to make students engage in classroom activities and tasks and PBLT could enhance students' language learning interest and improve their listening skills and speaking skills.

The above studies explore the application of PBLT in basic English education in mainland China and validate the effects of PBLT on students' language learning, but they bring in the relevant theories of PBLT from foreign ESL/EFL field directly rather than localize PBLT based on the features in basic English education in mainland China. Simpson (2011) proposes that when PBLT is brought in a particular ESL/EFL learning context, it needs to be localized to cater to the features of local English teachers and students and agree with local English learning context, which can enhance the suitability and the effectiveness of PBLT. Hence this paper attempts to localize PBLT to agree with the learning context of basic English education of mainland China.

### **The New Model to Conduct PBLT**

Stoller (1997) proposes a ten-step model to guide language teachers to implement PBLT in English classroom teaching, which is suggested to be a straightforward to design projects in the different levels of ESL/EFL classroom teaching (Eyring, 2001). The ten-step model of PBLT 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 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 researcher modifies this ten-step model of PBLT and constructs a new model to conduct PBLT (Figure 1) to agree with the learning context of basic English education in mainland China. Compared with the ten-step model of PBLT developed by Stoller (1997), there are three changes in the new model of PBLT. Firstly, the new model of PBLT is bi-subject, that is, both language teacher and student are the subjects of PBLT, 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. English classroom instruction is still teacher-centered in basic English education in mainland China and students learn English through textbook under the management and the guidance of English teachers and they have fewer chances to conduct autonomus learning and cooperative learning (Yi, 2010). PBLT is different from this traditional language teaching method and it requires students to conduct active and independent language learning rather than receive knowledge from English teachers passively, which may make some students inadapative to PBLT in the context of basic English education in mainland China. In order to bridge the gap between the traditional language teaching method and PBLT and help students adapt it gradually, PBLT needs to be bi-subject under the background of basic English education in mainland China.



**Figure 1: The new model of PBL**

Secondly, “lead-in activities” are added to the new model of PBL, which can build a bridge stretching from traditional directive teaching environment to an unknown PBL environment and get students to be accustomed to PBL, such as language teachers can make a brief introduction of PBL and require students to use language to complete some small tasks in the real life before conducting PBL. Thirdly, the new model of PBL has more specific language intervention steps to help students complete language input and output because the language competence of many students is relatively weak in basic English education in mainland China and they need more assistance on language to complete their projects from their English teachers in the different stages of PBL.

### **The Application of PBL in Basic English Education in Mainland China** *The Implementation Context and Participants*

Ningbo is located in Zhejiang Province in mainland China and it is a coastal city. The development of basic English education is very rapid and the quality of basic English education is relatively high in Ningbo. English is regarded as an exam subject in the education system and most of students begin to learn English from Grade three in primary school in Ningbo. The students have relatively better language competence and they have open attitudes to English learning. What’s more important, Ningbo as a coastal city has the certain representativeness in basic English education of some similar coastal cities in mainland China. Therefore, the researcher selects a secondary school in Ningbo to implement the new model of PBL.

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.

### ***Project Description***

Following the new model of PBL, the researcher guides 45 participants to carry out PBL in 12 weeks. Haines (1989) divides project into four categories—information and research projects, survey projects, production projects and performance/ organizational projects. Considering the teaching requirements and students' actual situation, the researcher selects two kinds of projects (survey project and the information and research project) and designs two corresponding projects for the participants. The first project is a survey project which requires students to interview 15-20 students to collect the related information around a topic, while the second project is a information and research project which asks students to select a city to design a one-day travel plan and gather the relevant information through reading the relevant paper materials and surfing the internet. The two projects end with PPT document and oral presentation. The first project is comparatively easy and students spend four weeks completing this project, while the second project is difficult and complicated and students spend eight weeks finishing it.

### ***The Implementation Procedure of PBL***

In the first week, the researcher gave 45 participants a brief lecture on PBL firstly to make them have a clear understanding of it, including the definition, the features, the implementation procedures and the effects of PBL. Secondly, the researcher led in the first project—survey project and introduced the basic requirements of this project to the participants. Thirdly, the researcher and students selected the daily life of students as the general topic and PPT documents as the final project product to present the survey report. Fourthly, the researcher determined the general learning objectives from three aspects—language, content and integrated skills and the assessment way of this project (teacher assessment, peer assessment, self-assessment) and interpreted the rubrics and the sample of the final product to students. Fifthly, every project group with 4-6 members conducted the group discussion to choose the sub-topic under the range of the general project topic and designed five interview questions under the guidance of the researcher (Table 1). Sixthly, every project group made the project plan and completed the worksheet. Lastly, 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 process the data.

**Table 1: The project design of every group**

Group number	The number of group member	Topic	The interviewing questions	The number of interviewees
1	6	Fruit	1. How often do you eat fruit every week? 2. Where do you buy fruit? 3. What fruit do you choose? 4. When you buy the fruit, what factors will you consider? 5. Why do you eat fruit?	15-20
2	5	Movie	1. What kind of movies do you like best? 2. How often do you see the film theater? 3. How do you see a movie? 4. What can you get from the movies? 5. What do you think about the development of domestic film?	15-20
3	6	The sound of music	1. What kind of music do you like? 2. Where do you hear the music? 3. When do you listen to music ? 4. What will you do when listen to music? 5. Why do you want to listen to music?	15-20
4	6	Time travel	1. 1.If you can return to past, which dynasty will you choose? 2. When you return to the past, who do you want to be? 3. What can you use to change this chance to return the past? 4. What do you want to get from? 5. Do you want to change the history?	15-20
5	5	Campus love	1. How do you think of campus love? 2. Choose a boyfriend or girlfriend, which aspect do you care about? 3. After being lovers, what aspect you will pay attention to? 4. If your mom and your boyfriend or girlfriend falls into the lake, who will you save firstly? 5. What can't bear about your lover?	15-20
6	6	Online shopping	1. Traditional shopping and online shopping, which one do you prefer? 2. How often do you do online shopping every month? 3. What do you usually buy when you go shopping? 4. How much money do you spend on online shopping? 5. What are the benefits of online shopping?	15-20
7	5	Homosexual	1. Can you accept homosexual? 2. If one of your friends is a homosexual, what will you do? 3. In your opinion, what does homosexual want to get? 4. If the homosexual can't get the acceptance, what should they do? 5. Do you think of it is necessary to promote the knowledge of homosexuality in the campus?	15-20
8	6	Travel	1. How often do you travel a year? 2. When do you usually go to travel? 3. Where do you want to go? 4. What do you like to do when you travel? 5. What can tourism bring us ?	15-20

### ***The Implementation Results of PBL***

After participating in PBL, the students are required to complete a post-project reflection to narrate their experience and feelings (at least 300 words) and the content analysis is employed to analyze the qualitative data. The researcher refers to the project framework developed by Beckett and Slater (2005) which shows the students' development on language, content and

integrated skill which occurs in PBL to analyze the summary of students from three aspects--language, content and integrated skills. The procedures of content analysis proposed by Gay and Airasian (2003) are employed to analyze the summary of students—preparation and organization stage, coding stage and interpreting stage.

### *Language learning*

The category of language learning reveals how PBL promotes students' language learning and it has four sub-categories: language knowledge, language skills, language learning affects and language learning abilities.

#### *1) Language knowledge*

In the reflection of students, 82.2% of students (37 students) propose that PBL can make them learn new language knowledge and help them consolidate their previous language knowledge (Student 1 states that PBL is an effective way to increase her language knowledge. Through looking up the new words in the internet and using these new words in her project products and oral presentations, she discovers that her vocabulary is increasing; Student 14 proposes that he masters new vocabulary and grammars through reading the relevant English materials in the internet and making the project products. On the other hand, he picks up new words which his group members use in the group discussion and the oral presentations).

#### *2) Language skills*

In the reflection of students, 75.6% of students (34 students) report their improvement on speaking skills (Student 12 mentions that she gets the chance and the impetus to use English to communicate with peers and show her oral presentation in PBL. Through her efforts, she overcomes the nervousness of speaking English in public and she can speak English more fluently and freely), more than half of students (23 students) claim that their translating skills have been improved in PBL (Student 3 states that the biggest improvement on language skills is translating skill in PBL. When translating the relevant Chinese materials, she surfs the internet to look for the relevant English words and translates Chinese materials into English sentence by sentence based on the analysis of Chinese materials. On the other hand, she masters some ways about how to translate better and more accurately under the guidance of English teacher in PBL), 44.4% of students (20 students) mention that their writing skills have been enhanced (Student 21 describes her unforgettable experience in revising the project products and thinks that it is valuable and useful though it is boring and tedious. In order to polish her writing work, she spends a lot of time and makes great efforts to revise the writing work repeatedly based on the comments and suggestions of English teachers and peers, which enables her to use clear and accurate English to express and share her ideas with the readers and improve her writing skill), 13.3% of students report their improvements on the listening skills (Student 2 states he interviews some classmates, asks them some questions about the movie and records their answers in the first project. He knows his listening and speaking skills are enhanced and he feels happy) and 40% of students (18 students) state that their reading skills have been improved in PBL (Student 17 states he accelerates his reading speed and he can get the main ideas of the English texts through using the reading strategies in PBL).

#### *3) Language learning affects*

In the reflection of students, 42.2% of students (19 students) report that PBL has the positive effect on their English learning affects (Student 9 claims that PBL makes English learning

become authentic, vivid and interesting and increases his English learning interest. Moreover, he thinks that the purpose of learning English is to communicate with other people besides catering to the needs of English tests; Student 36 claims that she obtains the sense of achievement, increases her English learning interest and changes her negative attitude to English learning after completing the project).

#### *4) Language learning abilities*

In the reflection of students, 37.8% of students (17 students) report their enhancement on reflective learning abilities (Student 5 finds that her language knowledge and content knowledge are very limited and she is unfamiliar with the cultures and history of many cities in China through attending to PBL, so she will read more books and see more films about these aspects. On the other hand, she also needs to improve her language skills and she will do more exercises), 46.7% of students (21 students) claim that PBL can increase their autonomous learning abilities (Student 1 puts forward PBL increases her autonomous learning ability. When she encounters the new English words in PBL, she will look up them in the dictionary or on the internet rather than wait for the teacher to teach her and she knows she must be responsible for her study) and 53.3% of students (24 students) think that PBL can improve their cooperative learning abilities (Student 20 proposes that the completion of project not only needs the individual effort, but also the close cooperation among group members because everyone has different strengths and they need to cooperate with each other to complete their projects).

#### ***Content learning***

The category of content learning indicates how PBL integrate language with content and promote students' content learning. In the reflection of students, about 77.8% of students (35 students) mention that they obtain a lot of topic knowledge and they have more overall and deeper understanding of the project topic (Student 19 states that PBL provides her the opportunity to know more about Nanjing, including the history, the culture, the landscapes and the souvenirs. Thus she thinks PBL activity is a good learning activity which enables her to have the overall understandings of a city and enrich her extra-curricular knowledge; S24 puts forward she obtains more overall information about Hangzhou and knows Hangzhou deeply so as to increase her interest in Hangzhou through participating in PBL).

#### ***Integrated skills***

The category of integrated skills indicates how PBL develops students' integrated skills and it mainly includes the following six integrated skills: critical-thinking skill, skill of solving problem, skill of collecting information, skill of processing information, researching skill and computer operating skill. In the reflection of students, 31.1% of students (14 students) report their achievements in the critical- thinking skills (Student 11 states that she can judge her opinions and group members' opinions objectively and reasonably. For example, when her project group selects the scenic spots and the delicious food of Wuhan, she selects the relevant information from the internet and makes her own decision firstly. Then she explains her opinions to the group members actively to get their support. When the other group members disagree with her opinions, she is willing to negotiate with them and reach the consensus), 46.7% of students (21 students) propose that their skills of solving problem have been improved (Student 28 mentions that he has some difficulties translating the relevant Chinese materials into English because of his limited vocabulary, but he employs online translating tools and



internet resource to solve this problem), 51.1% of students (23 students) state that they make some progress in the skills of collecting information and 40% of students (18 students) think that they develop their skills of processing information (Student 34 mentions that that he has some difficulties in collecting information and processing information at first because there is a lot of information in the internet and less valuable information is found. With the help of English teacher and group members, he learns how to collect and process the relevant information fast and effectively), 33.3% of students (15 students) mention their development on researching skills (Student 5 mentions that she develops researching skill and she is familiar with researching process through participating in PBL. Firstly, they determine the researching topic. Then they collect a lot of information, select the information and classify the information and summarize the information. Finally, they make the PPT documents and write the manuscript of oral presentation) and 44.4% of students (20 students) claims that they enhance their computer operating skills (Student 2 states that he knows more knowledge about the manufacture of PPT documents and he can use PPT documents more skillfully to match with his oral presentation).

### **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 and determine the assessment ways, design the framework of PBL, lead students to complete the project step by step and offer students necessary guidance on languages, content and integrated skills at the different stages of PBL. 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, 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.

## Conclusion

When PBL is brought in a particular ESL/ EFL learning context, it is necessary to adapt and localize it to cater to the features of local English teachers and students, meet their needs of English instruction and agree with the local English learning context, which can enhance the effectiveness of PBL in this particular ESL/ EFL learning context (Simpson, 2011). This study constructs a new model of PBL based on the features of basic English education in mainland China and applies this new model of PBL to the integrated practice English course in a secondary school in Ningbo. The results of this study validate that the new model of PBL can promote students' language learning, content learning and integrated skills' development effectively, which manifests the new model of PBL is feasible and reasonable. 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 continue to verify the feasibility and the rationality of this new teaching model of PBL.

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