

The Application of Project-based Learning of English Major Students in the University

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Abstract. Since the promotion of project-based learning has not been widely accepted in Chinese universities, especially for English major students, it is necessary to find the barriers and find some solutions to overcome them. The advantages of project-based learning are widely spread, including increasing students' knowledge, and improving their autonomy, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. However, it hasn't been totally accepted by Chinese universities, especially for English major students for different reasons of students and teachers. Also, the evaluation method of a project-based classroom is totally different from the traditional one which has advantages like maximizing students' ability and barriers of evaluation like the corresponding standard that blocks the promotion way. What's more, the contrast between traditional pedagogies and project-based learning exists. Since there are so many factors on the promotion path of project-based learning, the solutions for students and teachers are essential. The study's goal is to raise the profile of English major students in Chinese institutions through enhancing project-based learning.

Keywords: Project-based learning, student-centered, comprehensive ability.

1. Introduction

Based on the rapid development of project-based learning in some Western countries, the application and promotion of project-based learning in Chinese universities have been almost blocked by different factors from different aspects. So of course, there are very few survey research reports on project-based learning in China. The amount of research and studies that demonstrate the benefits that project-based learning can have on kids' all-around abilities, however, is still substantial. According to several research, project-based learning can improve students' speaking and listening abilities when used in language instruction. Therefore, project-based learning is extremely needed in Chinese colleges for students majoring in English, and there are some suggestions on how to make it better.

2. The Use of Project-based Learning with English Majors in College

2.1. Project-based Learning Benefits

The active, student-centered approach to learning known as project-based learning prioritizes the autonomy, productive investigations, communication, cooperation, and reflection of students within practical activities or assignments [1]. It is clear from the definition that project-based learning can improve students' problem-solving abilities. First, students need to get access to knowledge and learn different concepts related to the project. In this way, their knowledge increased. Opportunities for "the natural integration of language skills" are provided through project-based learning [2]. When students are divided into a few groups, they need to communicate with each other, share different viewpoints, and learn from other people's perspectives in the long process. Lastly, their cooperative, critical thinking ability will be promoted and communication skills as they need to exchange views and compromise in the process. Project-based learning can assist students in developing self-confidence because many kids are reluctant to speak up in class for fear of being made fun of by their peers, which facilitates on a spiritual level. But project-based learning provides them a chance to be brave. Except these, students are supposed to figure some problems out in their real life through this whole project so that their problem-solving ability will be highly enhanced. In addition to these

universal advantages, the positive effect on language learning is also very large. According to Fragoulis, students can practice speaking English in the best atmosphere while having fun thanks to project-based learning, which gives them contextual and meaningful learning [3]. Usually, presentation is a bridge between language learning and language use as students show their learning results in front of the class so that the presenter and the listener have the chance to interact and process language and information [4].

2.2. The State of Teaching English Majors' project-based Learning Courses

In reality, countries in Europe and America have utilized project-based learning for all grades and all ages but in China, even universities have already taken it but seldom used it. The project learning approach has been employed in corporate translation instruction as well as science, biology, and art classes in the Chinese environment but is not very widespread [5]. Only some subjects which have strongly applicable would take this pedagogy, such as engineering, chemistry, and interactive design of art. So the application and research of project-based learning in language learning at universities are almost blank. Most of the course designs are divided into a few parts—grouping, project theme selection, task division, group discussion, and oral presentation. However, the grouping was wrong from the beginning. Student peers were not familiar with each other, so they were confusedly divided into groups that were not beneficial to the project and research.

2.3. Evaluation of English Major Students in PBL Classroom

At first, the evaluation of project-based learning is totally different from the traditional pedagogies as the teaching mode is totally different. The evaluation for students in traditional classrooms is always a quiz or an exam. As we all know, there are always correct answers to the questions on the test paper which means absolutely objective and fair but the evaluation for students in PBL classrooms is much more subjective. They need to use different tools like the Internet and paper books to learn and use different forms like Word documents or the learning process and PowerPoint for presentations to show their learning results in final projects. Students need to explain what can learn from their project and how can it be applied to daily life. So the difference is the inspection form and inspection content.

The advantages and disadvantages of project-based learning are capable of being determined from the various evaluation techniques. Project-based learning method allows students to give full play to their creativity and imagination as they can determine for themselves how to learn and how to demonstrate. Teachers give students enough space to develop their own autonomy. Group members can discuss the planned division of labor with each other so that each student can fully maximize his or her abilities and potential not limited to learning in the project. For example, artistic talent can be fully demonstrated during the presentation stage. So the process of the project is the integration and development of many aspects.

However, as we all know the promotion of project-based learning is almost blocked in Chinese universities. There are some difficulties in assessing project-based learning and development. At first, the evaluation standard is really hard to settle down as there are so many aspects like topic, content, and presentation. This is totally a subjective issue without a definite standard or definition and sometimes it even leads to some “unfair” for students. It’s hard for teachers to confirm and also hard for students to understand and follow the judging rules.

3. Comparison of Traditional Teaching Method and PBL Teaching Method in Teaching English Majors

3.1. The Application of Traditional Teaching Methods in the Classroom of College English Majors.

According to the official course design for English major students, the fundamental abilities of English major students are divided into four parts—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Obviously, the official course is tightly connected with these four parts. Instead of developing and promoting general skills like critical thinking and problem-solving ability, the courses are typically designed to build and promote specialized English capabilities. There is no comprehensive curriculum that integrates these competencies and skills and most of the exercises to improve the ability are compiled into books and finally taught by the teachers. However, learning through the teacher's guidance and explanation to improve your specific ability, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, is much more like a teacher-centered class instead of a student-centered one. In this case, students' autonomy is weak and most of them lack the ability to synthesize inquiry which is not really good for students' future development. Also, students will focus much more on their fundamental abilities like intensive listening and reading skills. Of course, under this kind of exercise, students' fundamental abilities can be enhanced for their deeper study. However, their comprehensive ability cannot be sharpened as the limitation of the educational system nowadays. According to Hu, students can become active learners by engaging in "classroom interaction, authentic discourse, collaborative learning, and student autonomy" in a collegiate English teaching setting [6]. In the traditional class, students are always passive learners which is not good for their future.

3.2. The Differences between the PBL that English Major Students Use and the Traditional one

Lutsenko and Lucenko said that under the globalization changes in educational systems, it's important to modify approaches to the educational process that allow for maximum involvement in learning. One of the approaches is active learning which engages students with involvement in the whole process and certain tasks through collective activities [7]. Active learning brings students more relative to a passive lecture and makes them get more knowledge from the class. One of the active learning methods is project-based learning, which gives students more control over the entire learning process. Project-based learning is a student-centered methodological approach that involves many different factors [1]. As a student-centered teaching methodology, project-based learning focuses on students' comprehensive ability instead of specific skills. Throughout the entire project, they can not only get abundant knowledge from exploring and searching data and academic passages from books and digital resources but also a kind of practice for critical thinking, cooperative ability, and communicative ability. While traditional pedagogy is much more teacher-centered with the instruction of teachers, students lose the ability to self-decide which means less competency for their future development.

3.3. The Barriers that Prevent PBL from Promotion and Application in the Classroom of College English Majors

In Son and Penry's paper, they suggest a framework for debating project-based learning pedagogies as a spectrum of approaches, focusing in particular on two characteristics: the amount of instructor or student decision-making over the course, and the amount of solo or group effort the project necessitates [8]. Under this kind of predicament, there are some barriers that block the development way of project-based learning among English major students in Chinese universities. First, the age of professors in China is generally older. According to ShanghaiRanking's Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), the age of full professors is getting younger and younger but we also know that the aging of the teaching staff is still a serious problem. Kaufman used to say that processing speed, fluid reasoning, and working memory are all susceptible to natural aging at all

educational levels [9]. Their ability to accept new things gets much weaker than youths. We know that the aging of professors is a huge barrier to the promotion of project-based learning. Also, they seldom have the chance to get attached to innovative pedagogies. What's more, their teaching modes had already been fixed many years ago and they don't want to get out of their comfort zone and take the risk of a totally new pedagogy. In this case, they will keep on implementing their past methodology to teach students. For students, there is a persistent problem that is very serious for students, the unequal distribution of tasks in group assignments. Project-based learning usually takes the form of small-group learning. Usually, there will be some students who actively follow up on the progress of the homework, but at the same time, there will be some students who want to be lazy in teamwork and do fewer tasks. Under this circumstance, the workload inevitably falls on hard-working students and their passion for group work at university gets weaker and weaker. The promotion of project-based learning in China is also hampered by this.

4. Advice for Future Project-based Learning Development among English Majors

4.1. Suggestions of how to Break down the Difficulties for English Major Students in PBL Classes

Since there is such a big problem in group work, the first thing to solve is it. At first, professors are supposed to organize an activity that helps students to get to know each other. This way the student may be able to form a team with a more suitable team member. Also, professors need to stress the importance of reasonable division of labor and task distribution in the team. With the reminder, students may take the assignment more seriously and carefully. Sometimes, asking about students' specific distribution of tasks in the group will be a better way of supervising the procedure and implementation of the project. This is the first step that boosts students' initiative towards the form of project-based learning. Still, the confirmation of their topic or theme is still important to be instructed by professors because sometimes students choose something that is not meaningful to discuss which wastes students' precious time without any positive feedback or outcome. So it is necessary for professors to take more part in students' projects in case of a horrible situation. Besides, students need to get access to information but sometimes they just don't know where to search so professors could recommend students some ways to get information like the library or different websites online. What's more, since the project needs students to search and collect a bunch of information and resources no matter online or onsite, getting to know how to identify the information is important. Because nowadays in the information explosion era, there is a lot of unknown source information online that acts as expertise that mislead so many people. Last but not least, because this is the core of project-based learning, students must accept all project requirements, including outlining the problems they actually tackle in their daily lives. Since these are the universal suggestions for how to break down the difficulties for students in PBL classes, here are some suggestions just for English major students. English major students should pay more attention to cross-curricular because as we all know English is just a language and the meaning of its existence is just for communication so we should make use of the cross-curricular discipline. In this way, learning different subjects through English will be useful for students' future development. In Research of Tsiplakides and Fragoulis, did an experiment about how to put project-based learning in history learning in primary school. The aim of it is to use cross-curricular that shows the importance of cross-curriculum project-based learning. Also, while using the project-based learning pedagogy, students should not only learn comprehensive abilities like critical thinking, cooperative ability, and problem-solving ability but also put emphasis on specific English skills. Students should not only focus on the cross-curricular content in English but also the English ability itself. According to Sirisrimangkorn, project-based learning is a powerful strategy for advancing students' knowledge of and proficiency in the English language [10].

4.2. Suggestions of how to Better Promote the Application of PBL for Teachers

As for professors in the English major department, at first, they can read more research and study about the application of project-based learning. They should always keep the innovative ability in their teaching because education needs innovation. Also, professors need to teach students in accordance with their aptitude. In the very first stage, professors need to participate in students' projects more as it can provide them more when they are not familiar with project-based learning.

5. Conclusion

Project-based learning improves students' autonomy in their study, problem-solving, communication, cooperative abilities, and critical thinking. Also, it provides students with self-confidence as they are not afraid of being laughed at in front of the whole class. However, the real situation in Chinese universities, especially for language majors, is not ideal, and the real application is also not optimistic from the very beginning. What's more, the evaluation of project-based learning is totally different from the traditional one as the tools and forms are much more flexible which brings students a series of advantages like maximizing their abilities and creativity. However, the first difficulty in front of the evaluation is the proper standard. Besides, the focus of project-based learning is focused on comprehensive abilities more than just specific skills and project-based learning is a student-centered teaching methodology compared with the traditional methodology that is teacher-centered. The barriers that prevent project-based learning from promotion are teachers' gradually solidifying minds and the difficulties of group work. After all, students should acknowledge each other to get a better group in the project and so on. Teachers should get better teaching literacy and knowledge base to improve the application of project-based learning. Hope project-based learning can be widely accepted and applied for language English major students in China. The future study will concentrate on ways to widely promote project-based learning for students majoring in English.

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