

Project-based learning in Saudi universities: An exploratory webinar

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and Saudi TESOL
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Plan for the webinar

- Challenges teachers currently face in Saudi tertiary education
- Project-based learning (PBL) as possible solution (incl. definition)
- Ideas for PBL projects
- A framework for PBL projects
- Ways for presenting the 'product'
- 'Challenging' PBL – why won't it work?
- Useful tips
- Comments, questions, critique – but please also chat away/think out loud – I'll try to keep an eye on this.



What challenges do Saudi English teachers face at university level?

1. Learner motivation/engagement is often low: “I sometimes find it really hard to motivate my learners to participate in the class”.
2. Mixed abilities among learners: “Despite placement test, students come with varying levels and interests”.
3. Challenges with practising speaking skills: “a big challenge especially in online classes”
4. Generic materials/Textbooks are often found to be irrelevant no personal investment, no real world application: “a same-size-fits-all syllabus”.
5. The pressure to improve learners’ English quickly: “students are asked to move from A1 to A2 in about 7 weeks of teaching”.
6. Also mentioned were class sizes, especially online, and developing writing skills.

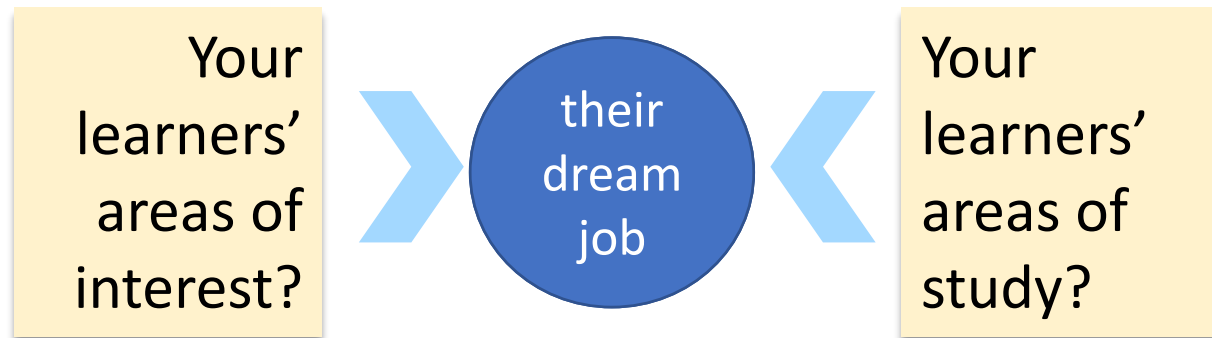
My own research with Egyptian teachers, many of whom worked in KSA, supported some of these findings (Anderson, 2020)

Thanks for your ‘feedforward’
– v. useful and insightful!



A possible solution?

Project-based learning motivates learners, bringing skills and knowledge together. It makes English relevant to learners' areas of interest or study and creates real, tangible products in English (as learners may need to do in their future). There is also evidence of impact on learners' productive language skills (e.g., Astawa et al., 2017) and cognitive development (e.g., Thomas, 2000). Importance of engagement and motivation?
[See Dörnyei, 2018.](#)



A working definition of project-based learning for language teaching

Project-based Learning (PBL) for language classrooms involves learners working in fixed groups for a planned period to research a phenomenon or study a problem, and produce a 'product' in the target language (e.g. English) as evidence of their enquiry. It is cross-disciplinary, provides agency to learners (e.g., to choose their topic focus), develops higher order cognition, and includes the development of practical skills in collaborative environments that simulate real world contexts (e.g., work, academic research, etc.).

Based on: Grossman et al., 2018; Moss & Van Duzer, 1998; Turnbull, 1999; Thomas, 2000.



Language use expectations in PBL

What challenges do you face with language use in the classroom?

In PBL, language-choice can easily be managed in three areas:

1. inputs (e.g. project instructions/overview in English),
2. products (e.g., presentations and reports must be in English),
3. interaction with you, the teacher (you speak English).

However, esp. at lower levels, learners can be allowed to use any languages, when working on the project in their groups.

Higher proficiency learners: in-class discussions in English.

This is different to TBLT, which requires English-only/English-mainly interaction during the 'task'.

It's also more 'authentic'.



How does PBL relate to your 'solutions'

"I have tried to give them topics that are more personalised and relevant to their local living environment"

"their engagement never lasts ... however... they are more active once I leave the coursebook and start giving external materials"

"I tried to group them with stronger students"

"I use breakout groups"

"I tried... to motivate them to share ... I also sometimes divide them into groups to encourage ... team work"

"I don't find the time to tailor the course to everyone's needs"

"it needs more of a team effort to produce the materials"



Let's get practical!

Share some of your ideas for possible projects in the chat. These could be projects you've done recently, or ones you've heard about others doing.

E.g. students research and present on an English song they love.



Images from the English Language Institute of KAU. Used with permission



Six ideas for ESL/ELT projects

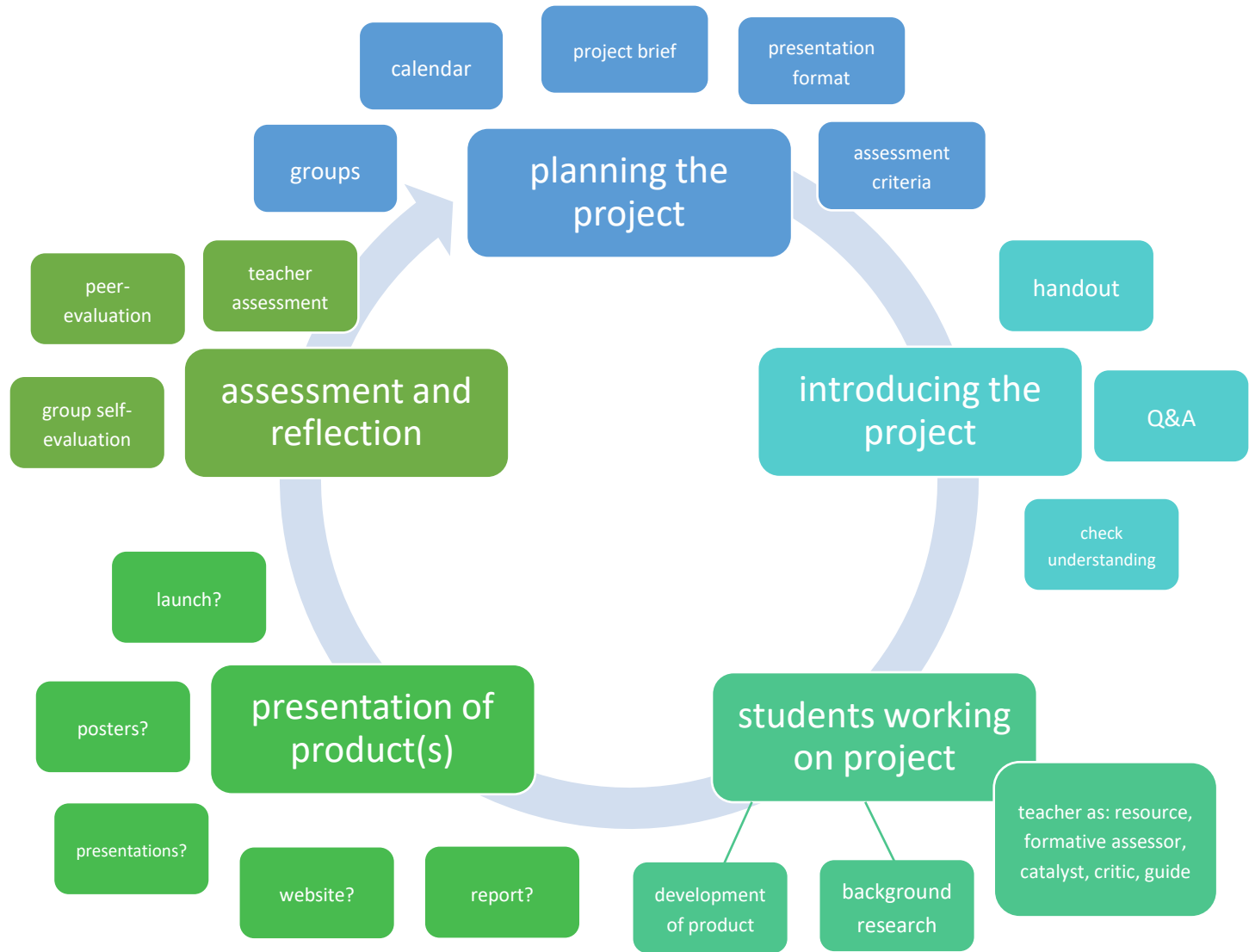
1. **Research and present** Presentations to classmates on people, hobbies, places, songs, etc.
2. **Story/article/newspaper writing** Fictional or true, narratives or news stories.
3. **Design problem projects** (e.g. design the perfect classroom; design a monument to a leading figure in our country; design a park for wildlife and people in our city; develop an invention for 'Dragon's Den').
4. **Business problem projects** (e.g. save a failing café or restaurant; create a new app-based language learning service; improve a well known business/community resource, e.g. local supermarket chain, airport, train station).
5. **Research projects** (e.g. research questions: Is social media a positive or negative influence on our lives? Are students happy with the university services? How has life changed since our parents were children?).
6. **'Real product' projects** (e.g. develop a website for English learners planning to take an important exam; plan a school social event; set up/improve an 'invited speaker' events calendar for the school; design subject-specific 'learning posters' for the university canteen).

easier

more
challenging



A framework for project-based learning in TESOL



Project product presentation formats

A well designed project will include several of these:

- Presentations to class (e.g. with PowerPoint, each group member contributes; without PowerPoint – cf. TED talks)
- 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 to the board of directors)
- Poster presentation (with mingle activity)
- Launch of ‘real world’ product
- Publication of research article



Challenging PBL – Why won't it work?

“In small group project-based learning, one good member may end up doing most of the work to compensate for other members' weakness and or slackness.”

“the ‘hanger-ons’ come and work as they please”

“We're doing PBL and it's not working well. PBL IS great for high school or middle school where teachers can coordinate themes across subjects in a language only setting, like we have – it wastes time”

“Tight pacing guide”

“It sounds good but there is a challenging process to suggest changes to the curriculum”

“we have a fixed syllabus which we have to teach”

“it is sometimes difficult to apply an approach in institutions that have a fixed curriculum.”



Some useful tips for implementing PBL in your classroom

- **Create project groups carefully:** 2-5 learners (ideally 3-4). Plan carefully. Sometimes mixed ability groups work well, sometimes same ability groups force the “hanger ons” to work.
- **Planning is key:** Make sure time frames are realistic. Develop assessment criteria at this stage. Develop project tools (e.g., project ‘rubric’; assessment criteria; calendar; group timesheet)
- **Teacher role:** In early stages, check groups are on task, and their focus is appropriate. Remind learners of assessment criteria. Later on, spend time (10-15 minutes) with each group, getting an update on progress and offering feedback, critique, suggestions.
- **Plan your first project as... a project!** Get together in a study group, design and implement a project together with the support of your head of teacher education. Reflect and learn during the process. Present your findings to colleagues at a future CPD event.

“The challenge would be to make the management see the value of it”



References and resources

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- Turnbull, M. (1999). Multidimensional project-based teaching in French second language (FSL): A process-product case study. *Modern Language Journal*, 83, 548-568.



Two useful resources

- http://www.jasonanderson.org.uk/downloads/Framework_for_project-based_learning_in_TESOL.pdf
- http://www.jasonanderson.org.uk/downloads/Project-based_learning_in_the_English_language_classroom.pdf

