Reviews

Project-based Learning: Cultivating creativity in the language classroom

by Jason Anderson

Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers, Oxford University Press (2026)

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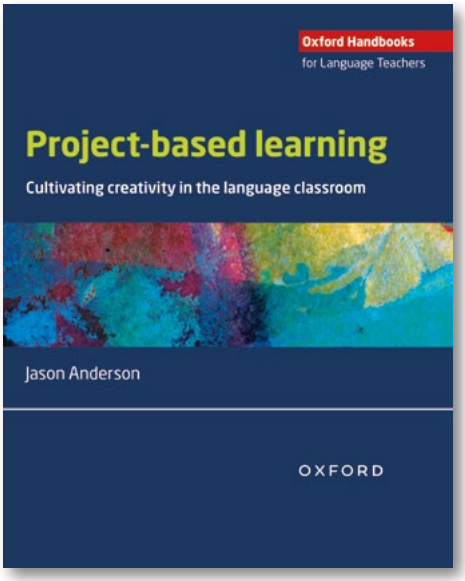

What do kites, drones, flip flops and handbags have in common? If you're thinking that the first two fly and the second pair are often made from plastic, then you're not wrong. But to link these items to pedagogy: they are examples of how teachers in low-resource areas (India and Cameroon, respectively) took on project-based learning with their students. Two 'Real Projects' are reported in Anderson's book, *Project-based Learning: Cultivating creativity in the language classroom*, and form part of his research findings from over 30 countries across five continents.

Indeed, who doesn't remember doing a school project? Whether at primary or secondary, science or art, geography or history, many of us can look back fondly (or not) at the solo grappling or the fruitful collaboration of project work. Projects 'often stand out in our memories as unique moments when creativity and enquiry led to authentic, meaningful and sustained learning that we can still remember and draw upon long afterwards'. (Barron *et al*., 1998, in Anderson, 2026:1). Yet, Anderson laments, creativity, criticality and other complex skills remain undervalued in many educational systems.

The 263-page book is a new addition to the Oxford Handbook arsenal, a series that teachers and teacher educators turn to as reliable, current and insightful. Anderson's undertaking here is to deep dive into the essential topic of learner creativity in the classroom, and suggest how it is fosterable through a project-based approach to language teaching. To give a quick overview, topics covered include:

- the importance of creativity;
- exploring the role of – and opportunities for – language learning in projects;
- the wider curriculum and the place of projects within it;
- different approaches to PBL (e.g. inquiry-based, passion-based and eclectic approaches);
- several authentic projects from around the world; and
- AI-empowered project-based learning.

Anderson's initial point about school projects (Chapter 1: Introduction) sparks the line of enquiry for the book: that despite its potential, project-based learning has had comparatively little influence on language teaching theory and practice up to now. What the book seeks to address – and challenge – is the view of project-based learning as a mere add-on to communicative language teaching and something we have neither the time nor the space for. From the blurb on the back, we read that 'projects offer an invaluable antidote to the increasingly narrow focus on measurement and accountability in the classroom, instead offering students diverse opportunities to develop and expand their minds, personalities and language skills, which are often overlooked yet essential goals of all education'.

With this 11-chaptered book, Anderson aims 'to offer a clear, practical, step-by-step guide to designing and using projects in the language classroom, whether you work in a high- or low-resource context, in public or private education, anywhere'. (Anderson, 2026: 1). He's at pains to state that his intent is to propose how teachers might foster global skills (aka 21st-century skills) and not to change what we (and Anderson considers himself primarily a teacher) are already doing.

The chapters lead the reader (the practising teacher, the researcher or scholar, the teacher educator or materials writer – all hats that Anderson has worn) systematically and carefully on a journey through the world of projects in the English (or insert other language here) classroom.

One starting point for some readers may well be: 'What's the difference between task-based and project-based learning?' This is explored in Chapter 2. Anderson clarifies by saying that Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a process-oriented approach, in which the meaningful using of language during the task is valued as crucial to (implicit) learning, with task outcome taking a back seat. With project-based learning (PBL), which has its origins in mainstream education, what is of worth is the development of teamwork, higher order skills, critical thinking and tech use. However, says Anderson:

> as TBLT evolves – particularly in Young Learner classrooms – it is increasingly influenced by project-based learning as a way to foster a wider range of skills development. As a result, the evolving relationship between the two approaches includes significant overlap and ongoing cross-fertilisation.
>
> – Anderson (2026:22)

It is this 'blending' that the book seeks to present further: an approach that acknowledges the importance of both process and product orientations, while recognising the need for ways in which projects can structure or supplement a curriculum. Chapter 9 has in-depth focus on projects in the curriculum, whether teachers are working in early years, primary, secondary or adult education: project-led curricula, project-integrated curricula, project-supplemented curricula. There is also careful consideration of the role of key stakeholders (parents, school heads, administrators, the wider community) vis-à-vis the aims, activities and aspirations of project-based learning in the educational system.

I read the book with two hats on: 1) as a practising teacher and 2) as a teacher trainer and educator. Mindful of what Anderson says about offering up some clear and practical ideas for the classroom, after the introduction I delved straight into Chapter 10 Example Projects. Here we find a list of fifteen project types, some of which are: personal presentation projects; drama projects; creative writing projects; design projects; problem-based projects; and narrative projects. Some of these fall under the heading of 'passion-based projects' (no explanation necessary) and involve the key notion of voice and choice (aka learner agency). Others are labelled 'eclectic projects' and 'inquiry-based projects'. For each type, the key features and accompanying notes are given, along with variations and examples. What is particularly good is the following section,

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which gives 10 ready-to-use (hurrah!) classroom projects, each with Teacher's Notes and a photocopiable intro page (hurrah!) that can be adapted (hurrah!) for learners.

To give an example: in Podcast Passions (B2–C2; primary to adult; 3–4 hours), students create a short podcast. It must include an interview, a research review and recommendations (= task requirements). They choose a topic that appeals to them (= agency) and where they can work in pairs (= collaboration). They discuss beforehand what makes a good podcast (= setting success criteria), do background research, draft a script (= planning), record and upload their project to a shared platform (= performance), and finally listen to and give feedback on other pairs' work (= peer assessment).

For those teachers who are time-poor or uninitiated as to the benefits of project work, these Teacher Notes are invaluable, providing a scaffold from which to work immediately. The Appendices give photocopiable templates of the Project Cycle (for planning), Progress Log (learners keep a handwritten record) and Team Reflection Questions (learners reflect post-project).

If the first two thirds of the book are given over to theory and are somewhat more appealing to the researchers or teacher educators that Anderson mentions in the introduction, what is more accessible to teachers is the inclusion of portraits of real projects from a variety of contexts for inspiration: page 59 tells of a teacher working in Egypt and her class project on small house design for urban Cairo; there is the story on page 135 of a storytelling and writing project from Palestine; on page 121 we learn about a 'reading for the blind' project initiated by a secondary teacher in Thailand. These are all testament to the success of project work in low resource environments, and pretty thought-provoking reading.

What the book also does well – and as we have come to expect from Oxford Handbooks – is the inclusion at the end of each chapter of 'Questions for Reflection' to the reader. Some examples:

> How would you adapt this project for your class and your learners? Think about time, resources, target language proficiency, individual needs and your curriculum? (page 75)
>
> Should the project development stage be conducted primarily in class time, or could your learners also work on it outside class (e.g. during homework time)? (page 120).

No contemporary publication would be complete without a mention of AI, and this is Anderson's final chapter. 'Conclusion: Towards AI-empowered project-based learning' gives voice to the opinions of over 100 teachers from over 20 countries re generative AI and creativity, institutional constraints, lack of or shortage of technology, and a rigid curriculum. As Anderson says:

> The final section of this chapter reveals that there are plenty of teachers working across the full range of educational stages worldwide who can and do value the importance of creativity in education. They have visions of what it looks like, what it involves (including project-based learning) and why it is important.
>
> – Anderson (2026:224)

As the final reflection question asks:

> Future AI-empowered learners may need to become more curators of knowledge than creators. To what extent do you agree? Would you also agree that project-based learning offers an appropriate methodological framework for them to learn to do this?
>
> – Anderson (2026:224)

Going back to my teacher-trainer hat, I found this a comprehensive, insightful and honest read. Anderson's spark of joy re project-based learning is palpable, but he is sanguine about its adoption and implementation: 'Whether such educational authorities choose to foster and value our learners' near-infinite passions, creativity and imaginations will likely be decided in the political realm rather than in the methodological one'. (Anderson, 2026:224). As a trainer on methodology courses, I could see myself putting the Questions for Reflection to my course participants. Anderson's closing chapter on the role of GenAI as supporting or undermining the teacher role is heartfelt and will, I'm sure, resonate with many who pick up this book and read it as a passion-project of their own.

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Clare Henderson has been a teacher and trainer of EFL since 1987. She has been a CELTA tutor, Cambridge Oral Examiner and IELTS writer. Based in Cambridge, she works for Studio School, and for Cambridge Teacher Development as a trainer for Contemporary English courses. She writes language testing material for Cambridge University Press and Assessment, and is a proofreader, content vetter, webinar presenter and conference speaker.

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