

Promoting project-based learning in Chinese large EFL classes: Implementation, challenges and strategies

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Abstract — Project-based learning (PBL) has been believed beneficial for effective learning and students' holistic development, in that it requires learners to actively participate and take responsibility in the learning process. While interest and research in PBL is growing, few empirical studies have been found investigating the application of PBL in China, and fewer have explored large EFL classes in Chinese tertiary institutions. This article reports on a longitudinal study of project-based learning in the context of Chinese tertiary language education. It was conducted over an academic semester in a Chinese university with six large non-English major classes. Data for this study was collected through observations, reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and a follow-up questionnaire. It is hoped that the project can have implications for classroom teachers utilising PBL in similar contexts and researchers continuing exploration in this area.

Keywords — project-based learning, large EFL classes, Chinese universities, implementation, challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

Project-based learning (PBL) is a student-centred approach of learning which follows three constructivist principles: context-specific, learners actively involved in the learning process, and learning goals to be achieved through social interactions and sharing of knowledge and understanding (Cocco, 2006). It is generally believed that PBL is beneficial for students' holistic development in a number of ways, such as cultivating self-regulation, knowledge-conceptualisation and ability for reflection (Barak, 2012) as well as collaboration skills (Bell, 2010). While PBL has been widely promoted in various contexts, the effectiveness of classroom implementation awards further attention. This paper investigated a Chinese EFL teacher's exploration of PBL in a university large-size class context.

The paper is organised in six sections. Following this introduction, section two reviews relevant literature regarding the concept of PBL and PBL research in China. Section three outlines the research setting, participants, and methods for data collection and analysis. Section four presents key findings, which are further discussed in section five. Finally, section six concludes the paper with key arguments and areas for further research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Understanding the concept of PBL

The notion project-based learning (PBL) has been defined and interpreted by different scholars in various ways. Some frequently-cited definitions are as follows:

“a model that organizes learning around projects” (Thomas, 2000, p. 1);

“a teaching method that allows students to apply what they are learning and are assessed by demonstrating their knowledge” (Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg, & Bezon, 2007, p. 151);

“a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks” (Markham, Larmer, & Ravitz, 2009, p. 4);

“is based on the use of authentic, significant projects, aiming to enhance students' decision-making abilities, curiosity and interests in 'real world' experiences that align with their own interests and vocational aims” (Thinglink, 2015).

2.2 PBL research in China

PBL has been mandated as a key language education approach for tertiary language teaching. According to College English Teaching Guide (China MoE, 2017), tertiary English teaching aims to “to cultivate students' English practical abilities, develop cultural awareness and

communication skills, improve independent learning ability, so as to enable them to use English for study and work". To achieve these aims, the Guide emphasises "teacher-guided and student-centred learning" and suggests that university English teachers should adopt such approaches as "task-based, cooperative, project-based, and inquiry-based learning". Through such methods, the focus of instructional activities is to be shifted from "realising teachers' teaching purpose" to "fulfilling students' learning needs", and to motivate students to change from "passively listening to lectures" to "active inquiry". Wang (2016) adds that for further improvement, teachers should pay attention to "characteristics of the new generation of college students" and adopt appropriate approaches to address their needs.

According to Zhang and Su's review (2018), research into PBL increased significantly in the decade of 2007 to 2017, involving a wide range of contexts at different levels. Major topics and areas covered in this period included learning process, learning activities and foreign language research, and some others dealt with teaching reform, teaching mode, teaching method, and information technology. Although there was a slight decline in the number of PBL studies during the period of 2011-2014, the research went broader and deeper, involving such topics as teaching strategies, learning motivation, learning effect, evaluation rules and team learning and so on. Subsequently, during the years of 2015 to 2017, topics in PBL research was further extended to classroom teaching, learning behaviour, creator education and core literacy.

As pointed out in Zhang and Su (2018), PBL teaching and learning in the western contexts investigates a great deal into students' learning in comparison with traditional curriculum-based teaching, and the most researched setting was higher education (undergraduate level) in such mainstreams as science and engineering. A similar situation was found regarding PBL research in China, which dealt with a number of topics in science and technology disciplines. A notable fact is that although PBL research has gradually emerged in the field language education, a significant gap exists in close examination in the classroom implementation of PBL in large EFL classes.

On the basis of the above review, this paper will address the identified gap, focusing on two questions:

1. How was PBL was implemented in the Chinese large-size EFL classes?
2. What challenges did the teachers encounter in the project implementation and what strategies did they take to cope with the challenges?

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research setting

This project was conducted in a Chinese university which aims to cultivate students' all-round competences and interdisciplinary skills. It was a comprehensive university with leading subjects in science and engineering and English is a more supplementary rather than core subject. Against such a background, for students whose major study is not English, the weekly hours of English teaching were greatly reduced in 2017 compared with ten years before, from six to three hours per week to be specific.

3.2 Participants

Participants were six large non-English major classes (approximately 80 students in each), that is, students who studied English as a foreign language but whose mainstream study were something else. The students, mostly aged eighteen to twenty, were all native Chinese speakers. They came from different faculties of the university, all in their first year, English proficiency at the time of the study approximately between IELTS 4.5 to 5.5. The aim of their first-year study was to prepare for the national College English Test (CET) and then English for Specific Purpose in the second year.

3.3 Methods

Data was collected over a semester. The instruments employed for data collection consisted of reflective journals, photos and video recordings, semi-structured interviews, and a follow-up questionnaire. Data analysis was guided by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and facilitated by SPSS 1.0.

Reflective journal

During the process, a reflective journal was kept by the researcher to record the implementation of the project and make memos about the challenges and difficulties encountered as well as strategies taken to handle the challenges.

Photos and videos

In the implementation of the project, photos were taken to keep a record of the presentation of the students. Video recordings were applied in the middle and at the end of the project to elicit opinions and feedback from students so as to make adjustments to the project's operation.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are interviews with open questions to collect data face to face. They were adopted in the middle and at the end of the study to gather feedback from individual students.

Follow-up questionnaire

A questionnaire was utilised at the end of the semester, aiming to obtain information about the learners' opinions and acceptance regarding the implemented project.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 The project implementation

The aim of the project was to enhance learning interest and encourage active learning and task completion through project presentation and peer evaluation. The project consisted of a series of study activities for students to complete independently and then present in the form of public show. It involved four stages: preparation, presentation, evaluation, and reflection.

In the preparation stage, students were involved in the project by choosing what to show and deciding on how to show it. Because study hours were limited, we could not cover all the units. Students chose to cover some units on the syllabus. At this stage, the teacher first conducted an informal survey about the problems and expectations of students in their English study. Secondly, she introduced the project to students, inviting students to decide whether to participate in the project-based learning, and then what and how to proceed with their study depending on whether their project was accepted or rejected. Thirdly, the teacher posted the project publicly on a QQ Group which was open and accessible to every learner for discussion and adjustments-making. Finally, the teacher invited students' opinions and feedback, based on which adjustments were made to the project draft. Then students, on a voluntary free basis, chose their own task which they were most interested. The rule "First come first served" was applied. Any further questions could be raised later, to be discussed in class or through the online communication tool QQ Group.

There were two rounds of presentations. The first round aimed to stimulate students to do autonomous learning as well as enjoy and maximise learning effect. The content was the peer-teaching of chosen tasks related to the study material that should be covered according to the syllabus, including introduction to major Chinese and Western holidays and peer-teaching of certain units of the textbook. The second round, held at the end of the term, was a talent show. Students were freely to choose anything they wanted to perform, for example, singing English songs, dubbing English films, or a role play.

In the first-round students could only choose from the options offered by the teacher and the tasks closely related to the material that should be covered during this semester. The design of the second round of the project was to encourage students' self-expression through

opportunities for free choices. Students could choose whatever they wanted to present with absolute freedom. Both rounds aimed to stimulate students to learn in an intriguing, informing, involving, interactive and inspiring way.

In the evaluation stage, students were evaluated by both the teacher and their classmates. During the show, the teacher picked ten students at random to take notes and make peer-assessment. In the reflection stage, the teacher and the students reflected upon the benefits and challenges of the project.

4.2 Challenges and coping strategies

During the implementation of the project, three major challenges were encountered. The first one was to get everyone involved in the project. The project was carried out in big EFL classes with about 80 students in each; therefore keeping a balance between individual work and collaborative work in a large class posed the first challenge. According to the results of the informal survey before the implementation of the project, students held different ideas about the collaboration, with some preferring to work in pairs or groups while others preferring to work alone.

In order to get everyone involved and accommodate the needs of students in favour of collaborative work, the project was divided into small learning tasks, the number approximately equal to the number of students, some to be finished individually, some to be finished collaboratively. In this way, all the learners in one class were members of a big team since they worked together for one project; all the learners could do independent study since each task could be treated as an independent task.

The second challenge came from managing the large number of "audience" students and keeping them engaged while only a few were presenting / showing. It was a great difficulty to monitor students in a large size class and keep individual students' attention on their own learning in class. When one learner was presenting, the rest of the class sometimes went distracted. Playing smartphones, dozing off, being absent-minded or distracted by something other than the presentation were very common.

Three strategies were taken to cope with this problem. First, helping presenters to make engaging PowerPoint slides and encouraging them to present in a more attractive way. Secondly, occupying the audience with peer-evaluation by asking volunteers or picking ten students at random to make peer-assessment. As to monitor students' learning in class, allowing students to record the presentation using various self-selected APPs was an effective way.

The third challenge was insufficient time, support and flexibility to apply PBL under the current educational system. The teaching hours, teaching materials, methods, and teaching objectives were strictly prescribed and scheduled, leaving teachers limited time and flexible space to apply PBL. In addition, support from the school was not inadequate either. Students who took part in the project should take the same test as other students taught in the conventional way. This created anxiety in many students that they might be disadvantaged for not having covered all the study materials prescribed in the syllabus.

To meet this challenge, students were required to do a combination of tasks with an item of their own choice and a “must-do” topic from the textbook. As to monitor students’ progress outside the class, some APPs were promoted such as Fun dubbing and Fluent in English, which facilitates students’ daily reading. The reading could be recorded automatically by the apps and students could be evaluated easily through the apps. Apart from this, keeping out-of-class learning support “on” via QQ & WeChat group was proved useful to tackle this challenge.

V. DISCUSSION

The project demonstrated positive impact on students’ learning in a number of ways. One of the noticeable finding was that students’ presenting skills improved. Many of them consciously learnt the strong points from their peers and tried to avoid the mistakes made by other. As a result, students became more interested and confident, which was evident in photos and video recordings showing accomplishments and achievements of the students. Although at the beginning there appeared various problems – for example, some students looked very nervous and not so well prepared, sometimes the prepared Power Point slides did not look good, or their presentation was not logically organised – as the project proceeded, they made great progress, enjoyed and benefited from the PBL approach overall. Their involvement increased, they developed stronger sense of commitment for what they were doing, and then they were inspired to learn more. Their PPT was much better designed, their presentations appeared more logical, clearer and smoother. They appeared more relaxed and confident, engaged better, made more eye contact, and some even interacted with the audience with very smart questions. In brief, the project allowed students to obtain knowledge more related to real life and apply skills in classroom learning.

In addition, the project allowed students’ decision making / individual choices on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ about learning, made learning more interesting, provided

opportunities for students’ active ‘learning by doing’, empowered students by letting them be ‘the sage on the stage’, allowed students to evaluate their own work (self or peer), enhanced students’ willingness to learn (more and harder), and built up students’ confidence, especially in public speaking & presenting). The extracts below illustrate these points.

S1: It’s interesting. It’s different from the way I learnt English before. I think it’s good. Every one can practice. I learned a lot.

S2: This project gave everyone an opportunity to present. We learned how to make a good presentation. We now understand how hard our teacher works. I will study harder.

S3: Although I spent a lot of time preparing, I still felt nervous. However, I’m more confident than before. I think I can do better next time.

S4: Learning this way is more fun. It’s kind of autonomous learning and we had to do a lot by ourselves, but it pushed me to learn more.

S5: It improves all kinds of skills...It’s good for our future employment. Through participating in the project, I learn how to make plans, how to monitor and assess my learning. I enjoy this kind of autonomous learning.

Current literature in relation to PBL research in China mostly focuses on comprehensive practical courses and its emphasis is more on theoretical construction than specific application of real-life contexts. Most of the research has been based on overall teaching design, while less attention has been paid to in-depth study of the interaction between teaching and learning (Li & Zhang, 2017). As a result, research on the implementation process of PBL has been limited. Against this backdrop, the PBL implementation in this study shows that that intrinsic motivation and extrinsic support play a significant role in the development of students’ independent learning in the context of large EFL classes. As revealed in the data, students who were strongly motivated were more involved in the project and better prepared for their study task; they achieved higher marks in the final examination as well as in English language proficiency tests, such as CET Band Four or Six and IELTS. Therefore it is vital to make efforts to genuinely stimulate students’ intrinsic learning motivation for their long-term learning and personal development.

The project makes valuable contribution to the current PBL research in China. First, the project draws much attention to specific application of PBL in concrete classroom teaching environment, and further refines research on the implementation process of PBL teaching. Secondly, the intervention of teachers is significant and

indispensable. A large number of students explicitly expressed the importance of the teachers' role in the implementation of their projects. Thirdly, this contributes to the PBL literature a rare empirical study of an EFL teacher researcher's application of PBL in such large EFL classes in Chinese tertiary language education. Both the overall design and its specific operational strategies provides practical implications for teachers working in other related contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION

The project in this paper has exemplified the PBL approach in large Chinese EFL classes. Results of the study suggests that PBL in such a context is feasible, enjoyable as well as beneficial. The project was well received by most of the students, who expressed a positive attitude towards the new way of learning. The project showed value in arousing students', helping them build confidence, practicing skills for future learning and working, and improving the students' motivation. The project developed awareness of learner autonomy by allowing students to decide 'what' and 'how' to learn, providing opportunities for students' active 'learning by doing', empowering students by letting them be 'the sage on the stage' and encouraging students to evaluate their own work through peer evaluation. Further, the study, through exploring the challenges that might hinder the implementation of PBL, emphasises that the role of teachers is significant and indispensable. Teachers' perceptions, beliefs and practice about PBL deserve further attention and research, and teachers' professional development in this area also needs further promotion and action.

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