

Project-based Learning

An Effective Way to Stimulate College Students' English Learning Motivation

Yuanyuan Liu

College of Humanities
Yantai Nanshan University
Longkou, Shandong, China

Abstract—From the angle of the college English teaching practice, the author found students' English learning motivation was lacking. In order to stimulate their motivation, the author studied the effectiveness of project-based learning (PBL) based on her understanding of PBL theories and her own teaching experiences. This article also listed a teaching case, the Model Job Hunting Fair, which was used to state the specific procedures of PBL and offer basic standards of effectiveness evaluation of PBL. It aimed to be helpful for many college English teachers in their process of English teaching.

Keywords—PBL; College English; Learning Motivation; Effectiveness Evaluation

I. INTRODUCTION

For college English teachers, there has long been a problem that students lack learning motivation. Learners of second language learning need certain learning motivation to promote their learning. However, in the actual teaching process, teachers' efforts in listening, speaking, reading or writing seem useless at last. As Littlewood puts it, in second language learning, as in every other fields of human learning, motivation is the crucial force which determines where a learner embarks on a task at all. How much energy he devotes to it and how long he preserves. (Littlewood 1984, 53) Although many college students appeared in the classroom, it was not because they were willing to have English class, but they were forced to attend. As a result, it was very important to stimulate college students' English learning motivation. In the process of English teaching, the author found those task-based exercises in the textbook weren't good enough to inspire students' learning motivations, but even made them feel frustrated and bored. In English learning, students also listened to listening materials, imitated dialogues, practiced oral presentation or wrote compositions, but many dialogues materials and titles of compositions lost touch with real life, unable to arouse a real sense of communication and creative writing. In other words, the course contents couldn't make students resonate. Students felt that they were not the characters in dialogues, and those things weren't the things that they were willing to do and write. In order to stimulate students' learning motivation, the author adopted the method of PBL in the process of teaching, making students have a command of their English learning.

This article will introduce the theories of PBL and explain how this method improve students' interest and promote their participation in class activities. Meanwhile, the author will also introduce some specific practice cases of project-based teaching so as to offer some models of classroom teaching to those English teachers who would like to try.

II. PBL THEORIES

PBL is considered an alternative to paper-based, rote memorization, or teacher-led classrooms. Markham (2011) describes PBL thus: "PBL integrates knowing and doing. Students learn knowledge and elements of the core curriculum, but also apply what they know to solve authentic problems and produce results that matter. PBL students take advantage of digital tools to produce high quality, collaborative products. PBL refocuses education on the student, not the curriculum—a shift mandated by the global world, which rewards intangible assets such as drive, passion, creativity, empathy, and resiliency. These cannot be taught out of a textbook, but must be activated through experience."

PBL is a kind of teaching method based on the Communicative Teaching Method, which puts emphasis on using natural dialogues and activities in the real world during the language acquisition. In decades, many hypotheses for explaining the effectiveness of this method came into being in the process of researching classroom teaching and cognitive science. One hypothesis was the Acquisition-learning Hypothesis, which identified two independent ways in which we developed our language abilities.

i. Language Learning. It was a conscious process, which was generally related to formal classroom instruction and depended on direct grammar learning and error correction.

ii. Language Acquisition. It was a subconscious process, which generally referred to the abilities to acquire the first language that the children were born with. There was no direct instruction but lots of pure language input.

According to Krashen (2003), adults and children can subconsciously acquire language, and either written or oral language can be acquired. This process is similar to the process that children undergo when learning their native language. Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language, during which the acquirer is focused on meaning rather than form. For Krashen, acquisition is much

more important than learning. He asserted that only acquired language is ready for natural, fluent communication. According to the acquisition-learning hypothesis, teachers should create an environment which is full of meaningful language input and chances for real communication in their teaching practice. With an interesting task which is closely associated with students, their motivations of speaking more natural languages will be stimulated, thus, creating conditions for language acquisition. In the classroom teaching, teachers can adopt various kinds of projects. The more it is related to the real world and interesting current events, the better it can inspire students to speak pure languages in finishing their tasks. The teaching of PBL requires teachers to learn about students' needs and interests, and apply what they have learned to class activities and tasks. This way can make students realize learning is goal-directed and study with a target can give students an impulse to starting learning. According to Eisner (2005), we should realize that students are made up of many different inner-related parts, so we should perceive them as a whole in the process of teaching, curriculum design and evaluation. "For teachers, students' attentions focusing on these complex things doesn't simply teachers' task, instead, it will make education more close to those really important things." (Eisner 2005, 14)

In addition to a lot of excellent language input, there are other advantages of PBL.

i. PBL is a beneficial supplement for the study and practice of specific language skills. Various projects add to the variety of curriculum, making students more devoted to the study and improve learning motivation at the same time. (Chastain 1976) In fact, "PBL tends to redefine the boundaries of the classroom. Through PBL, the curriculum is moved toward authentic complexity and the 'big idea' of the world, allowing students and teachers to look beyond what can be housed within the traditional schoolroom." (Simkins et al. 2002)

ii. Besides English learning, students also learn other skills in the course of designing, planning and finishing projects such as: how to utilize multimedia devices, how to get various sorts of resources and information and how to cooperate in a team. All these are helpful for job-hunting in the future.

iii. Project-based teaching also enhances students' self-regulation of learning. In the learning process, students take more responsibilities and sometimes they even need to instruct each other. Thus, students will have a sense of satisfaction that they are needed and further stimulate their learning motivation.

III. TEACHING CASE

After learning about the PBL theories and how this teaching method inspires students' learning motivation. Teachers should turn to students and put teaching strategies and ideas into practice so as to conduct a further study on PBL theories. In the choice of projects, what to note is that we should choose projects that are practical and can stimulate students' enthusiasm. The purpose is to make

students more willing to participate in the project, not only to finish the teachers' tasks and get the credits. In the actual teaching process, the author ever adopted the following project to organize teaching, that is, Model Job Hunting Fair.

In order to conduct this project, it takes several steps. The first step is pre-task consideration.

The teacher should learn about the purpose and difficulty of the project before introducing it. If it is too easy, the students will feel it is boring and not challenging, and they can get little from the project. If it is too difficult, students will feel frustrated for not knowing how to get it off the ground, and then their learning motivation will be weakened. Therefore, teachers should ask themselves the following four questions according to Keller's ARCS Model of Motivational Design (1987) before conducting the project.

A. *Can the project attract students' attention*

Keller attention can be gained in two ways.

- Perceptual arousal—uses surprise or uncertainty to gain interest. Use novel, surprising, incongruous, and uncertain events;
- Inquiry arousal—stimulates curiosity by posing challenging questions or problems to be solved.

B. *Is this project relevant to students' needs, interest and motivation*

Establish relevance in order to increase a learner's motivation. To do this, use concrete language and examples with which the learners are familiar. Six major strategies described by Keller include: experience, present worth, future usefulness, needs matching, modeling and choice.

C. *Can the project strengthen students' confidence for achieving success or not*

Help students understand their likelihood for success; provide objectives and prerequisites; allow for success that is meaningful; grow the learners; feedback; learner control.

D. *Will students have a sense of achievement after finishing the project*

S means satisfaction. Learning must be rewarding or satisfying in some way. Make the learner feel as though the skill is useful or beneficial by providing opportunities to use newly acquired knowledge in a real setting. Provide feedback and reinforcement. Do not patronize the learner by over-rewarding easy tasks.

The second step is to introduce the project. In this stage, teachers should make students understand what they need to do in order to finish the project. Model job hunting fair is held in the form of on-site recruiting. It is a two-way choice between applicants and recruiters. The author divides the class into several study groups at the beginning of a term. Students work as a team both in-class activities and after-class assignment correction. In the project, every team chooses to represent a company, such as Nokia, China Mobile Communication Corporation. Members of groups are recruiters, and meanwhile they take turns to apply for a job as an applicant to companies represented by other groups. At

last, every group announces the names of intended recruiters. After reaching the agreement, they will sign letter of intent. (Teachers will provide appropriate reward.) The author will select the group leader after introducing the project. (There will be several tasks in a semester, so almost every student has the chance to be the leader and take charge of the project.) Afterwards, every group selects the company that they will represent under the directions of the group leader and announces to the class ahead of time. If the members of other group are interested in some companies, they need to learn about the companies beforehand after class and make full preparation for the position. Meanwhile, they should cooperate with other members of their group in making recruitment advertising videos and working out interview strategies and so on. This provides an excellent opportunity for students to practice abilities of group cooperation and interview skills.

The third step is to make project schedules. Discussing with students and making specific arrangements about model job hunting fair and other relevant matters.

The fourth step is the implementation of the project. The teacher announces the opening of model job hunting fair. Then the selected spokesman of every group takes turns to introduce the company and play videos and so on. Every group selects a location and begins to recruit after an introduction. Students introduce themselves, ask and answer questions or discuss in English the process. Finally, the results come out.

The fifth step is reflection. Every member of the groups who finished the project shares the gains and losses during the project, and summed up what he or she did for the group, which also provided references for teachers to judge the performance of every group member.

The sixth step is the evaluation of project implementation. Reward the selected students who could be employed, and every group voted to select the group that performed best.

IV. EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROJECT

A very important step of PBL is evaluation. Only there is a good system of evaluation before, during and after developing the projects can they exert the best utility (reword this sentence). Generally, the following points should be taken into consideration.

- The project is directly relevant to the teaching aims of the curriculum. A successful case of PBL should be directly related to teaching aims of the curriculum. For example, model job hunting fair can enhance students' communicative abilities, including interview and oral expression, etc.
- The project is associated with real life or not. The project should be related to students' actual life. Looking for a job has been the common concern of students. Therefore, the project offers a chance for students to practice before they really hunt for a job. During the project, students can learn about the basic procedures of job fair and know in advance that

things are not always as good as it is. Likewise, unexpected things can also appear in job fair.

- The project can stimulate students' long-term interest. Students are interested in copywriting and planning and some relevant things after participating in model job hunting fair. They set about searching various sorts of English recruitment ads and information, developing long-term learning interest.
- Students directly participate in the various decisions of the project. Although teachers can set some rules and restrictions or offer suggestions during the project, major decisions of the project should be made by students. Such as, company selection or interview procedures.
- During the project, members of groups can cooperate well. Students' abilities of group cooperation are an important factor for the effectiveness of PBL. Students whether can take part in the group discussion and cooperate to accomplish the common task of the group.
- There is teachers' evaluation after completing the project. It is also a challenge to evaluate the situation of the project, so teachers need to take overall consideration and give feedback in time.
- The implementation of the project enhance students' other skills in addition to English learning. In the display part of model job hunting fair, students also learn how to make PPT and how to be a good spokesman, interviewer and applicant. All these are what the modern college students should understand and learn, and are an aspect of PBL evaluation.

Researchers have identified several factors that are crucial to successful PBL. While PBL has been criticized in the past for not being rigorous enough, the following features will greatly improve the chances of a project's success:

- A. *A realistic problem or project aligns with students' skills and interests and requires learning clearly defined content and skills (e.g. using rubrics, or exemplars from local professionals and students)*
- B. *Structured group work*
 - 1) *Groups of three to four students, with diverse skill levels and interdependent roles*
 - 2) *Team rewards*
 - 3) *Individual accountability, based on student growth*
- C. *Multi-faceted assessment*
 - 1) *Multiple opportunities for students to receive feedback and revise their work (e.g., benchmarks, reflective activities)*
 - 2) *Multiple learning outcomes (e.g., problem-solving, content, collaboration)*
 - 3) *Presentations that encourage participation and signal social value (e.g. exhibitions, portfolios, performances, reports)*

D. Participation in a professional learning network

- 1) Collaborating and reflecting upon PBL experiences in the classroom with colleagues*
- 2) Courses in inquiry-based teaching methods*

V. CONCLUSION

Studies have proven that when implemented well, project-based learning (PBL) can increase retention of content and improve students' attitudes towards learning, among other benefits. PBL relies on learning groups. Student groups determine their projects. In doing so, they engage student voices by encouraging them to take full responsibility for their learning. This is what makes PBL constructivist. Students work together to accomplish specific goals. PBL emphasizes learning activities that are long-term and student-centered. It also gives students the opportunity to explore problems and challenges that have real-world applications, increasing the possibility of long-term retention of skills and concepts.

Obviously, PBL is a challenge. Teachers must take many factors into consideration if they want to succeed in carrying out PBL in teaching practice. These factors include the real relevance of materials: whether language input is pure, whether students' group cooperation can be practiced, whether students have a sense of achievement, and so forth. Of course, offering appropriate rewards also a good way to stimulate students' learning motivation. In a word, if PBL is developed successfully, no matter model job hunting fair or other projects, they all can stimulate students' participation of English learning greatly, making them acquire a second language more consciously and independently. College English teachers also have to make greater efforts.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chastain, K. 1976. *Developing Second Language Skills: Theory to Practice*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- [2] Eisner, E. 2005. Back to Whole. *Educational Leadership* 63:14-18.
- [3] Flesicher, C. 2004. Professional Development for Teacher-writers. *Educational Leadership* 62:24-28.
- [4] Keller, J.M. 1987. Development and Use of the ARCS Model of Motivational Design. *Journal of Instructional Development* 10:2-10.
- [5] Karshen, S. 2003. *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use: The Taipei lectures*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- [6] Little wood, W. 1984. *Foreign and Second Language Learning: Language Acquisition Research and Its Implications for Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Little wood, W. 1994. *Teaching Oral Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [8] Markham, T. 2011. Project Based Learning. *Teacher Librarian*, 39(2), 38-42.
- [9] Simkins, M., K. Cole, F. tavalin, and B. means. 2002. *Increasing Student Learning through Multimedia Projects*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.