

# An Empirical Study of Learners Agency and Identity in Project-based Learning

Du Mingmei

Shandong University of Finance and Economics, No. 7366, Erhuan Dong Street, Jinan, Shandong, China

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to explore the status quo and changing situation of Chinese college Student' agency, identity and attitude in Project-based Learning (PBL). Based on the activity theory, a 12-week classroom project teaching empirical study was conducted on a class of 40 students in a Chinese university. The following conclusions were drawn through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and student reflection diaries: 1) Students' self-identity is influenced by project team rules and division of labor; 2) Group collaboration activities contribute to the English learning agency of the students in the study. Through the use of tools, students participate in the division of labor and complete their tasks with stronger motivation as well as clear purpose; 3) Students' participation, self-identity and initiative are enhanced and more positive attitude is adopted. The project teaching method can effectively combine the in-class and after-class learning, and strengthen students' learning initiative.

## 1. Introduction

Project-Based Learning is based on constructivism, with the socialization process of learners as a means and the purpose of cultivating practical talents (Hedge, 1993) [1]. So learners can achieve meaningful communication by collaborating with other learners to refine their task division, to evaluate criteria based on the real tasks in a certain social and cultural context. Learners need to use relevant tools or learning materials to take the initiative to complete tasks, and gain knowledge and ability in the process. Therefore, the project teaching method pays attention to both the process and the output, and it helps learners internalize knowledge, enhance their communicative skills, and achieve learning goals (Beckett & Miller, 2006) [2]. Specifically, the teaching process is student-centered and action-based, involving group activities in the classroom, after-school exercises, collaborative learning, instructional guidance, and a comprehensive language and content learning process, which can be called a cross-curricular teaching mechanism.

In terms of the project activities, students' initiative is the core factor embedded with all kinds of project tasks. While the students, with the different purpose, are performing the tasks actively, the outcome of these tasks will be affected by their behaviors and decisions at different levels (Beckett, 2005) [3]. In most circumstances, students tend to make wise choices; even when the social environment around them may limit their choices, they can implement influence to refuse (e.g., keep silent, withdraw from classes, etc.) or cooperate. Similar findings also were concluded in Zhang Wenzhong (2015) [4] and his team's research. These dynamic behaviors and demonstration can also be seen as venues for students' identity and agency enforcement, but the few related research were carried out to explore the learners agency, identity and even their attitudes.

## 2. Project-based Learning from the Perspective of Activity Theory

The theoretical model of activity (see Figure 1), made by Engestrom (1999) [5], emphasizes the integration of individual activities with larger sociocultural structures. In the project-based learning process, when the students complete the task, their agency depends on the process of dynamic negotiation between the learner and the social and cultural background, which is also a potential ability. The time and space of action are different in forms with different individual. The

relationship between agency and identity is non-linear, and agency, as a means of regulation, not only promotes identity, but also gives identity to contextualization.

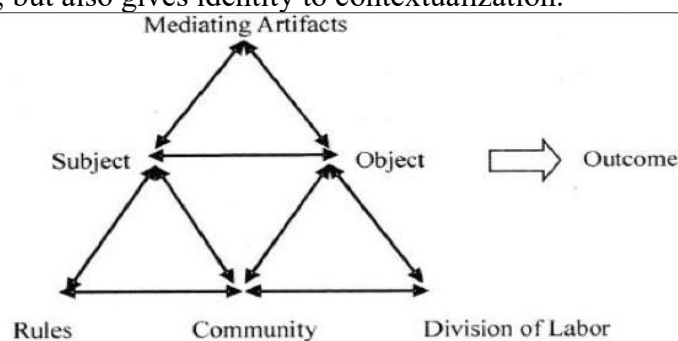


Fig. 1. Activity Theory Model (Engestrom, 1999: 31)

The main feature of PBL is that students can develop their self-taught ability and research skills, with which they can complete a project and display the outcome under the guidance of teachers. Therefore, students' agency and identity play an important role in the project. PBL emphasizes the language usage to promote learners' communicative competence. PBL activities can ensure involvement of students, stimulate students' motivation and innovation, improve their language skills and communication skills, enhance their self-confidence, and even foster their decision-making ability, analytical skills and critical thinking skills (Stoller, 2006) [6]. Through PBL activities, the students' agency can be promoted and their identities as L2 language learners can be shown explicitly.

This study mainly discusses 1. Are there any changes in the students' identity before and after participating in the project? 2. What is the effect of group activities in the project on students' English learning initiative? 3. What is the attitude of students towards English learning after the project?

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Object of Study

This research is a study conducted with the project pedagogy in a real classroom. 73 finance and economics majors (30 boys and 43 girls) from two experimental classes in a university took part in the 12-week Chinese Culture English course. The students in the innovative experimental class were recruited in their freshmen year by taking exams and interviews. Their average score of English test in the college entrance examination is 132 points. They all volunteered to join the English program.

#### 3.2 Data collection

1) Observe the presentation of the student's project results in the classroom and interview them after class. 2) Use questionnaires to understand their status, motivation, and attitudes of English learning in completing project activities. 3) Students' reflections are collected after completing the project.

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

The theory of activity in this study is both a research framework and a methodology. The survey questions gave students more opportunities to reflect on the English classroom using project teaching. The responses to the student questionnaires, the translated interviews, and the data in the reflective log are grouped and analyzed according to the various components of the activity theory triangle, namely goals and outcomes, subjects, division of labor, rules, tools, and groups. Take the first research question as an example, which is to explore the changes in student initiative, see Table 1.

Table 1 Data classification of students' activities in the project

| Category          | Explanation  | Example  |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Results           | Students agency  | "I feel more confident."   |
| Goal              | What the student wants to get from the activity              | "I like this way of learning."                                       |
| Subject           | Students participating in the project                        | "I want to improve my English."                                      |
| Division of roles | Roles and responsibilities in the group                      | "Every classmate has his own division of labor."                     |
| Rules             | Rules regulating project activities                          | "We need to discuss each other and come to a consistent conclusion." |
| Tools             | Internal and external tools that regulate student activities | "Find relevant information online and contemplate on it."            |
| Group             | Project team, class or university                            | "Our team is great and I have learned a lot with my teammates."      |

## 4. Research findings

### 4.1 Increased student identity in project tasks

Students' self-confidence is boosted. Some students develop from implicit self-identity to explicit self-identity in the process of completing the project tasks with the collaboration of team members. As Norton & Toohey (2011) [7] emphasizes, identity is how learners understand their relationship with the world, how this relationship is formed across time and space, and how individuals understand their own possibilities for the future. Specifically, the identity in the second language acquisition theory is the larger and more unequal self-social structure formed by the L2 learners in the daily social interaction. For example, in the interview, students said: *"I used to like Chinese culture before, but I don't know how to express it in English. After completing this task, I feel that I have learned many words. I also learned a lot of cultural knowledge. Especially good!"*; *"This kind of learning method enriches my knowledge and strengthens language skills. Because I want to speak on behalf of the group, I have to practice listening and speaking. I have grown a lot, I have learned to discuss, and I have to learn how to find information on the Internet."*

Group rules and the division of labor affect self-identity. The group rules for project-based tasks are a set of rules that are customary or formed through discussion. Some need compromising, and some need repeated negotiation. In this process, students' identification of the self-identity of English learning has changed a lot, and the social structure of identity has changed. Through the cooperation of project tasks, more direct self-awareness, and more comprehensive self-discovery and judgment appeared. In the discussion and debate with classmates, students find self-identity realized and make changes.

However, some students pointed out some shortcomings in the project activities, which made them lose their positions in the group and at a loss when they encountered problems. The relationship between some students and their team members is rather tense, and they do not want to participate in the discussion, which leave them no chance to practice English thus feel lost. In the interview, the students talked about *"Because my personality is more introverted, when I see other students slacking off, or when there is a dispute, I don't care, I don't want to talk more. I think my teammate who is active and good at English should do the task. I will just follow them to get a good score. However, after the end of the project, I regret it. I saw that the students in other groups have done a good job, and the spoken language has improved. I regret I had not cherished the opportunity."*

### 4.2 Group activities in the project promote students' English learning initiative

Group collaboration contributed to the students' English learning initiative in the study. In the

process of completing the project, students use the tools and take their own shares of tasks with stronger motivation and clear purpose. A student's initiative is the ability to regulate their actions in a sociocultural community, which enables them to imagine, assume, execute new roles or identities, and take concrete actions in achieving them. Motivation can also help people actively reject certain regulations, reality, status, and sometimes lead to opposing positions and behaviors, such as generating a new identity--a rebellious, unconfident student. If one aspect of the learner's initiative is out of place, the consequences are similar to those of the student who is negative in learning and uncooperative.

Motivation, power, and social environment are closely linked, because those who typically control their lives, choices, and environments also have the power to succeed (humane, social, cultural capital and ability). This is consistent with Zhang Wenzhong's (2015) [4] study, which emphasizes the importance of student participation and cooperation with others. For example, one student wrote in the reflection: *"we certainly have arguments in group discussions. However, we took turns to express our own views and the reasons for such choices. Finally, I convinced them of accepting my proposal. I was especially happy and motivated. It turned out that my efforts were not in vain. I am more confident and like learning English even more."*

### 4.3 Students' attitude towards English learning is more active after the project.

Eighty percent of the students are satisfied with the group's project activities. They found English learning more interesting and their passion for learning stimulated. The following comments are from students' reflection: *"It turns out that English learning can be quite interesting. At first, I did not really want to participate in the group discussion. Whoever likes to do the work should just do it. The topic we choose is Chinese music. Everyone is participating in discussing what to choose as the theme, but I was not interested at the beginning. Gradually, I felt that I also wanted to express my ideas. In the process of preparing my arguments, I checked the English introduction of music in Chinese culture, and slowly felt that English was not that difficult."* "I didn't like Chinese culture before, but I like it very much now. Very interesting." "This kind of task-based learning is a very enjoyable process, improving my English, cooperation and oral expression."

In project collaboration, students are highly motivated, more engaged, and self-identified and their attitude towards English learning is more positive. In Western countries, project-teaching methods have been widely used in subject teaching and foreign language teaching. Students set up projects, do projects, and report results around a topic. The process integrates various language skills and knowledge points. The boundaries among the courses of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating are no longer there. (Ding Yanren, Liu Haiping, 2011) [8].

## 5. Summary

This study verifies that students need cooperation and coordination in completing project tasks and group rules and division of labor affect their self-identities. Group collaboration promotes the English learning initiative of the participants in the study. Students completed their respective tasks with enhanced motivation, clear purpose, and the help of tools via participating in the division of labor. When the participation is enhanced, self-identity and high initiative make the students' attitude towards English learning more positive.

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