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

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Abstract

Project-based language learning (PBLL) is a language teaching method which organizes instructional activities by doing projects and it is suggested to be an effective way to facilitate students’ simultaneous development on language, content and integrated skills. More and more language teachers begin to focus on PBLL and apply it in the different learning contexts of ESL/EFL field. However, fewer language teachers pay attention to PBLL and explore the application and the localization of PBLL in basic English education in mainland China. In order to promote PBLL further and guide English teachers to carry it out, this paper refers to the ten-step model of PBLL developed by Stoller to construct a new model of PBLL based on the features of basic English education in mainland China and offers some pedagogical implications about the implementation of PBLL.

Key words: project, project-based learning, project-based language learning, basic English education, English instruction

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Introduction

Project-based language learning (PBLL) 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 (Hoang, 2014; Farouck, 2016). PBLL 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, PBLL has been introduced 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 PBLL as a powerful and effective language teaching method to promote students’ language learning and apply PBLL to the different ESL/EFL learning contexts (Tims, 2009; Simpson, 2011; Trabelsi, 2013; Kim, 2015). In 2005, PBLL entered into the basic English education in mainland China through the textbook-driven program, but fewer English teachers pay attention to it and conduct the relevant studies to explore the application and the localization of PBLL in basic English education in mainland China (Wen, 2015). In order to promote PBLL further and guide English teachers to conduct it, this paper refers to the ten-step model of PBLL developed by Stoller(1997) to construct a new model of PBLL based on the features of basic English education in mainland China and offers some pedagogical implications about the implementation of PBLL.

Literature Review

As for the teaching model of PBLL, some linguists and language teachers prefer to adopt the teaching model of PBL directly to conduct PBLL in ESL/EFL field (Eleni & Eleni, 2013; Du & Han, 2016), which includes preparation, planning, research, conclusion, presentation and evaluation. Following this paradigm to conduct PBLL, it is difficult to separate PBLL from PBL and make full use of PBLL to promote
students’ language learning because this paradigm doesn’t give the special attention to language learning and take effective measures to guarantee students’ language input and output, so it is necessary to construct the teaching model of PBLL. Some linguists and language teachers make some initial explorations and develop some models of PBLL, such as Sheppard and Stoller (1995), Stoller (1997) and Nekrasova and Becker (2012).

Sheppard and Stoller (1995) develop a new teaching model to carry out PBLL in an ESP classroom, which includes eight teaching steps: 1) teacher collaborates with the students to choose a topic; 2) teacher decides the final project outcome and its’ presentation; 3) teacher cooperates with students to make the project plan; 4) teacher conducts the training of language skills and strategies; 5) students gather information; 6) students compile information and analyze information; 7) students present the final product; 8) students and teachers evaluate the project and reflect the process and product of project. This teaching model of PBLL has been tested in a variety of language classrooms and the experiments’ results prove it is reasonable and feasible. However, there are some small drawbacks in it to some extent. Firstly, the students will have too heavy cognitive burdens to master so many skills and strategies which will be used in the whole project. Secondly, it also neglects the students’ demands on language knowledge and content knowledge. Lastly, the guidance and assistance of teacher should be offered to students in the whole implementation process of project.

Stoller (1997) modifies the teaching mode developed by Sheppard and proposes a ten-step model to guide language teachers to carry out PBLL in English classroom teaching, which has become a paradigm to conduct PBLL gradually and has been adopted by many language teachers in ESL/EFL field, such as Peterson (2008) in Canadian ESL learning context and Kim (2015) in Korean EFL learning context. The ten-step model of PBLL includes the following teaching steps: 1) students and teacher determine a project topic; 2) students and teacher agree on the final project product; 3)
students and teacher shape the project together; 4) teacher offers students language support on the collection of information in the classroom; 5) students collect information; 6) teacher offers students language support on the analysis and the compilation of information; 7) students analyze and compile the information; 8) teacher offers students language support on the culminating activities; 9) students present their final products; 10) students assess their projects.

The ten-step model of PBLL developed by Stoller (1997) defines the roles of language teachers and students in PBLL clearly and designs the specific language intervention steps to offer students language support in the different stages of PBLL. However, there are some tiny drawbacks in this new teaching mode of PBLL: firstly, it doesn’t include the leading-in activities, which can help students to be accustomed to PBLL; 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 PBLL 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 language knowledge learning which occurs in PBLL; lastly, it neglects the other demands of students in the different stages of PBLL besides language, such as skills, strategies.

NCELA (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition) incorporates STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) content with advanced foreign language teaching through PBLL and develops a new teaching model to conduct PBLL (Nekrasova & Becker, 2012), which consists of seven teaching steps: 1) language teachers negotiate with STEM teachers to identify a topic from the STEM curriculum; 2) language teachers and STEM teachers determine the final outcome which is consistent with language learning objectives, STEM learning objectives and students’ current language proficiency; 3) they help students shape the project and
offer students the project guideline; 4) language teachers prepare students for the language demands of collecting information, STEM teachers prepare students for the content-related demands of collecting information, and students begin to collect information; 5) language teachers prepare students for the language demands of compiling and analyzing information, STEM teachers with students to compile and analyze information; 6) language teachers prepare students for the language demands of producing the final project outcome, and STEM teachers offers students the guidance on content knowledge about the final project outcome; 7) teachers and students assess the project together from the aspects of language, content and strategies. The cooperation of language teachers and STEM teachers is the luminous point of this teaching model of PBLL, which can provide students with the guidance and feedback on language and content and make students conduct the further exploration or research around the topic and complete the project better. This teaching model of PBLL gives the language teachers some valuable reference and inspiration about the implementation of PBLL.

The New Model of PBLL

The researcher modifies the ten-step model of PBLL developed by stoller (1997) further and proposes a new model to implement PBLL (Figure 1) to agree with the learning context of basic English education in mainland China. English classroom instruction is teacher-centered in basic English education in mainland China (Yi, 2010). Students learn English under the management and the guidance of English teachers and they have fewer chances to conduct active and independent English learning in basic English education in mainland China. PBLL is different from this traditional language teaching method and it requires students to conduct autonomous learning and discover knowledge actively rather than receive knowledge passively from English teachers, which may make some students inadaptive to PBLL in basic English education in mainland China. In order to bridge the gap between the traditional language teaching method and PBLL and help students adapt it gradually,
PBLL needs to be bi-subject in the context of basic English education in mainland China, that is, both language teacher and 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. On the other hand, the language competence of many students is relatively weak in basic English education in mainland China and they need more assistance on language from their English teachers to complete their projects in the different stages of PBLL, so the new model of PBLL designs more specific language intervention steps to help students complete language input and output. There are three stages in the new model of PBLL, including pre-project stage, while-project stage and post-project stage.

Figure 1—The new model of PBLL

Compared with the ten-step model of PBLL developed by Stoller (1997), the researcher adds two teaching steps (lead-in activities and 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) at the stage of pre-project.
“Lead-in activities” are designed to build a bridge stretching from traditional directive teaching environment to an unknown PBLL environment and get Chinese students to be accustomed to PBLL, such as English teachers can make a brief introduction of PBLL and require students to use English 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 the stage of while-project, the author 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 the post-project stage, the author designs a special teaching step (language focus) to help students consolidate language knowledge learning which occurs in PBLL further.

The Implementing Procedures of the New Model of PBLL

1. The Pre-Project Stage

In the pre-project stage, the main task of language teachers is to guide students to shape their projects and prepare students for the language, skills and strategies demands of project research, which consists of five teaching steps. Step one (lead-in activities): the 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 become 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.

Step two (teacher and students agree on the theme and the final product for the project): language teacher cooperates with the students to choose the theme and the final product of PBLL. Once the final product is determined, language teacher should introduce the genre characteristics and the components of the final product to students and offer them some samples of the final product.

Step three (teacher determines the general learning objectives and the evaluation for the project): language teacher refers to the content of New English Curriculum Standard to plan the general learning objectives from three aspects—language, content and integrated skills and determine the assessment way of project. Moreover, language teacher needs to explain the assessment criteria of project to students elaborately.

Step four (students and teacher structure the project): students begin to structure their projects and make the detailed plan for their projects under the guidance of language teacher, including determine the kind of information needed, the resource of information, the ways to collect, compile and analyze the information, the project schedule and the task allocation.

Step five (teacher prepares students for the language, skills and strategies demands of project research): before conducting the project research, students need to be receptive to the practice about language, skills and strategy, so language teacher should conduct the project research in advance to identify language, skills and strategies demands of project research and design the teaching activities to help students master the language, skills and strategies which are needed in the project research.
2. The While-project Stage

In the while-project stage, students are offered more autonomy to manage their project, while language teachers need to provide students with the guidance on their projects and prepare them for the language, skills and strategies demands of making and presenting their final products. There are four teaching steps at this stage. Step one (students carry out the project research): following the project plan, students conduct the project research with the guidance of the language teacher, including collect information, analyze information and compile information.

Step two (teacher prepares students for the language, skills and strategies demands of making the final product): Firstly, language teacher is supposed to explain the genre characteristics and the components of the project product to students further and stress the requirements of the project final product. Secondly, language teacher needs to arrange the special class to conduct the explicit language instruction. Thirdly, language teachers can teach students some integrated skills about making the final product, such as computer operating skills.

Step three (students make the final product): every project team discusses the basic structure of final product, drafts the blueprint of the final product and assigns the tasks to every group member. When all group members finish their individual products separately, every project team are supposed to conduct the group discussion to evaluate the product of every member in this group and offer the feedback from the view of language and content, while language teacher should offer students the feedback on their final project and help student correct the language mistakes in their final products.

Step four (teacher prepares students for the language, skills and strategies demands of presenting the final product): language teacher should help students practice oral presentation skills and offer them the feedback on voice projection, pronunciation, organization of ideas and eye contact. On the other hand, the students should be
provided with the opportunity to face to the real audiences and rehearsal their presentations of their final products.

3. The Post-Project Stage

In the post-project stage, students need to present their products orally, evaluate their learning and reflect on their learning under the guidance of language teachers, while language teachers should help students consolidate and internalize language learning in PBLL. There are two steps at this stage. Step one (students present the final product, evaluate the project and reflect on the project): students present their final products and evaluate their projects with language teacher. On the other hand, students are required to reflect on the process and the product of PBLL to realize their improvements, discover their drawbacks and revise their drawbacks in the future study.

Step two (language focus): language teacher needs to pick out some key language knowledge from students’ project products and conduct the explicit language instruction to help students consolidate and internalize the language knowledge which they have learned in PBLL.

The Pedagogical Implications

First of all, English teachers should play the appropriate role in PBLL. PBLL in the context of basic English education in mainland China is bi-subject and English teachers are supposed to play a directing role in PBLL and guide students to complete their projects step by step, but English teachers shouldn’t interfere in students’ projects too much and even replace students to complete some tasks. Students should be provided with the proper autonomy according to their actual situation and the central status of students should be respected in PBLL.

Secondly, English teachers should combine traditional English classroom instruction with PBLL. At present, traditional English classroom instruction is still the main
access for students to learning English in basic English education in mainland China and PBLL can be taken as the supplement of the traditional English classroom teaching method. Therefore, it is important to connect traditional English classroom instruction with PBLL. The researcher suggests that the topic of PBLL should be related with the unit topic of English textbook so as to help students consolidate and extend language knowledge and topic knowledge which they learn from English textbook.

Thirdly, there are some constraints which interfere with English teachers to conduct PBLL. The first constraint is the language ability of some students can’t meet the need of PBLL, so English teachers should help students strengthen the training of basic language skills at pre-project stage and offer students more language support at while-project stage. The second constraint is information resources. The completion of project needs plenty of information resources. However, many schools can’t offer students enough paper information resources and electronic information resources, especially in some remote areas. Thus English teachers should narrow the scope of PBLL according to the actual situation and try their best to provide students with the necessary materials as many as possible. The third constraint is the big class size and the limited instruction time. Most of schools adopt large-class teaching mode, so it is impossible for English teachers to guide all the students to conduct PBLL at the same time. Therefore, English teachers can divide all the students into several groups and ask them to participate in PBLL in turn so that English teachers can focus on every student and offer them the prompt guidance.

Last but not least, English teachers need the guidance of English teaching experts and the support of the schools. PBLL is still a new language teaching method in basic English education in mainland China and English teachers are lack of the theoretical knowledge and the relevant teaching experience, so they need the guidance of English teaching experts and the support of the schools. The researcher wishes more English teaching experts can participate in the theoretical research and empirical research of
PBLL and explore the effective ways to conduct PBLL in basic English education in mainland China. On the other hand, the leaders of schools should create the favorable conditions for English teachers and support English teachers to conduct PBLL.

**Conclusion**

It is worth bringing PBLL into basic English education in mainland China because the real purpose for students to learn English is to obtain communicative competence and PBLL can help students improve their communicative competence (Yamak, 2008). PBLL can create authentic and interactive context for students and requires them to use language to interact with people and texts so as to obtain information, achieve various communicative goals and improve their communicative competence in the real life. However, PBLL should be adapted and localized 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 when PBLL is brought in a particular ESL/EFL learning context. This paper constructs a new teaching model of PBLL based on the features of basic English education in mainland China and offers some pedagogical implications to English teachers about the implementation of PBLL. More empirical studies should be done to verify the feasibility and the rationality of new teaching model of PBLL. In addition, the exploration on the teaching practice of PBLL should be made to look for more feasible and more effective ways to implement PBLL in basic English education in mainland China.
References


