A framework for project-based learning in TESOL

Jason Anderson looks at ways of using this collaborative and communicative approach.

While teachers of all subjects have made use of projects for many years, there has been a steady increase in interest in project-based learning to engage and inspire learners in the English language classroom over the last decade at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, paralleled by increasing evidence of its positive impact on learning and engagement (e.g. Astawa *et al*, 2017). This article provides an original definition for project-based learning for TESOL, examples of possible project types and a framework that teachers can use to plan and implement projects in the English language classroom.

Projects have been a part of mainstream education for many decades. I remember my own enthusiasm for two projects in my own rather traditional education in the UK in the 1980s. However, with an increased interest in cross-curricular education in school systems around the world (Barnes, 2015), project-based learning (PBL) has come to the fore as an original and appropriate means to structure learning, and a number of frameworks for PBL have been developed to help teachers to bring together and apply learning from different subjects to practical, often real-world problems and situations (e.g. Grossman *et al*, 2018). However, there is less clarity regarding exactly what PBL means for language teachers – How do we define PBL in our field? Is PBL just a longer version of task-based language teaching (TBLT)? What projects types are appropriate and possible for language learning? And – fundamental to all of these issues – how exactly do we use projects in the classroom to facilitate effective language learning? This article provides possible answers to these questions, offering a personal opinion for critical appraisal.

A working definition of PBL for language learning

This working definition of PBL draws critically upon several influential sources, both in language teaching and mainstream education (Grossman *et al*, 2018; Moss & Van Duzer, 1998; Thomas, 2000; Turnbull, 1999) to identify key elements that are likely to support language learning effectively:

Project-based Learning in the additional language classroom (e.g. TESOL) involves learners working in

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fixed groups for a planned period to research a phenomenon or study a problem, and produce one or more 'products' in the target language (e.g. English) as evidence of their enquiry. It is cross-disciplinary (i.e. linked to other subjects), provides agency to learners (e.g. to choose their topic focus), develops higher order cognition, and encourages the use of practical skills in collaborative environments that simulate real world contexts (e.g. work, academic research, etc.).

While learners can engage in projects alone, this definition views collaboration – a means to facilitate peer instruction and develop social skills – as key to maximising the potential of projects, and sees only the products of the project as necessary outputs, avoiding making any impositions on the processes involved during the research and development of the product. As such, PBL is here defined as a *product-*, not *process-based* approach.

This definition provides a basis for us, as English teachers, to design our own projects based directly on our learners' needs with regard to both language learning and other educational interests. It also allows for flexible levels of interaction between English and other subjects, and cooperation with other teachers. A project with a subject-specific focus (e.g. history, biology) could easily be extended to the English classroom – providing some products require the use of English. In such instances, the English teacher may take on a CLIL-support role of sorts. Alternatively, a cross-curricular project can include one or two products in English, which is feasible at primary levels when one teacher often teaches all subjects to the class.

How project-based learning is different from task-based learning

While some writers see PBL as essentially an extension of task-based language teaching (e.g. Bilsborough, n.d.) I think it's important to separate the two. In TBLT, the focus is on creating opportunities for meaningful interaction in English, particularly spoken, with task cycles typically taking place wholly within single lessons and no requirement for a tangible product as a result of the interaction. As such, it tends towards a focus on process as a means to facilitate language learning, and is particularly effective in 'mixed L1' classrooms, where learners are essentially forced to communicate in English as the only or main lingua franca. This can be much more of a challenge in a 'shared L1' classroom, where learners often, quite logically, switch to their other language(s) to complete the task – succeeding in the goal, but short-circuiting our hope that they would acquire English during the process.

In contrast to this, by focusing on the products of learning, PBL not only allows, but encourages translingual interaction between learners during the process, providing that the products themselves meet our assessment criteria. Depending on our aims, these could include producing written documents (e.g. reports, stories), audio-visual displays (e.g. Powerpoint presentations or online vlogs), or spoken presentations

(e.g. TED-type talks or drama presentations). We can complement this by providing further input materials in English (e.g. texts or videos), or project focuses that require learners to conduct research in English (e.g. on a place, custom or person for whom there is little information online in the students' L1), to ensure that PBL encourages them to engage in both receptive and productive skills work involving the target language. Given that many of our learners will go on to jobs or academic study in multilingual contexts, where their L1s will often play an important role in social interaction at work (see Anderson, 2018), it can be argued that PBL creates a more realistic – 'authentic' even – work-like environment for learners to use English as part of their wider languaging repertoire, thereby sidestepping the 'English only' communication fallacy that is basal to TBLT.

Examples of project types

Table 1 provides examples of six common project types, structured from simpler to more complex (from a management perspective), with the latter projects often also requiring greater creativity, evaluation, synthesis and application of ideas – thus developing higher order thinking skills (Anderson *et al*, 2001).

A framework for project-based learning

Figure 1 provides a basic framework to help you and your learners to plan, implement, assess and learn from projects. At each stage, several key areas of importance are highlighted. While it is likely that the planning and materials development will be the teacher's responsibility initially, once your learners gain experience in PBL, they may also be able to plan projects with you, create materials (e.g. each group writes a business case study for another group's business problem project), and assess both their own and their classmates work (e.g. by providing anonymous feedback on peers' products).

Table 1: A taxonomy of six project types

simpler ↓	**Research and present projects**	Presentations to classmates on people, hobbies, places or other areas of interest (e.g. a favourite English language song).
	Writing projects	With original texts as the key product, either fictional or true, narrative or analytical (e.g. local news stories, written for classmates and published via a free school newspaper).
	Drama projects	Often work best as PBL if they involve creative interpretations of real historical events (e.g. a national independence struggle) or contemporary problems (e.g. the Covid epidemic) to encourage factual research and synthesise with fiction.
	Design problem projects	The project brief typically asks learners to solve a specific problem or fill a gap in our day-to-day lives (e.g. design a park for wildlife and people in our city; design a monument to a leading figure in our country; design an invention for 'Dragon's Den').
	Business problem projects	Similar to the previous, but involves case study synopses of business problems, especially useful in tertiary contexts (e.g. save a failing cafe or restaurant; improve a well-known supermarket chain or transport service).
	Research projects	Useful in academic contexts, with students working together to answer (usually qualitative) research questions through original data collection and presentation (e.g. How happy are students with university services? How has life changed since our parents were children?).
more complex ↓	**'Real product' projects**	The product of these projects is shared and used in the real world (e.g. develop a website for English learners planning to take an important exam; improve the events calendar for the school; design, print and hang subject-specific 'learning posters' in the university canteen).

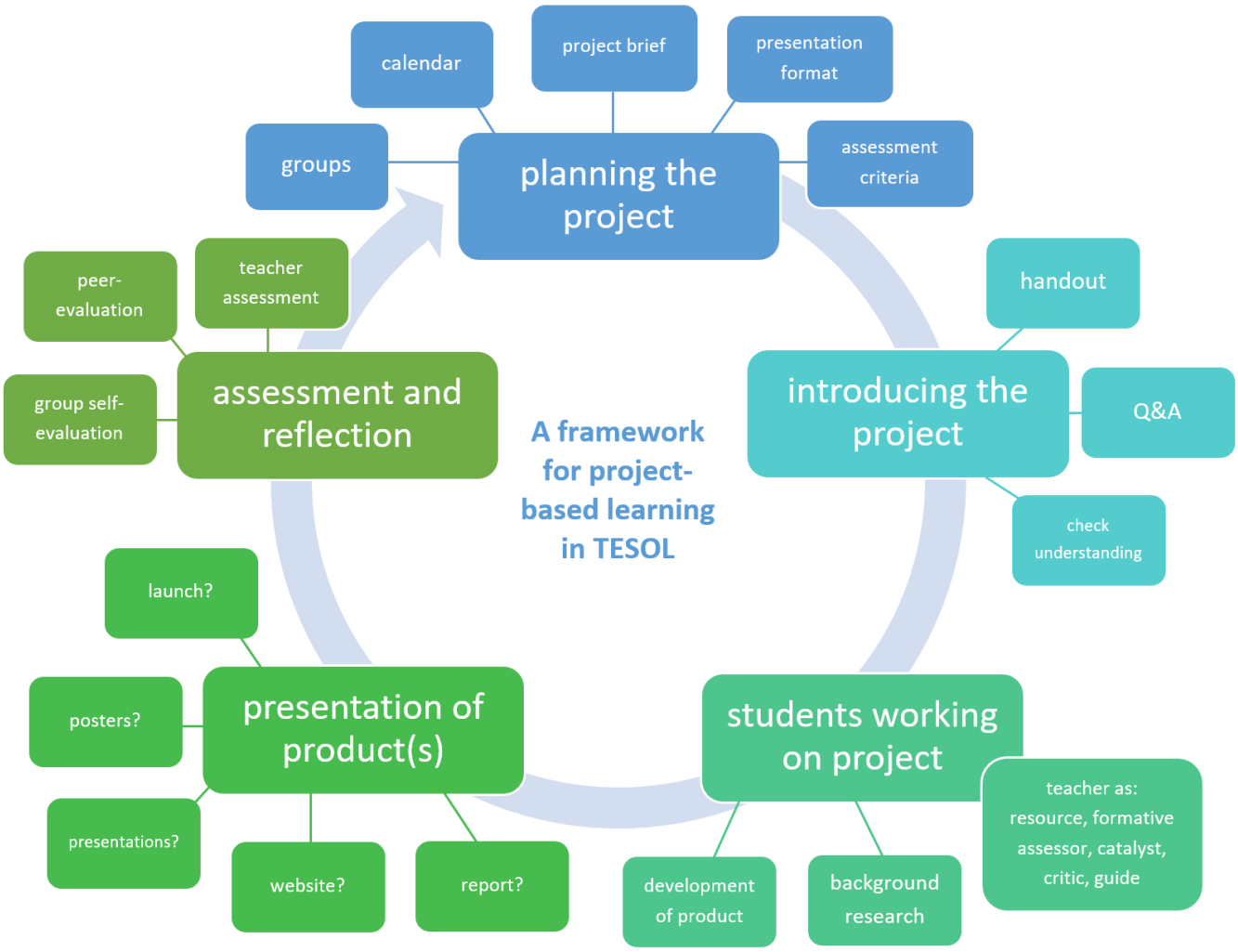

Figure 1 A framework for project-based learning

Of all the stages shown in Figure 1, it is usually planning that is most important to the success of a project. Firstly, it is important for us to select the members of each group carefully (avoid groups of over five members if possible: Anderson, 2019); we may sometimes opt for mixed ability groups if, for example, we want to prioritise shared interests, and sometimes for similar ability groups to ensure that all group members are challenged and contribute equally. Secondly, time needs to be planned carefully, both how much we can devote to project work each week, and how long the project lasts; one project per term is probably more feasible in secondary and tertiary contexts. But perhaps most important at this stage, and sometimes overlooked, are the project assessment criteria. These will typically divide marks between different products, and between different aspects of the product (e.g. structure, originality of ideas, quality of English). You can also apportion marks for teamworking skills to encourage learners to work well together; and sometimes even for peer evaluation. Thus, your final assessment weighting for a Research and Present project could be similar to the one shown in Table 2. You should also provide brief descriptors for full marks for each of these elements (e.g. '*The report is clearly organised with appropriate headings and sub-headings in a logical order.*').

At the heart of project-based learning is the collaborative project work itself. This includes two basic activity types: background research (including accessing, processing and drawing on texts, both written and oral, created in English) and product development, which involves producing something in English, both as the primary product (e.g. the posters, website or news stories mentioned in Table 1) and also as descriptive supplements to a concrete or abstract product (e.g. an invention or a 'solution' respectively). During this stage, learners are expected to work without the teacher's direct support in their project groups for periods of time, and the teacher is able to respond when required to learner needs, questions, problems, etc. As the project progresses, the teacher's focus is likely to move from checking that groups are on task and working appropriately, to visiting groups for short periods of time (project tutorials) to get an update, offer advice, support and even critique to push learners to develop their projects appropriately. Obviously, you as teacher can also create English-use opportunities at such times by speaking mainly or only English, and encouraging or requiring that they respond in English, creating a further functional reason for learners to use English.

While products are presented at the end of a project, you will need to think carefully about the presentation

formats at the start of the project – this is necessary to ensure both that the project meets your intended outcomes, and that these are reflected in the assessment criteria (which should always be provided to the learners at the start of the project); another reason why your project needs to be carefully planned. A well planned, term-length project may have two or more different products, including, for example:

- Oral presentation to class (with or without PowerPoint, each group member contributes)
- Written presentation (e.g. structured report, submitted article)
- Online presentation (e.g. blog post, website, YouTube video/vlog)
- Drama presentation (e.g. of historical event)
- 'Pitch' presentation (e.g. Dragon's Den; pitching an idea to the board of directors)
- Poster presentation (with a mingle activity involving mini-presentations throughout)
- Launch of a 'real world' product
- Publication of a research article (e.g. in a university department or academic journal)

Table 2: Weighting of marks for an example Research and Present project

40%	**Presentation**	■ accompanying audio/visual elements (20%) ■ oral presentation (20%)
30%	**Report**	■ organisation (5%) ■ detail (covering all required areas) (10%) ■ clarity of English use (5%) ■ usefulness of recommendations (10%)
20%	**Teamwork skills**	■ harmony (5%) ■ division of labour (5%) ■ drawing on everyone's strengths (5%) ■ peer support (5%)
10%	**Peer assessment**	■ based on number of votes from other teams for each presentation

Taking the first steps: a project-based approach to implementing PBL

A closing piece of advice relates to how you might begin to implement PBL in your institution. Obviously, it's a good idea to start with a fairly simple project as your initial 'pilot study', and to do so collaboratively with two or three colleagues to share the workload – also get the support of your head of English/director of studies whenever possible. As such, you can turn this first experiment into a CPD project for you and your colleagues: planning collaboratively, implementing at the same time (you could even get classes to present products to each other), and then engaging in reflection and self-evaluation as a team at the end of the project. You can plan to present to colleagues at a CPD workshop, a conference, or through an article in a periodical such as this one. Finally, make sure your role in this venture is documented in your own professional development appraisal, and on your CV.

If everything goes well with the pilot study, it may be possible to assign a portion of your learners' yearly assessment to PBL projects (i.e. continuous assessment), thereby reducing the pressure of high stakes exams at the end of the year, and increasing the range of skills, qualities and types of English use you value among your learners to develop the range of twenty-first century skills they will likely need in their future lives (Robinson & Aronica, 2015).

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