

Project-based learning in the English language classroom

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).

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

In PBL, language-use constraints can be imposed with regard to inputs (e.g. project instructions/overview in English), products (e.g., presentations and reports must be in English), and learners' interaction with you, the teacher (you speak English). However, learners are free to use whatever languages, including translanguaging, when working on the project in their groups. This is authentic to likely future work environments for language learners around the world, and is inclusive of their languages and languaging practices.

This is a fundamental difference to TBLT (task-based language teaching), which typically requires English-only interaction during the 'task', due to its process-orientation. While this may be easy and unproblematic in 'mixed-L1' classes (with learners from different L1 backgrounds), it is much more challenging in 'shared-L1' classes, where learners' natural interaction involves their L1. In contrast, PBL involves a stronger focus on products and recognises that while products may need to be monolingual, processes can be more flexible.

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).

A framework for project-based learning in TESOL

1. Plan carefully (groups, time frame and calendar, project brief, presentation formats, assessment criteria)
2. Introduce the project (handout, Q&A, check understanding) (in English)
3. Students work on project (teacher as resource, formative assessor, catalyst, critic, guide) (can be multilingual) (in class and for homework)
 - a. background research
 - b. development of 'product'
4. Presentation of product and potential supplements (e.g. project report, evidence of language learning) (in English).
5. Assessment and reflection (can include teamworking skills, creativity, alongside English language skills) – can be built into your students' courses as continuous assessment (e.g. 20% of end of year marks).



Project product presentation formats

A well designed project can have several products, each contributing to the project assessment. These may include:

- Presentations to class (e.g. with PowerPoint, each group member contributes; without PowerPoint, like TED talks, for example)
- 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

Some useful tips for implementing PBL in your classroom

- **Create project groups carefully:** 2-5 learners (ideally 3-4). Plan carefully – range of abilities and skills in each group.
- **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.

References

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