Focus on

PROJECT–BASED LEARNING

1. What is it?

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a student-centred form of learning that involves students spending sustained periods of study time exploring and attempting to solve real-life problems. PBL has its origins in the work of John Dewey, who in 1897 published his book *My Pedagogical Creed*, which focused on the importance of 'learning by doing'. More recently, PBL has been seen as an important vehicle for the development of global skills for the 21st century, including digital literacies.

Key elements

PBL does not simply involve doing a project with your students. Most PBL sources recognize that a project should contain a number of essential elements. These include:

- **A challenging problem or question**

    Clear project goals should be set, based around addressing real-life problems or questions that students find meaningful and relevant to their lives.

- **Public product**

    The project should culminate in some form of public product, whether it's a performance, presentation, or the publication of a digital paper, document, video, or display.

- **Key knowledge and skills**

    During the project, students should acquire key knowledge and develop a range of skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, cooperation, and self-management.

- **Sustained inquiry**

    The project should run over a number of lessons and involve a range of tasks and activities that lead to the final product.

- **Authenticity**

    The project goals should be focused on 'real world' outcomes and goals that have genuine relevance to the lives of the students.

- **Student voice**

    Students should have some choice, for example in deciding what problem they should solve, how they will work together, and what the final output of the project will be.

- **Reflection**

    Students should be encouraged to reflect on their work, considering the obstacles they encountered and how they overcame them to achieve the project goals.

- **Critique and revision**

    Students should be encouraged to give and receive feedback, both from each other and the teacher, in order to improve what they are doing and how they are doing it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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2. What does it mean for the ELT classroom?

When done successfully, PBL can have a substantial positive impact on your students and your classroom environment.

Problem solvers

Students learn how to approach, break down, and solve problems with a good degree of independence. As well as developing their problem-solving skills, this can have a huge impact on the students' motivation and self-esteem.

Broader learning

Students learn much more than just language. They learn collaborative and negotiating skills as well as information related to the topic of the problem they are addressing. They also explore different types of sources and evaluate their reliability.

Real language use

Students learn to use language for genuinely communicative purposes in contexts that reflect real life. This involves a wider range of language practice and a more frequent use of integrated skills than an approach to language learning based around discrete language items.

Management skills

As they work their way through the project, students will develop time management, organizational, and project management skills. Many of these skills are essential for studying and working in the 21st century.

Deeper levels of learning

PBL classrooms can be dynamic, full of students using language to work towards motivating goals. A high level of engagement is achieved when learners find project goals meaningful and relatable, and this can in turn lead to deeper levels of learning. Outcomes include improved language skills, transferable project skills, and much better retention of learning.

3. What are the challenges?

Covering the syllabus

One of the biggest challenges of applying PBL in the language classroom is that of identifying projects based around meaningful problems that will cover the breadth of the core language syllabus. While it is possible to build projects around getting students to explore and research a specific language structure, consider how authentic and motivating the experience would be for the students.

Language level

Language level can be a considerable obstacle to a PBL approach to language learning, especially in projects where language acquisition is achieved as a 'by-product' of the project interaction. Students with a lower language level may find it difficult to carry out the project tasks and activities. You will need to think about how you can structure their language use, considering when they might draw on their first language to support the completion of the projects and when you want them to use English only.

Group dynamics

Grouping of students needs to be handled with care and an understanding of the dynamics between the different members of the class. Mixed-ability groupings can work well when the group benefits from differing skills and interests and everyone's contributions are valued. However, care must be taken that some students do not dominate and prevent others from having a voice, and that the workload is shared fairly between all group members. It should also be ensured that group members are able to draw on their different strengths, so that everyone is able to contribute but no one feels they have to 'perform down' for the sake of their peers.

Time constraints

PBL is, by its nature, time consuming and it may seem difficult to balance the time demands against wider requirements of the syllabus.

Reflection and feedback

Reflection and self-critique/peer critique are important elements of PBL, but these can take time to master, especially for less experienced learners. Giving peer feedback with sensitivity can be challenging even in our first language, so this needs to be handled with a good degree of care.

Assessment

Because of the nature of the skills being developed, it can appear much harder to evaluate the learning efficacy of PBL. Many methods of assessment in mainstream education tend to focus on the performance output at the end of the project, but for language learning this may be less relevant than the quality of the interaction and communication that took place in the production of the output. Criteria that seek to evaluate the additional skills developed through PBL might appear to burden the process further.

Acknowledgement

A large part of the driving motivation for PBL comes from the fact that students are working towards some form of public display of their project output. This can stimulate a strong desire for audience recognition and appreciation. In the case of a public performance where parents or other teachers are invited along, satisfying this sense of recognition and completion can be quite straightforward, but it can be much less so when projects result in some form of online publication or performance. Generating and registering audience interaction can be more difficult and students may be left feeling that their work has not been acknowledged.

4. How can this be implemented?

Get students on board

Be sure to get students involved from the very beginning of the project. Although you may have an idea of the kind of project output you want students to create and the kinds of issues or problems you want them to address, try not to impose your own view.

Understand their passions

Find out the kinds of issues and interests that students feel passionate about and that motivate them. You could do this through classroom discussion or questionnaires.

Give students choice

Once students have decided on the issue they want to address, let them choose what form of output they want to produce at the end of the project. Again you could give them different options to choose from. Some may prefer a form of public performance whereas others may prefer a video, e-book, or online poster.

Give clear criteria

Be sure to create and share your overall project goals and evaluation criteria with students. It should be clear to them what they are trying to achieve, and that the quality of their input and interaction during the project is as important as the evaluation of the final product.

Monitor language use

Be sure to monitor students' work closely. Listen and take notes about any language issues or communication breakdowns that come up as they work towards the project goal. You can then integrate regular language clinics to provide language support based on a clear assessment of their needs.

Balance your use of time

If you have the time and flexibility within your course, you could take the opportunity to build your whole course around PBL. However, if you have a syllabus that students need to cover, you can just make it a part of your course. You could have a specific time each week for project work and then spend the rest of the time working through the syllabus.

Build in time for reflection and peer feedback

You may want to let students reflect and give feedback in their first language, especially if they are lower-level learners. If you get them to do it in English, be sure to give them some appropriate structures so that they can write their reflections or deliver their feedback in a positive and supportive way.

Involve other schools and classes

Get your students involved in projects with other classes and schools, especially if you can use technology to connect them with students in other countries. This can be a great way of making the projects more authentic and genuinely communicative as well as great vehicles for developing collaboration skills, intercultural competences, and digital literacies.

5. Over to you

It's clear that despite the many challenges involved in applying PBL to the language classroom, if done in a carefully structured way and with the right support, PBL can have a transformative impact on the experience of your students. This in turn could provide a rewarding experience for you as a teacher.

6. Further reading

13 Brilliant Outcomes of Project-Based Learning
👉 https://www.teachthought.com/project-based-learning/outcomes-of-project-based-learning-pbl/

Twenty Ideas for Engaging Projects
👉 https://www.edutopia.org/blog/20-ideas-for-engaging-projects-suzie-boss

Gold Standard PBL: Essential Project Design Elements
👉 https://www.bie.org/blog/gold_standard_pbl_essential_project_design_elements

How Can We Survive on Mars?
👉 https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-can-we-survive-mars

Boosting Student Engagement Through Project-Based Learning
👉 https://www.edutopia.org/article/boosting-student-engagement-through-project-based-learning

TBL and PBL: Two Learner-Centred Approaches
👉 https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/tbl-pbl-two-learner-centred-approaches

Applying PBL to English Language Teaching and Learning
👉 https://beginswithaproblem.wordpress.com/what-is-pbl/applying-pbl-to-english-language-teaching-and-learning/

4 Ways to Use Project-Based Learning to Support English Language Learners
👉 https://www.gettingsmart.com/2016/03/project-based-learning-supports-english-language-learners/

Social media groups for teachers interested in PBL
Project Based Learning
👉 https://www.facebook.com/Pblsite

The Buck Institute for Education
👉 https://www.facebook.com/biepbl

Introducing Project-Based Learning in your Classroom – Teacher Academy
👉 https://www.facebook.com/groups/projectbasedlearningcourse

Twitter accounts to follow
👉 https://twitter.com/BIEpbl
👉 https://twitter.com/lisamireles
👉 https://twitter.com/deeperlearning

Hashtags to search or follow
#pbl #projectbasedlearning #inquiry

Talking points

💬 What kinds of problems do you think your students would be interested in solving?

💬 What would be an achievable project you could try as an experiment?

💬 What do you think would be the main challenges of using PBL with your classes and how could you overcome them?

💬 What new skills would you need to develop to successfully implement this approach?

💬 What would be the most exciting thing about implementing this approach with your students?

💬 Describe what a successful PBL output would look like for your students.

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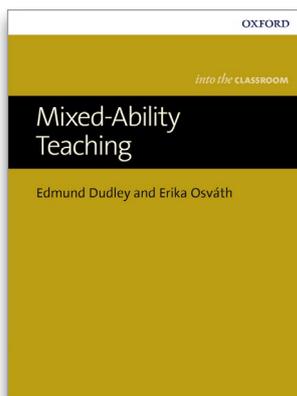
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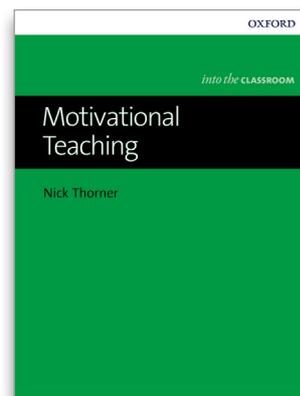
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