# Project-based Language Learning and Its Implications for English Teaching in Chinese Universities

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*Abstract:* Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL) is a novel teaching method that focuses on the student and seeks to transform the model of second and foreign-language education. This technique can dramatically transform students' learning experiences. Students are at the center of their own learning experience in PBLL. In comparison to traditional teacher-led instruction, PBLL emphasizes students' active engagement and in-depth comprehension. Students will study language in PBLL by taking part in a range of projects that are typically related to their interests, professional domains, or social activities. This article dives into the unique characteristics, benefits, and limitations of PBLL, providing a complete assessment of its applicability in Chinese college English classes. By examining its essential components, useful insights into how PBLL might be used to maximize language acquisition in higher education contexts are gained. Furthermore, this analysis illuminates the current stage of PBLL implementation and forecasts its future trajectory in the field of Chinese college English instruction. This article seeks to serve as a beneficial resource for educators looking to innovate and improve their approaches to college-level English language instruction by chronicling the course of this dynamic teaching methodology.

*Keywords:* college English courses, project-based language learning (PBLL), learner-centered teaching method, English course design

## 1. Introduction

Project Based Learning (PBL) is an educational method that aims to enable students to acquire knowledge, skills and in-depth understanding by actively participating in the exploration and solution of real-world problems. In project-based learning, students typically collaborate on one or more projects that require them to apply subject knowledge, skills, and creativity to solve real-life problems. This teaching method takes subject principles as the core. Under the guidance of teachers, students are freely grouped according to their own interests and conditions and choose different research topics. They use various resources to independently conduct inquiry activities and solve a series of related problems within a certain period of time, thus forming an inquiry-based learning model.

Students in project-based language learning (PBLL) are no longer passive recipients of linguistic instruction but are required to master their learning. Students use their language skills obtained in actual projects in real-world settings, making learning more practical and relevant. The primary purpose of PBLL is to provide students with real-world experiences to utilize the target language,

hence enhancing their language learning and application skills. This strategy not only allows learners to build knowledge but also fosters teamwork and independent learning skills. In comparison to traditional single-learning assignments, PBLL focuses on improving students' language abilities, allowing them to be more proficient and comfortable in practical applications. By working through the project's challenges, students develop vital problem-solving and critical thinking skills while also honing their communication abilities. Furthermore, PBLL incorporates cultural components that correspond to the target language, providing students with a deeper understanding of the target language's history and popular culture. This type of learning method is used not only to acquire language, but also to integrate into the language community and comprehend its culture, values, and so on. PBLL is an effective language learning method that allows students to participate in real-world projects, making the learning process more practical and relevant. It promotes students' ability to communicate, think critically, and solve issues while also developing their capacity for independent, collaborative, and comprehensive learning. This type of training not only helps students learn the language but also helps them get a more comprehensive understanding of the target language and culture.

The promotion of PBLL in China has had a profound and positive impact, bringing significant changes to the education system, student acquisition, and educational practice. The promotion of this teaching method has promoted the reform of the education system, encouraging educators to adopt more flexible and student-centered teaching methods, thereby making curriculum design more innovative and allowing students to more actively participate in the learning process. By participating in practical projects, students will actively participate in solving practical problems, strengthening their learning motivation and awareness of independent learning. In order to enable more Chinese foreign language teachers and educators to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this field and promote the development and application of PBLL in China, this article analyzes the current situation, necessity and applicability of PBLL in China as well as possible future development trends. The characteristics, advantages, limitations and implications of PBLL for foreign language teaching in China are introduced in detail. PBLL promotes the innovation of education and teaching models, making learning more meaningful and practical, and is expected to continue to contribute to the development of China's education in the future.

## 2. Characteristics of PBLL

### 2.1. Authentic Context

PBLL projects are meticulously crafted to immerse students in authentic contexts and scenarios. This approach ensures that students engage in tasks that authentically replicate situations they are likely to encounter when using the target language beyond the confines of the classroom. The authenticity of these projects goes beyond mere simulation; it injects a sense of real-world relevance and practicality into the language learning experience. By grappling with language in authentic contexts, students not only acquire linguistic competence but also develop the skills and confidence to navigate real-life communication effectively. In essence, PBLL bridges the gap between the classroom and the real world, making language learning more meaningful and immediately applicable to students' lives.

### 2.2. Inquiry-based Learning Process

PBLL generally includes three stages: project planning, project implementation and project output [1]. In the project planning stage, learners first choose a project that interests them, meets their learning goals and language level, has a real situation and is feasible, and then makes an overall plan and process arrangement for the time and activity steps required for the project. During the project implementation stage, learners use specific research methods and technical tools inside and outside

the classroom, including reading, watching videos, interviews, etc., and use the Internet and tools to collect, discuss, analyze and organize information, and reflect on the activity process. The implementation phase of the project is the core of PBLL, where most subject knowledge and skills are acquired. In the project output stage, learners use various forms to write reports based on the information obtained, produce multimedia presentations, etc., and flexibly use the target language to communicate and present. Teachers and students jointly evaluate the process and output of the project and provide feedback.

## 2.3. Learner-centered Teaching Methods

In traditional language teaching classes, teachers' explanations and guidance take up most of the time. There isn't much interaction between teachers and students, and what there is mostly takes the form of "teachers ask questions and students answer." Swain's research pointed out that simply providing a large amount of comprehensible input cannot fully improve learners' foreign language abilities [2]. Meaningful and sufficient negotiation interaction and output processes are also required. In a study conducted by the English major of the School of Foreign Languages at Nankai University, taking the "English Through Projects" (ETP) course as an example, overall, the total time for teacher guidance was 129 minutes, and the total time for student presentations and discussion interactions was 484 minutes [3]. Occupying 78.96% of the classroom time, it is the absolute main activity in the classroom. PBLL not only provides learners with input from teachers and other students, but more importantly, creates a large number of opportunities for learners to output and interact through oral presentations and discussion interactions.

## 3. Advantages and Limitations of PBLL

## 3.1. Advantages of PBLL

### 3.1.1. Realistic English Learning Situation

Participating in authentic projects enables students to use the target language dynamically, allowing them to face authentic, real-world challenges while honing fundamental learning objectives. This revolutionary approach breaks the constraints of passive knowledge absorption and enables learners to actively apply their language skills in a pragmatic environment. This immersive participation develops deep understanding and practical skills, enhancing their memory retention and ability to master acquired knowledge. Teachers who use the PBLL approach emphasize the practicality and authenticity of this approach in English classes. This means that students learn English skills outside of the classroom as well, by applying them to relevant, real-world scenarios that are discussed in the course. Several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of this approach. PBLL provides students with an excellent opportunity to use English in real-life situations, participate in project work, and present their results in front of classmates. At the same time, teachers will also simulate real-life communication methods during the teaching process [4]. The key to inquiry-based learning is its ability to develop critical thinking in students. This way of learning is not only about the application of language, but also about the cultivation of students' ability to solve problems in real life. As they work to solve complex problems and respond to real-life situations, they develop the ability to dissect and evaluate various sources of information, ultimately honing the art of making informed, evidence-based judgments. Furthermore, this approach instills in learners a mastery of the art of asking precisely targeted questions, further enhancing their ability to navigate complex linguistic domains with precision and skill.

### 3.1.2. Improvement of Learning Motivation

Speaking in a foreign language is known to be a difficult experience. However, PBLL can alleviate tension and minimize learners' concerns about using English in speech [5]. PBLL is a highly motivating approach for language learners. It brings real-world relevance to language acquisition by directly applying learning to real-world situations, encouraging active participation and effort. Through authentic projects, students learn the purpose and value of acquiring language skills for meaningful tasks, developing a sense of ownership and intrinsic motivation. Completing a project provides a tangible sense of accomplishment, prompting learners to take on more challenging tasks and continue their educational journey. For example, learners need to simulate giving a presentation at an international conference. Through this project, students prepare a presentation, practice oral presentation skills, research technical terminology, and interact with others in simulated meetings. This practical situation allows students to directly apply the language they are learning to a real-world scenario, and they will be more willing to invest because they see this practicality.

### 3.1.3. Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning and peer support are integral parts of PBLL and foster a sense of community and shared purpose among students. Through PBLL, students gain rich experience in teamwork and not only develop communication, negotiation, leadership and conflict resolution skills, but also develop a sense of responsibility and belonging. For example, they jointly develop plans and division of labor in teams, which requires them to communicate and negotiate efficiently to reach consensus. Each member has specific responsibilities during the execution of the project, and this shared workload inspires students to take an active role in the success of the project. Additionally, collaborative projects often involve complex challenges that require students to think together and find creative solutions. They can use their collective wisdom to solve complex challenges together and strengthen their problem-solving abilities through teamwork. At the same time, working with others on projects encourages social interaction and helps students build relationships with one another. They learned to negotiate, build trust, and develop a team spirit. Students improved their subject knowledge and language proficiency while working in teams as they developed their understanding of the material. Overall, collaborative learning in PBLL provides students with a platform to work together and grow together, cultivating their communication, problem-solving and leadership skills in teamwork. This practical and interactive learning method not only provides them with rich experience in their studies, but also lays a solid foundation for future career development.

### 3.2. Limitations of PBLL

Along with the advantages of the PBLL method for enhancing speaking abilities and the contribution of projects in English lessons, this learner-centered approach also has certain drawbacks. First, both students and teachers claim that it is time-consuming and labor-intensive [6]. Some students find it challenging to get used to the teacher acting more as a facilitator than as the only source of information and to the fact that they can choose their own ideas rather than being forced into a predetermined framework [7]. Teachers frequently fail to see that even though students should be more independent, they nevertheless require constant supervision and assistance. Some students find it challenging to communicate with team members and bargain with them, and they consider an unequal distribution of labor within the team [8]. Teamwork requirements typically lead to higher stress levels [9]. The tendency of learners to utilize their native language rather than the target language for group interactions, as well as the confinement of the second language to building the final project product, is one hurdle to effective PBLL implementation [10].

## 4. PBLL in Teaching English in Chinese Universities

### 4.1. The Role of Teachers in Project-based Language Learning

Teachers are critical to the success of project-based learning. They must strike a delicate balance between engaging pupils and eventually passing responsibility for learning to learners. Teachers first plan and organize the curriculum through carefully designed learning activities, develop work schedules and overall structures, and lay the foundation for the smooth progress of the project [11]. Throughout the project, teachers adopted a collaborative learning approach and actively participated in the collaboration of team members. They play a key role in organizing resources and managing project changes. They have coordination and organizational skills to ensure that the tasks of various team members are coordinated with each other to keep the entire project on track. By providing scaffolding, teachers may also control and monitor student efforts. Scaffolding can be pre-designed and pre-planned instructional activities, or it can be an emergency intervention when students encounter challenges or require assistance [12]. Teachers can then provide extra help and guidance to pupils as needed, making the learning process run more smoothly. Furthermore, teachers break down complex activities to make them more manageable. They teach students how to use cognitive and metacognitive strategies to complete projects in stages [13]. This tiered method enables students to gradually grasp the project's major aspects and accomplish the assignment more efficiently. A constant communication between professors and students is also essential. Teachers must encourage students to share their understanding and experience of the learning experience so that difficulties may be resolved quickly and required comments and guidance can be provided [14]. This method of open communication can boost students' learning motivation while also assisting teachers in better understanding students' learning needs. In general, teachers serve as organizers and guides, as well as supporters and evaluators, in project-based learning. Their active engagement and excellent direction are critical to the project's smooth progress and students' successful learning.

### 4.2. Current Situation of PBLL in Chinese Universities

Currently, there is a relatively uniform concept of project-based teaching in Chinese college English education. Project-based learning is regarded as a style of inquiry-based learning that is student-centered. The teaching is driven by actual and successful project tasks to enhance students' learning motivation. Throughout the project development process, we will continue to consolidate existing knowledge and skills while learning new ones through various tools. We will support the project's successful completion by collaboration, exchanges, conversations, and explorations, and will eventually be able to exhibit the findings and share the benefits made in the process. The following content has been added to the explanation of the teaching requirements for college English growth goals in the "Guide to College English Teaching" (2020 Edition): "Be able to communicate and discuss in-depth social topics and academic topics related to the major studied, and effectively describe and explain, explanation, demonstration, and analysis." The revised teaching objectives lay a greater emphasis on the utility of language and emphasize the importance of students' application ability. Group activities are currently interleaved in college English classes, although they have little effect. The following are some possible explanations:

#### 4.2.1. Lack of Practical Activities

Some group activities may merely be theoretical and lack applicability. A poorly planned activity may merely demand students to discuss a topic in small groups without offering enough guidance and structure to allow students to utilize English to solve practical problems. The activity design may potentially be uninteresting and fail to pique the interest of the kids. A flexible and scientific idea

may be to establish a simulated English radio program in which students can play the roles of host, guest, and so on, thus enhancing their oral communication abilities.

### 4.2.2. Lack of Clear Activity Requirements

Some group exercises lack defined work objectives, causing students to become disoriented and unsure of what outcomes should be reached. Students may be required to work in groups to prepare a discussion report, with each member having a distinct role and division of labor. Activities can sometimes be overly concerned with form rather than their value to language learning.

### 4.2.3. Lack of Comprehensive Assessment

The current college English course evaluation method may solely focus on activity completion, ignoring students' language useability, cooperation ability, and other aspects of performance demonstrated in the activities. A thorough evaluation system should assess all areas of student performance in activities. Furthermore, some evaluation systems may lack incentive mechanisms, causing students to lose interest in participating in events.

In conclusion, shortened course hours and extensive covering of topic areas offer obstacles in today's college English teaching environment. Teachers must be more efficient in imparting knowledge, while students must be able to absorb and apply knowledge quickly. Teachers should employ vibrant and exciting teaching approaches as well as practical instances to closely link the curriculum with real life to build students' love for learning. Provide practical experiences and employ project-based learning to allow students to learn English while solving real-world problems, thus increasing their excitement for learning. Simultaneously, teachers should emphasize practice and application, encouraging students to apply what they've learned in the classroom to real-world situations, and strengthening the cultivation of application skills. Project-based learning not only provides teaching impacts but also cultivates students' practical talents and imaginative thinking, which fits the teaching guide's standards for developing students' comprehensive quality.

## 5. Suggestions for Applying PBLL to Chinese College English Courses

College English project-based learning includes theme selection, project design, project development, achievement display, evaluation, and reflection. The five linkages in this model evolve cyclically, and the overall process is an accumulation of final outputs. As a result, earlier links will be encouraged to develop and improve, ensuring that each link is completed in an orderly manner based on goals and expected outcomes.

### 5.1. Theme Determination

The determination of the theme is a crucial part of college English course design. It needs to be integrated with the overall learning objectives, and it must also be consistent with the practice of college English teaching, emphasizing some key issues in English learning as the main line, and oriented to solving difficult problems in actual teaching. The chosen topic must be practical and provide students with practical application scenarios. Teachers can find inspiration from daily life and focus on the living conditions of human beings in the social environment. Incorporating social issues and hot spots into the design and development process of the theme and closely connecting them with social practice can make the learning content more realistic. At this stage, teachers should be good at guiding and encouraging students to think divergently, so as to make the project format more diverse. Teachers might choose themes based on their students' interests when determining topics. To pique pupils' interest, stories, multimedia resources, or tangible things might be used.

Students' suggestions can be collected and added to a pre-prepared topic list from which students can choose. This strategy will help to increase students' enthusiasm for studying, get them more interested in college English learning, and obtain higher learning results.

## 5.2. Project Design

The project design stage is crucial in the development and implementation of the project topic. Students must establish project goals, sort out project content, specify expected results, and conduct preliminary project preparations during this step. At the same time, teachers must remain focused on desired outcomes, provide appropriate group leadership and supervision to students, encourage students to allocate time wisely, analyze project outcomes, and provide timely feedback. Such care and supervision will provide a firm foundation for the project's smooth progress.

## 5.3. Project Development

Project learning is typically done in small groups. Before beginning project-based learning, the teacher must assess the characteristics of the students and actively intervene to ensure that student grouping is acceptable. It is critical to determine the size and composition of each group. Teachers should carefully limit the size of the group and properly describe the group structure during the project creation process to ensure the formation of a consistent and stable project learning team. Furthermore, teachers should help students accept the project's division of labor and define task allocation and the significant part they play in the overall project based on the project's goals and expected outcomes. Teachers need to provide specific analysis, research route development, and data gathering to assist students in gradually completing project duties. Outcome-oriented project learning also necessitates that teachers and students pay close attention to the project's progress, direction, and timing to ensure that the project goes smoothly toward reaching the desired objectives.

## 5.4. Achievements Display

The purpose of presenting outcomes is to ensure that the results of each project fully realize their practical application value and are incorporated into the current environment, hence boosting students' learning impacts. In terms of presentation approaches, we should provide a variety of open possibilities so that students can express their creativity and imagination fully. For example, in a design project, students can exhibit their results via models, movies, presentations, and so on. Simultaneously, teachers must be adaptable when creating display schedules and time divisions to fit the needs of varied projects. More time may be required to describe the study process and outcomes in-depth for a sophisticated scientific research project, whereas, for an art project, more focus might be placed on actually displaying the work itself. In terms of display channels, working in groups allows team members to collaborate and present outcomes together. Furthermore, more individuals can engage in the display process with the support of varied display channels such as courses, extracurricular activities, and online and offline, resulting in greater feedback and communication. These tactics allow for a thorough and three-dimensional exhibition of project findings, allowing students to properly demonstrate the results of their work while also promoting the enhancement of their learning impacts.

## 5.5. Evaluation and Reflection

Project assessment primarily includes student evaluation, instructor evaluation, self-evaluation, and reflection. Based on the results of each group, teachers and students outside the group judge whether the topic is original and has a particular social value, whether the information is rich, and whether the

explanation and argument are clear, full, and logical. At the same time, teachers can use their observations to assess each member's performance in terms of participation, cooperative learning, and attitude during the learning process. Students should also be able to evaluate and reflect on themselves.

## 6.    Conclusion

The project-based teaching style has numerous advantages in English education. Teachers must consistently establish an English learning environment for students to truly explore the world, think, voice opinions, and convey information. Fully understanding the models, concepts, principles, and processes of project-based teaching and implementing teaching practices will enable more English classes to truly integrate students' learning needs and reflect the value of learning, thereby continuously stimulating students' enthusiasm for English learning and improving student's learning ability, allowing college English teaching to truly help improve students' comprehensive quality and future development. Because of its focus on learners and emphasis on building diverse abilities, PBLL, as a language teaching and learning model that has only recently begun in China, is expected to have a good impact on foreign language education in China if it can be effectively promoted and utilized.

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