

**AN INTRODUCTION TO PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PBL) FOR
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELL) AND AN INITIAL LOOK
INTO EXISTING AND POTENTIAL APPLICATION OF PBL IN F.O.E-
H.N.U.E**

**Le Thi Minh Nguyet
LSD Division**

I. INTRODUCTION

Initially introduced by John Dewey in My pedagogical Creed (1897), the idea of “learning by doing” has been comprehensively developed into a methodology widely known as “ Project-based Learning”. Blumenfeld & Krajcik (2006) cite studies by Marx et al., 2004, Rivet & Krajcki, 2004 and William & Linn, 2003 and state that "research has demonstrated that student in project-based learning classrooms get higher scores than students in traditional classroom."

Project-based learning (or PBL for short) has gained the global popularity in the recent years. Actually, there is nothing new about Project-Based Learning (PBL). Good teachers have always used projects as a supplement to their regular course of instruction, in the forms of an oral presentation or interview outside the classroom. Educational world has been witnessing the resurgence of interest in the idea of PBL and its consistent and successful application and management in classrooms. Many educators, schools, communities, and other organizations are exploring aspects of project-based learning. It is believed that at least some of this renewed interest is due to the project opportunities presented by the Internet and World Wide Web...Another explanation for the increasing preference for PBL is the fact that advocates of PBL cite numerous benefits to the implementation of these strategies in the classroom including a greater depth of understanding of concepts, broader knowledge base, improved communication and interpersonal/social skills, enhanced leadership skills, increased creativity, and improved writing skills.

In this mini-research, the author would like to paint a picture about PBL employment in English language classrooms in the world and in Viet Nam, to

reflect the existing situation of using PBL at Faculty of English, Hanoi National University of Education and make some recommendations for further exploiting the helpfulness and usefulness of PBL in English language sessions there.

II. DEVELOPMENT

II.1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Project-based learning has been considered as a potential alternative to traditional teacher-led classrooms. PBL is defined as “an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop”. (Duzer, 1998). The basis of PBL lies in the authenticity or real-life application of the research. Artifacts may include a variety of media such as writings, art, drawings, three-dimensional representations, videos, photography, or technology-based presentations.

Comprehensive Project-based Learning:

- is organized around an open-ended driving question or challenge.
- creates a need to know essential content and skills.
- requires inquiry to learn and/or create something new.
- requires critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and various forms of communication, often known as "21st Century Skills."^[6]
- allows some degree of student voice and choice.
- incorporates feedback and revision.
- results in a publicly presented product or performance.^[7]

In PBL classroom, teachers do not perform the role of the language transmitter anymore, but a facilitator instead. They do not control the timing, pace as well as content of the classroom or student learning but rather develop an atmosphere of shared responsibility. In contrast, students move from passive learning state to an active and dynamic learning style. Student role is to ask questions, build knowledge, and determine a real-world solution to the issue/question presented. Students must collaborate expanding their active listening skills and requiring them to engage in intelligent focused communication. Therefore, allowing them to

think rationally on how to solve problems. PBL forces students to take ownership of their success.

Project-based learning is not without its' opponents though; opponents of Project Based Learning warn against negative outcomes primarily in projects that become unfocused and tangential arguing that underdeveloped lessons can result in the wasting of precious class time. Opponents suggest that narratives and presentation of anecdotal evidence included in lecture-style instruction can convey the same knowledge in less class time. Given that disadvantaged students generally have fewer opportunities to learn academic content outside of school, wasted class time due to an unfocused lesson presents a particular problem. Instructors can be deluded into thinking that as long as a student is engaged and doing, they are learning. If the project does not remain on task and content driven the student will not be successful in learning the material. The lesson will be ineffective. Like any approach, Project Based Learning is only beneficial when applied successfully.

II.2. EXAMPLE PBL FOR ELL

Let's have a look into a project designed and implemented at the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) in Virginia, USA. Learners in advanced intensive ESL class worked in pairs to present a thirty-minute lesson to other classes in the program. They worked collaboratively to determine the needs of their audience, interview teachers, choose topics, conduct research, prepare lessons, practice, offer evaluations to other teams during the rehearsals phase, present their lessons and evaluate the effort. Topics ranged from ways to get rid of cockroaches to how the local Governments works.

Before the lessons planning began, learners identified lesson objectives and evaluation criteria. They shared ideas on what makes a presentation successful, considering both language and presentation skill. The evaluation criteria used for feedback on rehearsals as well as for final evaluations include the following:

- Introduces self and the topic clearly, respectfully, and completely. Includes interactive activities in the lessons. Speak in a way that is easy to understand. It responsive to the audience. Shows evidence of preparation and practice.
- Shows knowledge of the topic

In addition, the teachers and learners in the classes receiving the presentations wrote evaluations of the lessons. The presenters also wrote an evaluation essay reflecting on their work and the value of the project itself.

Another example of PBL for ELL is the team project designed and implemented in NFL 2020 at Thai Nguyen University. Together with teacher-led sessions, English teachers in the projects are required to work in group of four to exploit the answer to a specific question relating to their English learning. The project stretches 6 weeks, with several steps including: analyzing needs and difficulties in their own English learning and choose the project focus that would help to build language skills in that area, Plan it! (to make a plan about what ELLers can do to actively answer the questions); Do it (carry out the plan); Discuss it!; and Share it! (to write a final report to summarize what have been learned from the experience.). there are several topics to be chosen for the projects:

- How will minimal pairs practice for five minutes a day help us to improve the voiced and unvoiced consonant sounds?
- How can (audio/video) recordings of ourselves improve our pronunciation of final consonants and consonant clusters?
- What kind of self-study strategies will help us to improve our reading speed?
- What kind of interactive and interesting game are most useful for building different language skills?
- What are ten online, free web-sites and tools that are used for language learning/ how are the best used?

The completion of the project is considered a compulsory condition for groups of learners to take the final exams.

II.3. EXISTING PBL APPLICATION IN F.O.E-H.N.U.E

PBL is of no pure innovations to English teachers and learners at F.O.E.-H.N.U.E; yet the process of applying PBL in English classroom here has not been paid enough attention and fully developed to the level of a project. Following are some examples of existing PBL applications in the Faculty.

* Group/Individual Presentations: students in a class are divided into groups to work together on a presentation. The topic of the presentations would be decided either upon the content of the curriculum (in most cases) or sometimes the students' choices. Students' presentations would be scattered throughout the course or in one presentation- session either in or at the end of the course. The problems with student presentations as an application of PBL is the lack of authenticity in the projects: the rapport between the topic of the task and the learners' interest and needs sometimes tangential; the presentations are mostly and almost always built on theoretical materials rather than from real-life experiences and information. As a result, the presentations become a compulsory learning part in the curriculum which makes nearly no difference to other components of the syllabus.

* Mini-theatre: Students are required to work in groups and produce a script for a mini-session of theatre in class which employed a number of idioms that they have been introduced previously in their language competence lessons. The scripts are written in two versions: one with idioms and the other with non-idiomatic language, which then would be checked and approved by teachers. The groups must work together to act out the script to make a short play in the class.

II.4 SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER APPLICATIONS OF PBL IN F.O.E-H.N.U.E.

When designing a project, teachers frequently ask, "Should my students/teams create:

- The same product with the same focus or topic?"
- The same product, but with a different focus or topic?"
- A different product with the same focus or topic?"

- A different product, but with a different focus or topic?”

Actually, it would be difficult to affirm the right answer to this questions. the application of PBL must be varied up on the teaching and learning context.

A good example of “ same product, but with a different focus or topic” is in a Humanities classroom for a project on the history of some major world religions and negative contemporary stereotypes about them. Students were teamed in expert groups to study one religion – Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism – and produce the same product: a podcast, using the history of the religion to debunk false stereotypes against that religion. The teacher wanted to scaffold all students in the use of Audacity, a voice recording and sound editing tool, so selecting a singular product type was a strategic decision.

Students in the classes of the Faculty is absolutely capable of making eye-catching, meaningful and useful product to illustrate their lessons in a variety of subjects, including American and British Literature or Phonetics an phonology.

An story of “**different product with the same focus or topic**” type is about a teacher once who wanted to “PBLize” his persuasive writing unit. The school and his students had been abuzz with a recent tragedy involving a group of students who had gotten into a scuffle over an iPod at a public transportation stop. Sadly, during the fight, one of the boys pushed another boy into an oncoming bus and he died. The prosecution was seeking to have the boy tried as an adult for manslaughter, which in Texas would open the door for a possible death penalty sentence. The teacher challenged students to share their perspective on the controversial issue through a variety of persuasive writing product options: a letter to the editor, a letter to the judge or legal teams, a position statement, a debate, a blog, an editorial, or the script for a live newscast or podcast. If students had their own ideas, he welcomed the opportunity to “consult” with them on additional product possibilities.

The “**different product, but with a different focus or topic**” option has the broadest **possible** scope. It can be powerful because of the potential for students to

tailor the project work tightly to their strengths, interests and passions. The teacher has to be a skilled facilitator who is comfortable not having all the right answers and who knows how to help students learn to learn by modeling process skills during the project.

This led the author to a proposal to inter-subject project in the Faculty.

Students currently pursue two subjects : Phonetics and phonology and Professional Presentations in the same fifth semester at the faculty, with separate end-term products. PBL would be ideal to combine and reduce the amount of time an effort while increase the effectiveness of the students' learning by asking students to work in group and choose one topic in their phonetics Subject to make a project. The oral presentation of the project would be evaluated in terms of style for the Presentation Subject while the content of the presentation would be the object of evaluation in Phonetics Subject.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, let me introduce a statement by Fisher & Frey (2008) that

“ The ultimate goal of any classroom is to develop students who can independently apply information, ideas, content, skills, and strategies in real-life situations. Our goal is not to create learners who are dependent on another person for information and ideas.”

PBL has been not only an alternative to old-fashioned, boring teacher-controlled classrooms but also a contemporary trend that prove to be effective and useful in English language lessons. To change and to move forwards, it's highly advisable for the Faculty to examine and exploit the ways into PBL for teaching and learning English in their classrooms.

Moreover, to decide what makes the most sense for their project, teachers need to think carefully about the scope of content, what's most authentic in the project's real-world context, and how comfortable they would be in scaffolding the development of a variety of products, performances, presentations and/or services.

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