

Project-based Learning of Senior High School English under the Guidance of Key Competencies

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Abstract: At present, English teaching attaches great importance to the study of language knowledge and neglects the development of language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. With the further implementation of the new curriculum reform, Project-based Learning has been paid more and more attention. In senior high school English teaching, we can carry out project-based teaching based on students' existing knowledge and cognitive structure, mobilize students' enthusiasm to participate in the project, and then improve their key competencies. This paper mainly takes the learning activities of the Unit 3 Project block of the high school English textbook about People's Education Press to Make a Travel Brochure as an example to introduce the PBL teaching design, and discusses how to develop students' key competencies in activities.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning, Key Competencies, Senior High School, English Teaching.

1. Introduction

According to the *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 revision, 2020 edition)*, English teaching should take learners as the principle. Students should gradually form correct values, necessary characters, and key abilities that meet the needs of personal lifelong development and social development through course learning. The key competencies include language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability^[2]. Therefore, the traditional method of emphasizing knowledge teaching is not suitable for the characteristics of the times and the development of students. Teachers should design comprehensive activities according to the English learning activities in the curriculum standard, which is in line with students' cognition and the development of their ability.

Project-Based Learning (hereafter called PBL) is a set of systematic learning methods that enables students to master the required knowledge and skills through the process of exploring complex and real problems, elaborately designing project works, planning and implementing project tasks, presenting projects, and conducting exchanges and cooperation. PBL conforms to "Curriculum Standards" and is an effective way to cultivate key competencies.

2. The Definition and Characteristics of PBL

(1) The definition of PBL

In the field of general education, based on different research perspectives and positions, researchers have explored multiple definitions of Project-based Learning.

Originating from John Dewey's early 20th-century concept of "learning by doing" (Kilpatrick 1918 & Dewey 1926)^{[6][1]}, PBL is grounded in social constructivism and significantly influenced by theories such as situated learning, social interaction, and cognitive tools (Krajcik & Blumenfeld 2006)^[7]. William Heard Kilpatrick (1918) first fully articulated this methodology, defining project-based learning as learner-centered, purposeful activities. This definition embodies the learner-centered philosophy of project-based

learning, emphasizing the participatory and constructive nature of learning activities^[6]. Guo Hua (2018) argues that project-based learning (PBL) is a comprehensive, activity-oriented educational practice. It enables learners to conduct self-directed learning by integrating interdisciplinary achievements, with the acquisition of systematic subject knowledge as its foundation^[3]. Yang Mingquan (2021) describes PBL as a constructivist teaching method where teachers guide students to apply knowledge to real-world problems and present shared results^[13]. Yang Luxin and Diao Huiying (2024) believes that PBL effectively embodies the student-centered philosophy^[12].

Based on these definitions, PBL is a form of "doing projects" and a process of exploring complex and real problems. It is a method combining knowledge learning and project construction. In the real background, with the driving problem as the center, students are required to explore and solve problems under the guidance of teachers and theme-based project tasks, so as to achieve learning goals. It is a kind of problem-solving and outcome-oriented approach, as the main characteristics emphasizing the student-centered teaching method. There is a relatively complete learning cycle, including project identification, project formulation, project implementation and project presentation.

(2) The Characteristics of PBL

Although researchers hold varying interpretations of project-based learning (PBL), this thesis adopts the six characteristics synthesized by Liu Jianjun (2023)^[5], integrating perspectives from Stroller (1997)^[9], Larmer et al. (2009)^[4], Xia (2018)^[11], Yang (2021)^[13] and others.

Firstly, learner-centered: Students exert initiative, use given discourse choice, engage in tasks, collaborate, and build ownership to meet needs like autonomy. Secondly, key competency-oriented: As an interdisciplinary approach, it prioritizes teaching and learning for understanding, features inquiry and generative outcomes, and cultivates comprehension. Thirdly, problem-solving-driven: Challenging problems create higher-order thinking to ignite motivation, serving as project stimulus, framework, and inquiry driver. Fourthly, authentic context-grounded: Authentic disciplinary platforms allow students to gain

knowledge, skills, qualities, and knowledge understanding through practice. Fifthly, project outcome-guided: Students complete projects for driving questions and present publicly-distinguishing PBL from conventional teaching and reflecting outcomes orientation. Lastly, diverse assessment-leveraged: Evaluation tied to outcome generation and presentation integrates formative, summative, and multi-stakeholder methods to boost student engagement.

That's to say, PBL can not only focus on students as the center, make use of the potential of learning, make English learning closer to our life, but also can closely combine teaching and social development, cultivate learning and cooperative talents in line with the needs of the times, and promote the realization of the core goal of education "moral cultivation".

3. The Theoretical Basis of Project-based Learning

As for PBL, it can be traced back to Dewey's theory of "learning by doing". Later, influenced by this idea, his student William Kilpatrick proposed to obtain knowledge from practice, emphasizing that individuals should consult relevant information in various ways, collect data, sort out and analyze, and verify in real situations. Namely, a purposeful, planned and inquiry-based learning method in the social context.

Constructivism learning view holds that students acquire knowledge by actively constructing knowledge on the basis of their own knowledge, experience, and cultural background, and at the same time, teachers give certain guidance. According to the teaching view, PBL is a kind of teaching mode in which teachers ask students to actively explore by raising challenging and authentic questions.

Multiple intelligence theory holds that PBL requires individuals to use their own intelligence to complete tasks, promote their own development in various aspects and cooperate in group inquiry learning, emphasizing a learning mode of multiple evaluation pragmatism learning theory, represented by Dewey and Kerberch, emphasizes "learning by doing", and believes that PBL is an experiential, exploratory and practical learning mode. It pays more attention to linking theory with practice.

4. The Steps of Implementation of PBL

(1) Pre-Project Preparation Stages

The pre-project preparation stage serves as the foundational phase of PBL implementation, where teachers lay the groundwork for effective project execution by clarifying objectives, organizing teams, and providing necessary support. This stage is critical for activating students' prior knowledge, stimulating learning motivation, and ensuring that the project aligns with curriculum standards. The specific operational steps are as follows:

The primary step is to design contextualized lead-in activities. By utilizing multi-modal resources (such as scenic images and cultural documentaries), the task of "Making a Travel Brochure" is introduced to stimulate students' interest. Concurrently, teachers present a sample brochure and analyze its structure (including destination overviews, attraction introductions, and transportation guides) to help students build a cognitive framework.

Next comes group formation and theme selection. Students are divided into groups of 4-6 members based on the principle of heterogeneity, considering factors like language

proficiency and skills. Each group selects a target city (e.g., Beijing, Hangzhou), and teachers provide guidance to avoid duplicate themes and ensure cultural diversity.

Additionally, formulating learning objectives and evaluation criteria is a key step to guide the project direction. Teachers consider language learning, content knowledge learning and synthesis ability and other aspects to formulate overall learning objectives. What is more, the teacher instructs the project teams to develop the project plan and project implementation schedule, such as travel planning, group division, and the time to complete each task. Concurrently teacher instructs project teams to set specific learning goals, such as introducing the Forbidden City in simple English. Finally, teachers provide language for students to carry out project research, content, and skill preparation, and need to tell students to get access to obtain relevant language knowledge and content knowledge, such as the Internet, books, Magazines.

(2) Project Implementation Stages

The project implementation stage is the core phase of PBL, where students transition from preparation to practical operation, applying language knowledge and research skills to complete the travel brochure. This stage requires teachers to adopt a facilitative role, providing timely guidance and feedback to address problems encountered by students. The specific steps are as follows:

The primary task is information collection and screening. Each group gathers data about the target city (including attraction details, transportation, accommodation, and culture) and screens the information to ensure accuracy and suitability for English expression. Teachers assist in verifying information (e.g., real-time ticket prices) to avoid cultural misunderstandings.

Subsequently, brochure drafting and revision follow an iterative process. students began to make tour brochures, and teachers are required to provide students with relevant language knowledge and travel brochures making tips. After each project team has completed the first draft of the tour brochure, it is necessary for teachers provide specific modification suggestions, such as travel brochure design problems, language problems. Project teams must revise the travel brochures according to the teachers' constant suggestions until it meets the standards .

Lastly, preparation for oral presentation involves creating a 5-7 minute script that includes a Q&A session. Teachers provide training on pronunciation, logical structure, and non-verbal skills, and organize practice sessions with feedback.

(3) Post-project Presentation and Reflection Stages

The post-project presentation and reflection stage is the concluding phase of PBL, where students showcase their project outcomes, receive comprehensive evaluation, and reflect on their learning process. This stage not only helps students consolidate knowledge but also enables teachers to assess the effectiveness of PBL implementation and optimize future instructional strategies. The specific steps are as follows:

First, project presentation provides a platform for students to demonstrate their achievements. Each group presents their travel brochure to the class using a slideshow (with the brochure displayed on the screen) and delivers the oral presentation based on their prepared script. During the presentation, other students are encouraged to ask questions, and the presenting group responds in English, fostering interactive communication. Teachers ensure that each group

has equal presentation time (e.g., 7 minutes per group) and maintain a positive classroom atmosphere to encourage student participation.

Second, comprehensive evaluation adopts a multi-dimensional and multi-subject evaluation model, which is a key feature of PBL. The evaluation involves three subjects: (1) Teacher evaluation: teachers assess each groups' brochure, oral presentation, and team collaboration using the pre-designed rubric, assigning scores for each criterion (e.g., 30% for brochure content, 30% for oral presentation, 20% for team collaboration, 20% for research process); (2) Peer evaluation: students evaluate other groups' work using a simplified version of the rubric, focusing on aspects such as "clarity of presentation" and "usefulness of information"; (3) Self-evaluation: each group reflects on their own performance, answering questions such as "What did we do well?" and "What problems did we encounter?" The final evaluation result is a combination of these three scores, ensuring objectivity and comprehensiveness.

Finally, summary, consolidation, and reflection involve: teachers summarizing project outcomes (outstanding works, common errors), explaining core language (vocabulary, sentence patterns) and cultural knowledge, and reinforcing learning through exercises like gap-filling and translation. Meanwhile, teachers and students reflect separately-teachers assess the achievement of goals, rationality of the schedule, and effectiveness of guidance, while students think about skill improvement and team contributions. These insights provide a basis for optimizing future PBL projects.

In summary, the PBL approach in foreign language teaching, as demonstrated by the "Making a Travel Brochure" project, comprises three crucial stages: pre-project preparation, implementation, and post-project presentation and reflection. Each stage demands thoughtful planning and execution. Employing a multi-faceted evaluation method encourages ongoing enhancement and fosters all-round educational growth.

5. The Significance and Limitations of Project-Based Learning

(1) Significance

PBL offers distinct advantages in fostering students' comprehensive competencies compared to traditional foreign language teaching, addressing limitations of conventional models while aligning with modern education's student-centered goals.

A. Superiority Over Traditional Teaching Models

Traditional foreign language teaching follows a teacher-centered paradigm, focusing on one-way knowledge transmission but neglecting practical language application and autonomous learning. Willie (2001) and Solomon (2003) pointed that PBL is different from traditional instruction because it emphasizes learning through student-centered, interdisciplinary, and integrated activities in real world situations^{[10][8]}. In this process, teachers only act as facilitators, guiding 4-6 member collaborative groups to tackle authentic tasks (e.g., "Make a Travel Brochure"). Students proactively collect, analyze, and organize information to build knowledge, integrating knowledge acquisition with ability development.

B. Facilitation of Cultural Awareness Cultivation

Cultural background knowledge is a core component of foreign language learning, and PBL provides a systematic framework for its integration. Teachers collect diverse

cultural resources-including academic databases, official tourism platforms of target-language countries, and multi-media materials-and deliver them via multi-modal instructional strategies (e.g., audio-visual displays, interactive cultural workshops). They also intentionally introduce comparisons between Chinese and Western cultures (e.g., differences in communication etiquette), guiding students to recognize cultural similarities and disparities. This process helps students develop respect for cultural diversity and form an open worldview, laying the foundation for cross-cultural communication competence.

C. Promotion of Thinking and Practical Abilities

In PBL, collaborative project processes drive students' active engagement: through cooperative learning, they independently search for relevant information, verify its authenticity, and classify materials by project needs-activities that effectively activate their thinking and foster critical thinking skills. Moreover, PBL situates learning in real social contexts: students complete tasks through "hands-on practice" (e.g., drafting English content, designing project outputs) and "intellectual engagement" (e.g., solving task-related challenges), realizing the integration of hands and brains. This "learning by doing" model enables students to apply knowledge in practice, improving their information literacy, practical operation skills, and problem-solving capacities.

D. Contribution to Key Competencies Improvement

Ultimately, PBL integrates language competence, cultural awareness, thinking, and practical skills-key dimensions of foreign language core competencies. It aligns with modern teaching goals, serving as an effective approach to boost students' comprehensive quality and prepare them for global communication and lifelong learning.

(2) Limitations

Despite its advantages, PBL in foreign language teaching faces several practical limitations that affect its implementation effectiveness.

A. Difficulties in Designing Driving Tasks

A core challenge lies in PBL design, particularly the development of contextualized driving questions. Constrained by traditional teaching concepts and the limited daily use of English in non-English environments, teachers often struggle to create driving questions that deeply engage students. Such questions fail to resonate with students' cognitive needs, hindering the stimulation of critical thinking and in-depth learning development. This section uses "contextualize" to enhance academic rigor while condensing redundant descriptions to retain core logic.

B. High Demands on Teachers

PBL involves multiple interrelated elements, such as task design, group guidance, and resource integration, requiring teachers to consider diverse factors comprehensively. This process is time-consuming and labor-intensive, increasing teachers' workload significantly compared to traditional teaching. Additionally, PBL may not fully align with the cognitive and language proficiency levels of all students, complicating the balance of instructional support. Here, specifying PBL elements clarifies teacher demands, while linking workload to traditional teaching creates clear contrast.

C. Student Adaptation Barriers

Influenced by long-term traditional classroom experiences, some students struggle to shift from passive knowledge receivers to active learners-a core requirement of PBL. Furthermore, the lack of differentiated design for students at varying proficiency levels may leave lower-achieving

students unable to keep up with project progress, while higher-achieving students may not be sufficiently challenged, affecting overall participation and learning outcomes. Expanding “concept change” to “role shift” here improves academic accuracy, and adding details on proficiency differences enriches content depth.

6. Conclusion

In a word, PBL plays a salient role in enhancing students’ comprehensive foreign language competencies -language application proficiency, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and autonomous learning capacity-serving as an effective approach to advance key competencies in foreign language education.

In line with the requirements of Curriculum Standards, PBL in senior high school English teaching must be anchored in curriculum “big ideas” and geared toward preset teaching objectives. Project design should align with these objectives, accommodate students’ cognitive traits and learning needs, and drive a role shift: teachers from knowledge transmitters to instructional facilitators, students from passive receivers to active knowledge constructors. It should also integrate scenario-based driving questions and essential instructional scaffolding. This ensures students sustain engagement, have practical content to apply, and achieve progressive development in foreign language proficiency and literacy.

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