Project-Based Learning in Adult ESL: Theory meets practice

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April 30, 2016
BC TEAL Conference
Overview:

- Characteristics of PBL
- Benefits to students
- Suggestions and tools
- Creative project ideas
- My research and what teachers and students had to say about PBL

Conclusion
Characteristics of PBL

- Theme plus consecutive tasks
- Joint process of negotiation, cooperative necessity
- Plan which defines goals and procedures
- Experiential and holistic, meaningful and inquiry driven
- Process of discussion, experimentation, reflection and application of new insights to new cycles of experimentation
- Learner autonomy
- Increased roles for teachers and learners
- Students can play an important role in the initial choice of subject matter, project timetable and ‘end product’

Tool links to theory: "Essential Project Design Elements Checklist" or "Project Design Rubric"
Types of projects

- Structured
- Semi-structured
- Unstructured
- Correspondence
- Survey
- Encounter
- Production
- Performance
- Organizational

Projects

A scrapbook collection of writing and pictures
A formal written report
A collection of figures or statistics
A newspaper
A book club
Out of class surveys
A guidebook for a town or city
Marketing strategies (i.e. sell/market an item from a garage sale)
A student performance or presentation
A radio or video program (news story scripts /ads)
A fundraiser
An interview with someone in the community
A web-based research project

Tasks (Willis, 1996, p. 149)

Classifying words into categories
Odd word out
Memory challenge and Yes/No games
Jumbled spelling dictation
Ordering and sorting (Sequencing)
In class surveys
Tasks based on familiar songs (i.e. matching words to song lines)
Picture puzzles (find the differences or similarities)
Pair or group work, story telling, sharing experiences
Reading + discussion
Brainstorming
Fact-finding
Comparing, matching
Problem-solving (i.e. puzzles, logic problems, incomplete stories etc.)
Benefits to students

Students who are weaker in their formal linguistic achievement may be able to use other talents which are as valuable to the success of the project.

Design: leaflets, publicity material, booklets, displays, posters.

Illustration: taking photographs, drawing cartoons, charts, graphs.

Organization: people, materials, tasks and time.

Handling equipment: using cameras, cassette or video recorders, computers.
Benefits to students

Balances the need for fluency and accuracy

Natural context enables students to become confident enough in their own abilities to use English in the ‘outside world’

Often need for accuracy becomes apparent in proofreading, rewriting and reporting back stages of end product

Tangible end product associated with project work, often shared with a real audience, leads students to take their “formal accuracy more seriously” (Skehan, 1998, p. 274)
The Teacher’s Role

Commitment and belief in the approach

Willingness to adopt what may be a new teaching style

Give up some of the authority, but ensure students are fully prepared

Avoid over correction in the early stages, peer feedback is crucial

Make notes of common mistakes and difficulties. End product language should be as accurate as possible.
Tools/resources

Buck Institute: http://bie.org/for/teachers

Essential Project Design Elements Checklist
Project Design Rubric
Project Team Contract
Project Management Log
Self-reflection on Project Work
Project Assessment Map
Creative Project Ideas

Cultural comparison project
Sustainable buildings tour
Create a movie trailer video project
Design a Dream Cruise Vacation Package
Unsolved Mysteries of the World (Fair/poster style)
Environmental Exploration - Interview project
Organizational behavior - Interview project
Be the teacher - Grammar review project
Listening comprehension booklet
Create a mini-news broadcast video
Stealth social marketing and propaganda persuasive speeches
Granville Island Photo Essay
Matching the theory and the practice: Using the 'mini-news cast video' project as a model

Theme: Citizen journalism, news about campus life
Level: 600SL
Textbook: Leap Listening and Speaking Advanced

Objectives/skills: work in a team; listen for details; analyze sources; discuss and critique sources of news; examine print vs spoken news differences in vocabulary, grammar and style; write scripts using precise language; speak clearly using focus words and thought groups

Tasks (leading to project): Discussed and reviewed vocabulary from textbook & listening about Twitter; discussion practice about citizen journalism using gambits; watched & compared two YouTube videos on citizen journalism; note-taking styles; organization of news stories (inverted pyramid -textbook); practiced changing formal print style to broadcast, spoken style; watched two videos from CBC about student debt and housing crunch as models for project; listened to CBC Under the Influence on marketing stunts; listened for details, practiced note-taking; discussed effects of viral videos; interview/survey other students on campus about experiences; field trip tour of CBC newsroom; LAB time to find facts/statistics etc. for project; write scripts, organize, negotiate, practice, film, present product; reflect, peer feedback, evaluation.
Matching the theory and the practice: Using the 'mini-news cast video' project as a model

Sustained inquiry/driving questions:
How does our campus experience relate to stories in the media? What are the issues facing students these days in our community? How does spoken news differ from written news?

Authenticity: Real-world context (my students were in a conditional admittance program to UBC); understanding current issues for students in Vancouver and at UBC

Student voice/choice: Issues chosen were up to the groups, how they presented them, in what order and the script writing was all up to them. (Semi-structured)

Reflection: Happened after the videos were completed for each group (internally) and also peer evaluations and reflections from the class and audience (other class same level)

Public Product: shared videos with other 600SL class and also some groups uploaded their videos to social media

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ST51qUDNh6g&feature=youtu.be
My research questions:

What are the ESL students’ and teachers’ conceptions, beliefs and attitudes about project-based learning and its different features?

What do they think are the frequencies of use of different PBL strategies in their own classrooms?

Are there any differences between teachers’ and students’ beliefs and attitudes towards project-based learning and the various strategies associated with its use in their classrooms?
2. Reflection activities (T:5.43 vs. S:4.75)

3. Group work focused on a theme and project-based (T:5.12 vs. S: 4.35)

8. Teacher role variety (T:5.23 vs. S: 4.69)

9. Student role variety (T:4.93 vs. S:4.08)

10. Work on a project for more than one class (T:5.13 vs. S:4.08)

Overall means for opinion section 2:
Teachers: 4.984  Students: 4.572

Teachers agreed slightly more with the various aspects of PBL than students. There were no negative answers.
Advantages:
Learn research skills, how to explain something clearly
Learn new vocabulary and expressions
Requires many skills, critical thinking
Sharing of opinions
Learn more than just language
Talk to real people, not just textbook
Presentations are fun
Use listening and speaking a lot
NEED to pay attention (listen) in order to complete project
Build interpersonal communication

Disadvantages:
Other students’ grammar is incorrect, so listening to them is not good
Deadlines are stressful
Can take a long time
Qualitative results - teacher comments

Advantages:

- Personal growth and a sense of accomplishment
- Integration and confidence-building
- Less teacher-dependent
- Hands-on way of learning
- Generated by students
- Community-based
- Get language that you can’t think of in a classroom (authentic language use)
- Real content
- Collaborative
- Creativity encouraged
- Creates responsibility
- Ability to meet deadlines
- Cuts down on preparation time for teachers and the need to reinvent the wheel every day
- Motivates students
- Fun (not boring!)
- Develops fluency
- Projects keep things rolling
Qualitative results - teacher comments

Disadvantages

“It’s like air traffic control compared to my normal teaching approach”
Getting a substitute is complicated
Interaction between students can be problematic due to cultural or personality differences
Can be a heavy workload for students’ lives
May be a new approach to students than in their home country
Lower levels may not understand authentic materials, difficulty speaking with native speakers in community
Requires all group members to be accountable for their attendance (project can fall apart if all do not contribute)
Need to be a really organized teacher
Pacing – some groups finish project faster than others
Keeping students on task can be difficult
Technological problems and/or access to resources
Timing can be difficult to regulate

Challenge: How would YOU respond to these issues?
Conclusion

A Project-based Learning approach is seen (from my research) as an agreeable way of teaching and learning.

It can offer students memorable ways to learn language in an integrated, holistic way.

Motivation is improved through learner autonomy = more chance at successful language learning!

Thanks very much!
Thank you for coming!

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