

# *Application of PBL Model in Public Speaking Courses*

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**Abstract:** Project-based learning (PBL) is a teacher-guided and student-centered teaching method based on projects aiming to develop and improve abilities of self-directed learning, researching, sharing and cooperating. Public Speaking of English, as a compulsory course for English majors, aims to enhance students' comprehensive language skills and intercultural communicative competence. With online study platform Xuexitong, the author was able to integrate PBL and public speaking course. In groups, students were required to complete two projects in 16 weeks, which contain a series of interconnected sub-projects. Through PBL, students' understanding on contents, in-class participation, cooperation and critical thinking ability were greatly improved.

## **1. Introduction**

In the context of English major education reform and New Liberal Arts Construction, to cultivate international talents who are capable of spreading excellent Chinese culture and telling Chinese stories has become one of the essential goals of English major education in China. Public Speaking of English, as a compulsory course, aims to develop students' comprehensive language skills, intercultural communicative skills and critical thinking ability. However, according to the author's observation, teachers of this course often require students to imitate the writing of existed speeches, and from there to further train their presentation skills. The whole process is teacher-centered. Students have very little chance to be involved in self-directed learning, discussion and cooperation. This article tries to show how PBL approach can make a difference to the teaching and learning of this course.

## **2. Theoretical Orientation and Foundations**

### **2.1. Project-based Learning Approach**

Project-based learning (PBL) is a model consists of projects that encourages students to collect information, discuss questions, analyze materials and communicate ideas.<sup>[1]</sup> In 2004, Stoller proposed the 9 steps of applying PBL in teaching practices. (See Table 1 <sup>[2]</sup> Based on these steps, the author integrated PBL model and Public Speaking of English. Students were required to compete two group projects in one semester. Every project consists of five sub-projects: Selecting a Topic and a Purpose, Supporting Your Ideas, 1st Draft, 2nd Draft, Final Draft. In this way, the course transformed from teacher-centered to student-centered.

Table 1: Stroller's 9 steps of applying PBL in teaching practices

Step	Content
1	Teacher guides students to select research project topics.
2	Teacher and students decide the criteria for assessment.
3	Teacher and students build the projects.
4	Students use various sources to collect information.
5	Teacher supports and guides students during their process of collecting information.
6	Students analyze and classify information.
7	Teacher provides skills for students' analysis and classification of information and language techniques for their presentation
8	Students present the outcomes.
9	Teacher and students assess the outcomes.

### 3. The Integration of PBL and Public Speaking of English

#### 3.1. Learning Condition, Preparations and Xuexitong Platform

##### 3.1.1. Learning Condition and Preparations

Students in this paper are sophomore English majors from a local private university. There are 5 classes and 168 of them. At the beginning of the semester, students voluntarily formed 30 groups. Each group consisted of 5 to 6 members.

##### 3.1.2. Xuexitong Platform

Chaoxinxing Xuexitong platform is known for its complete functions and multi-terminal access. With the development of information age, mobile phones and computers are widely used for learning activities, which provides a good condition for the digitization of projects. Meanwhile, Xuexitong platform supports one-on-one and many-to-many discussion, peer assessment, self-assessment and teacher assessment, etc, which offers multiple choices for communication and assessment.

#### 3.2. Project and Sub-projects

##### 3.2.1. Project

Students were required to complete two projects in groups. The goal of each project is to write a speech and present it to the class. The reason why the author decided that students had to finish two projects was to help them develop a back-up speech while they were preparing for the main topic. In the meantime, with two projects, there will be enough tasks and more discussions.

Each project consisted of 5 sub-projects. By completing each one of them, students got closer to the completion of the whole project. During the process, group members divided the work and cooperated with each other. In other words, students undertook different roles and headed to the same destination.

### **3.2.2. Sub-projects**

#### **3.2.2.1. Selecting a Topic and a Purpose**

This sub-project asks each group to select the topic of the speech and draft the framework. The author gave an alphabet (A to Z) to each group. Students discussed and came up with topics to fill in the alphabet, for example C-Chat GPT, D-Domestic violence, P-Pet Abuse, etc. When the activity ended, each group had a list of topics they would like to research. Then the author asked each group to select two topics they were most interested in.

After the selection, each group wrote the Main Purpose (To Inform/To Persuade), Specific Purpose and Main Idea for each topic. Thus the framework of the two speeches had been developed. The work was required to be photographed and uploaded to Xuexitong platform.

#### **3.2.2.2. Supporting Your Ideas**

This sub-project requires each group to collect, classify and analyze supporting materials. Students can divide the work based on the topics (who will find the materials for which topic) or the kinds of the supporting materials (who will find statistics/examples/testimony for both topics). After the collection, classification and analysis of the materials, students linked the evidence to each idea. This work was also requested to be photographed and uploaded.

#### **3.2.2.3. 1st Draft**

By completing the first two steps, the main body of the speeches is ready. Now it's time to draft. In each group, two students were selected by their group members to write the 1<sup>st</sup> draft. When it was done, the rest of the group were suggested to revise first. The trace of their revisions were asked to be kept and the drafts were uploaded to Xuexitong platform.

#### **3.2.2.4. 2nd Draft**

In this step, the teacher gives feedback to the 1<sup>st</sup> drafts. When the 1<sup>st</sup> drafts were uploaded, the author had been teaching how to write effective beginnings and endings. Based on what had been learned, students were suggested to revise the speeches with an emphasis on perfecting the beginnings and endings. Each group were asked to begin preparing visual aids (PowerPoint, pictures, posters, videos, etc) for presentation. The 2<sup>nd</sup> drafts and visual aids were asked to be uploaded.

#### **3.2.2.5. Final Draft**

In this step, the teacher gives feedback to the 2<sup>nd</sup> drafts and visual aids. After receiving the author's feedback, each group selected two representatives for presentations and began rehearsing. When the presentations were done, the final drafts and visual aids were uploaded to Xuexitong.

### **3.3. Assessment**

With each sub-project completed, the assessment was done both online and offline, from both peers and the teacher. Every uploaded work was primarily checked by all group members and students were helping as well as supervising each other, which ensured the quality of the outcomes. The author also reserved some time in class for discussions and peer assessment, which helped each group effectively finish or revise their work after class. After the presentations, the author scored and gave feedback to the projects. The score accounted for 40% of the formative evaluation.

### 3.4. Results

PBL model is contextualized, cooperating, question-intriguing, self-inquiring, interdisciplinary and reflective.<sup>[1]</sup> By integrating PBL and Public Speaking of English, the author observed an obvious improvement in in-class participation and cooperation. Judging from the final outcomes, students' critical thinking ability and comprehensive language skills are also enhanced remarkably.

#### 3.4.1. In-class Participation

Different from the traditional teacher-centered model, PBL is student-centered and teacher-guided. While finishing the projects, students discuss extensively to select topics, set main ideas, revise drafts, make visual aids, etc. The teacher serves as a facilitator to provide language, strategies, skills which help complete the tasks. For example, the teacher might assist students in selecting the topics, structuring the framework, summarizing the main ideas, etc. Working in groups also helps students overcome psychological barriers and increases their will to express. Especially for students who are not proficient, group works can reduce their anxiety effectively.<sup>[3]</sup> Compared to teacher-question-student-answer model, PBL emphasizes the common construction from the two parties. Students clearly feel their dominant role as the decision makers and thus are more willing to participate. Meanwhile, to better assist students, teachers have to constantly absorb new knowledge, research new fields and accumulate new experiences, which contribute to the growth of both teachers and students.<sup>[4]</sup>

#### 3.4.2. Cooperation

PBL model stress the importance of cooperation. During the process, every student undertakes a certain role which leads to corresponding tasks like collecting materials, classifying and analyzing information, drafting, revising, etc. In this process every group member gives play to their strengths and contributes to the construction of projects. The author explained the course assessment to the students thoroughly at the beginning of the semester and made it clear that the score for final outcomes will be shared by all group members. Then students realized they were a member of the group and they strove for the same goal. In order to complete the projects, group members shared knowledge, communicated ideas, solved problems together, which led to both individual and collective growth.

#### 3.4.3. Critical Thinking Ability

PBL model requires students to solve problems in the process of completing the project, which increases consciousness of problems and improves critical thinking ability.<sup>[5]</sup> The author observed the process where students selected speech topics. If one student wants his or her topic to be selected, he or she will have to participate in discussions, communicate with others, persuade and finally compromise. Compared to the model that teacher sets the topic, PBL cultivates critical thinking during the process of solving the problems, which is exciting and challenging. When the author assisted each group in summarizing the ideas for the speech's body part, students were required to debate from different perspectives, which efficiently deepened their understanding on the topic.

#### 3.4.4. Comprehensive Language Skills

PBL model effectively improves the speaking ability of students. While building the projects, students communicate, discuss, explain and persuade each other in English, which is challenging and intriguing. PBL also contextualizes the tasks, which leads to the improvement of intercultural

communicative competence. For instance, when helping students set a purpose for the speech, the author asked each group to discuss the following questions: Why should other people know about your topic? How can you make other people take an interest in your topic? When discussing these questions, students assumed “other people” are from both the same and different culture, which helped them to improve the ability of comparing, understanding and spreading cultures.

### 3.5. Reflections

Though the integration was generally successful, there were several drawbacks occurred during the practices.

#### 3.5.1. Imbalanced Participation

Though group works provide a safe and intriguing environment for students to express themselves, some members might be overly dominant or completely inactive. According to the research of Dochy, the knowledge and skills acquired from research-based learning vary greatly when students’ abilities are distinct.<sup>[6]</sup> Teachers may be able to balance the participation of the group members in class but it’s hard to supervise their participation after class. Some students reported that several members were constantly absent or even completely inactive.

#### 3.5.2. Imbalanced Work Division

Deriving from the last problem, students might receive imbalanced workload. Even though PBL puts an emphasis on common construction, some group members might take on the most work actively or passively, which leads to the conflicts between group members and dissents on the distribution of the scores. To solve this problem, the author added group member evaluation to adjust the scores within a group.

#### 3.5.3. Insufficient Knowledge and Ability

To successfully complete a project, students need to have a certain fund of knowledge and abilities, for example, the knowledge of online resources, the ability to collect, analyze, integrate, classify information, the ability to write a speech and orally present the outcome.<sup>[7]</sup> The students author taught were relatively insufficient in several mentioned aspects. Teacher’s assistance is indispensable in the process of completing the project. Teachers are supposed to open the channels for seeking help and assist students in dealing with the problems timely.

### 4. Conclusions

The integration of PBL model and Public Speaking of English helps the author build a student-centered and teacher-guided class. Students’ in-class participation, cooperation and comprehensive language skills are improved remarkably. PBL model can be widely applied in other English major courses. Through the teacher’s design, students will get a better learning experience and cultivate various abilities in the process of analyzing and solving problems.

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