Project-Based Learning

This chapter defines PBL and connects it to the communicative approach. It discusses the benefits of using PBL in an English language classroom and compares and contrasts PBL with task-based learning (TBL). A unit plan for a beginning-level communication skills class is provided to demonstrate how PBL and TBL are similar and different.

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to answer the following questions:

- What is PBL?
- How does PBL align with the principles of communicative language teaching?
- What are the benefits of using PBL in an English language classroom?
- How is PBL similar to and different from TBL?

As indicated by the name, project-based learning involves students refining and honing their language skills through the completion of projects both in and outside of the classroom. It requires teachers to create a classroom culture of creativity and engagement in which students share their work and reflect on the processes they use to create and complete their

projects (Cooper & Murphy, 2016). It moves away from a teacher-centered style of teaching where students sit passively in a class and are rarely given the opportunity to put their ideas into action or practice their language skills in authentic environments. Instead, PBL engages students through the act of inquiry (Leat, 2017) and promotes the development of critical thinking skills.

Specifically, in the field of English language instruction, PBL is a means for students to improve their language and critical thinking skills in tandem. Tricia Hedge (1993) first introduced PBL as a means for English language learners (ELLs) to develop their communicative competence and fluency. She defined PBL as follows:

> A project is an extended task which usually integrates language skills through a number of activities. These activities combine in working towards an agreed goal and may include planning, the gathering of information through reading, listening, interviewing, etc., discussion of the information, problem solving, oral or written reporting, and display. (Hedge, 1993, p. 276)

While PBL is used with many types of learners and in many types of classrooms, for English language classes it includes the integration of language skills to complete these extended tasks. Hedge (1993) noted additional specifications for PBL use in an ELL classroom, including using authentic materials, creating a student-centered classroom, sequencing tasks to scaffold the final project, and students accepting responsibility in completing the project both in and outside of the classroom.

Communicative Language Teaching and PBL

Because PBL calls for the integration of language skills as a means for students to increase their fluency, it aligns well with the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. The CLT approach has been commonly used in English language classrooms since the 1970s for many types of learners—children, adults, postsecondary students, and so on. Brown and Lee (2015) have outlined seven characteristics of the communicative approach. The characteristics of CLT are helpful in understanding how PBL enhances English language learning and how it can be implemented into a classroom where CLT is applied.

- CLT focuses on all aspects of language (integration of skills).

- CLT focuses on the function of language, with form being secondary.

- CLT focuses on fluency first and then accuracy.

- CLT focuses on real-world contexts.

- CLT focuses on students using language outside of the classroom.

- CLT focuses on the teacher as a facilitator or guide.

- CLT focuses on student-centered learning.

As previously indicated, like CLT, PBL calls for the integration of language skills so that all aspects of language are taught. Projects often focus on real-life contexts and are collaborative, requiring students to negotiate for meaning with their instructors, their peers, and even outside participants, depending on the assignment. In PBL, the teacher creates a student-centered learning environment and facilitates or guides students through the completion of their projects.

For example, a teacher assigns students to read a passage from a textbook and answer comprehension questions. The students read and complete their assignment, but the teacher notices the students are disengaged and simply going through the motions of completing the assignment. They do not interact with their peers, and outside of the class they do not discuss what they have read. The teacher decides to better engage students through their assignments and assigns a novel for the class to read and discuss both in and outside of the classroom. After reading the novel, the teacher places students into groups and assigns each group to design a movie trailer about the novel. The creation of the movie trailer, like the completion of the comprehension questions, demonstrates students' comprehension of the novel. However, the project requires them to engage in a more thoughtful inquiry of the novel through discussing and analyzing the text with their peers in order to design the movie trailers.

If we look at Bloom's revised taxonomy, as developed by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), we see that when students read a text and answer comprehension questions, they only demonstrate their ability to remember and understand the reading assignment. Both of these outcomes fall in the lower end of the taxonomy pyramid. However, through the creation of the movie trailer, students not only demonstrate the ability to remember and understand the novel, they also apply what they learned from the novel by analyzing and evaluating the text in order to determine what information

should be included in the movie trailers. Indeed, the movie trailer project demonstrates students' ability to comprehend the novel and encourages them to develop their higher order language and thinking skills. These outcomes appear in the highest point of the taxonomy pyramid. At the end of the project, students share their work with each other and reflect on the process they used to complete the final project and the overall product.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Have you ever designed or used a project such as a movie trailer?
- How did you engage with your students throughout the project?
- How did your students use their language skills to create the project?

If you have designed an assignment such as the movie trailer example, then you have used PBL in your classroom. For an assignment to be considered PBL, it should

- require students to create an original or authentic product;
- encourage students to think critically;
- be made public and shared with peers, family, community members, and so on;
- encourage collaboration through completion of the project;
- encourage students to reflect during and after completion of the project.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- How does the movie trailer project meet the five criteria listed above for PBL?

Indeed, the movie trailer assignment is an excellent example of PBL, as it required students to create an original text and think critically. Students had to make inferences and analyze the novel in order to create their trailers. The

process they used to complete the project was collaborative, as they worked in groups to design the trailers. Students' work was made public or shared with an outside audience. And finally, after students shared their work, they reflected in their groups about the process they used to complete the trailer and the outcomes of their final projects.

In addition to the movie trailer, here are some other projects:

- creating a diorama to demonstrate comprehension of the characters, setting, and main conflict of a novel or short story

- writing a script and performing a play with peers

- researching a topic and creating a podcast to present the research findings to an audience

- writing a recipe and then demonstrating how to prepare the dish

- conducting an interview and creating a multimodal composition to share the findings with an audience

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- Can you think of other possible projects that would work well in your classroom?

The Benefits of Using PBL

There are multiple benefits to using PBL in an English language classroom. To begin, projects encourage students to further negotiate for meaning and use English in authentic and meaningful contexts. Indeed, second language acquisition theory has proven that group work is beneficial for students in learning English. Lessard-Clouston (2016), in exploring Long's interactionist model, has written that such interaction increases students' input and output of the language. In addition, Ellis (2003) has written that group work "increases language practice opportunities, it improves the quality of student talk, it helps to individualize instruction, it promotes a positive affective climate, and it motivates students to learn" (p. 598). In other words, group work reduces teacher talk time and creates an environment where students practice using the language. In addition, Long and Porter (1985) have written that group work offers students strategies for using the language

that they can employ outside of the classroom as well, because their speech is not staged or forced. Therefore, collaboration in PBL allows students to go beyond practicing the language, increasing their abilities to use English outside of the classroom in authentic settings.

In addition to group work, PBL offers students choices in their class work. Beckett (2002, p. 54) wrote that PBL is "exploratory in nature" and that outcomes of the projects vary, depending on students' work ethic and the individual choices they make while creating projects. Therefore, PBL requires students to take further ownership of their work more so than worksheets or other tasks assigned in textbooks.

Finally, Campbell (2012) noted that PBL allows for differentiated instruction. While students workshop their projects, instructors have time to better address individual students' needs and offer them feedback. Feedback is further addressed in Chapter 5, which discusses the assessment of projects.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- **What are some other benefits of using PBL in your classroom?**

How Is PBL Similar and/or Different From TBL?

PBL is often confused with TBL. According to Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001), "A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to obtain an objective" (p. 11). Bygate et al. focus on one activity in their definition. Yet PBL requires students to engage in several tasks in order to complete a project.

For example, a teacher assigns students to read and discuss a short story. After reading and discussing the text, students design a diorama that presents the setting, characters, and conflict of the story. After reading and note taking, students visually arrange the dioramas to ensure they include all the key components from the novel (setting, characters, plot, etc.). They then prepare a presentation and share their work with the class and the teacher. The teacher facilitates the development and arrangement

of the presentations so students are best prepared to share their work. After presenting their work, students reflect on the process of creating the dioramas and their final projects. This entire process takes several weeks to complete.

The teacher, in lesson planning for the project, may design smaller tasks or mini lessons for students to complete throughout the unit; for example, she or he may design a lesson on how to take notes. The students may complete this task in class to practice taking notes while reading. Tasks, especially those completed during a class period, serve as stand-alone activities. Therefore, these task-based lessons are only one piece of the entire unit or project, with the goal of ensuring students are on track to complete the project. In other words, the tasks scaffold to the completion of the project.

Table 1 demonstrates the differences between planning for day-to-day lessons (TBL) and planning for a project for a beginning-level communication skills course for adult learners (PBL). In these lessons, students learn to write and talk about recipes using proper measurements.

As indicated in Table 1, the instructor that used TBL spent only 3 days on instruction and 1 day on assessment. The activities allowed for individualized instruction, practice, and formative assessment, and students met each objective; however, students were not given the opportunity to extend their language learning and further their abilities to collaborate, critically think, share their recipes with an audience, or reflect on what they learned. Therefore, if we return to Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy, we see how the PBL unit, in contrast, extended students' learning and helped them acquire higher level thinking and language skills.

Also, as noted in Table 1, the project allowed time for students to workshop and confer with their instructor. Workshop days allow the instructor to provide students with further individualized instruction on content they may struggle to comprehend or language that is difficult to use. For example, a student may struggle with writing his or her biography for the cookbook. The instructor can use the workshop times to assist the student in writing a biography by modeling or using sentence forms to help the student write a draft. Then on the next workshop day, the student can bring his or her draft to the instructor for further feedback. This scaffolding creates opportunity for the sort of individualized instruction that is so important for ELLs as they acquire the language.

Table 1. Example of Task-Based Versus Project-Based Planning

	Task-Based Planning	**Project-Based Planning**
Day 1	**Objective:** Students will be able to identify measurements in recipes. ● The instructor introduces measurements, providing students with a handout or some other visual aid. ● Students complete a worksheet or a manipulative in which they match the correct measurement with its abbreviation (e.g., tsp. = teaspoon). ● The instructor goes over the activity and may assign homework such as a worksheet before students leave for the day.	**Objective:** Students will be able to identify measurements in recipes. ● The instructor introduces a project in which students will write a recipe, prepare the dish for their classmates, and collaboratively create a cookbook. ● After reviewing the assignment sheet and rubric, the instructor introduces measurements and has students complete a manipulative to match the correct measurements. ● For homework, students brainstorm their favorite recipes.
Day 2	**Objective:** Students will be able to use vocabulary that is common when cooking and reading recipes. ● The instructor may use PowerPoint or the Internet to display target vocabulary. ● Students may write sentences using the key vocabulary.	**Objective:** Students will be able to use vocabulary that is common when cooking and/or reading recipes. ● The instructor may use PowerPoint or the Internet to display target vocabulary and model how to write a recipe using measurements and key ingredients. ● Using the brainstorming they created on Day 1, students narrow their focus, select one recipe, and begin drafting the recipe in proper format.
Day 3	**Objective:** Students will be able to identify measurements in recipes and use vocabulary that is commonly found in recipes. ● The instructor may review lessons from Days 1 and 2 and have students complete an in-class activity as an informal assessment.	**Objective:** Students will be able to identify and use measurements in recipes as well as use vocabulary that is commonly found in recipes. ● Students continue writing their recipes. ● The instructor serves as a facilitator and asks questions as students continue to write their recipes.

Project-Based Learning

Table 1. *(continued)*

	Task-Based Planning	**Project-Based Planning**
Day 4	Students may be quizzed on materials.	**Objective:** Students will be able to talk about their recipes and explain the process for making the dish. ● Students bring their written recipes to class. ● The instructor shows a cooking demonstration or models how to talk about food. ● Students begin to rehearse their presentations.
Day 5		● Students continue to rehearse their presentations.
Day 6		● In front of the class, students demonstrate how to make the dish using props.
Day 7		● Continue presentations if needed.
Day 8		**Objective:** Students will be able to create a class cookbook in which they include their names, biographies, written recipes, and any eye-catching visuals for the audience. ● Workshop day. The instructor acts as a facilitator and assists students as they work together on the cookbook.
Day 9		● Workshop day
Day 10		● Workshop day
Day 11		**Objective:** Students will reflect on the project, discussing their overall contributions to the cookbook, how they would improve if they had more time to work, and the value of creating the cookbook. ● Final class cookbook is due.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced PBL and explained how it can be used when applying the communicative approach in an English language classroom. It also discussed benefits such as increasing students' critical thinking skills, improving their abilities to negotiate for meaning, and enhancing their opportunities to use English in authentic settings. Finally, PBL was compared and contrasted with TBL. The next chapter discusses best practices, specifically for using a process approach, when implementing PBL in the classroom.