

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Proper prior planning prevents pitiful projects

John Rucynski, Jr.

Doshisha University

Todd Rucynski

Toyo University

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Project-based learning is a popular and effective tool for EFL teachers. When implemented properly, projects are a great way of creating a student-centered classroom with a sense of community and student satisfaction. There are also, however, major pitfalls to project work. To address these pitfalls, in this article we will share our experiences with project-based learning in Japanese universities. After summarizing the benefits of project work, we will provide step-by-step instructions for two common projects. Finally, we will give several pointers for implementation of successful project-based learning.

学生によるプロジェクトをベースとした学習法は、英語教育者には広く知られているものですが、適切に実行された場合には、学生同士の交流を深め、また学生自身を主体とした授業を展開するのに非常に効果的です。しかし、この教育法には落とし穴も存在します。この論文では、我々の日本の大學生での教育経験をもとに、プロジェクト学習の利点、ならびに、具体的な2つのプロジェクトを例に挙げて解説をおこなっていきます。また、最後には、この教育法を成功に導くためのヒントをいくつかご紹介いたします。

According to an old saying called the 6 P's, "proper prior planning prevents pitiful performance." EFL teachers who have attempted project-based learning realize that "projects" could easily be substituted for "performance." Despite all the pros of project-based learning, a lot can also go wrong. It is the teacher's role, however, to set up projects in a way that gets the most out of their learners and results in quality work. After an overview of the benefits of properly implemented projects, we will share guidelines for two sample projects that have been popular with our students in Japan. We will then provide



final pointers to help you avoid common project pitfalls in your classes.

Benefits of project work

Creativity and student-centered classrooms

The use of the grammar-translation method in English education in Japan has long been criticized for producing learners without practical English abilities (McVeigh, 2002). Considering that memorization alone is not enough to master a language, other creative means are necessary to give learners meaningful practice using it. Projects are an excellent way of tapping into the creativity of our learners. Whereas they might have previously seen English study as the process of learning a rigid set of grammatical rules, projects give students the opportunity to experiment with the language. Additionally, the varied steps required of project work – such as choosing content, organizing, deciding presentation style, and preparing visuals – give different group members the opportunity to contribute in their respective way.

Along with the chance to be creative, project work also allows more freedom for student-chosen topics. Students will naturally be more motivated when they have the opportunity to choose their own topics. If the students are, for example, doing a survey project and one of the language objectives is to use percentages and quantifiers, does it really matter whether the students are talking about music, sports, or movies? Whereas the random examples often given in EFL course books to demonstrate language points can actually hinder understanding (Littlejohn, 1997), using student-chosen topics makes language learned more memorable.

Compatibility with integrated syllabus

Despite our previous criticism of EFL course books, instructors often have no choice and are required to use them. Still, course books are best used as mere springboards to more meaningful language use and communication. Fortunately, course books and project-based learning can work well together. It is common now for course books to have an integrated syllabus, where each unit includes a mix of everything from grammar points to writing skills to content. The table of contents usually has a helpful chart which summarizes what skills and language points are to be practiced in each unit. With a little creativity, it is easy to adapt class projects that integrate all of these points. For example, a unit which combines making generalizations with talking about percentages and using quantifiers fits in perfectly with the aforementioned survey project. Again, the course book works as a springboard in supplying helpful examples, but the true learning takes place when students work together to create something of their own. Instead of being bound to the content provided by the book, students have the freedom to choose their own topics. Performing tasks while also exploring these themes makes the material easier to remember (Singer, 1990). So, the various points in the course book are covered, but in a more meaningful and less contrived context.

Feedback

Another advantage of project-based learning is that it gives the teacher more opportunities to correct student errors and provide feedback. Consider, for example, a typical speaking class. In a conventional activity, the teacher might set up a dialogue or explain a grammar structure and then have

students practice with a partner. Due to large class sizes, however, it is impossible for any instructor to actively monitor the accuracy of the language being used. With project-based learning, however, students generally have to hand in material to be checked at each stage. This not only results in more accurate language use, but also provides easy opportunities for vocabulary instruction. The teacher can offer more tips on more natural vocabulary or the occasional slang term. Since it is taught completely in context, it is easy for each group to understand the suggestions and later teach any new words to other groups. Although it takes time to check the material, you are creating a classroom where more accurate language is being practiced.

Attendance

When considering incorporating project work into their classes, a common concern among teachers is “What do I do if group members are absent?” From our experience, project work helps rather than hinders attendance. If you have established the sense of community that all good classes have, students will not want to let their fellow group members down.

Consider the following two scenarios. In Teacher A’s class, students are going to do page 27 from unit 6 in the text. In Teacher B’s class, they are responsible for doing final preparation for your group’s presentation the following week. Knowing that the second scenario involves more investment and missing class has greater consequences, attendance is likely to be better. Even when students do miss important project work, it is common for them to do the work in advance or at least contact their group members

and explain that they cannot make it to class. How often does that happen when the plan for the day is to review the present progressive tense?

Sense of accomplishment

Learning a language is a slow process. A common complaint among learners is that they do not feel that they are improving. Project-based learning, however, gives learners a greater sense of accomplishment. Again, rather than looking back at a course book and just saying, “I did that dialogue,” students who have completed projects often have something concrete that they can keep. They can keep their poster or handout they made for the class and say, “I actually did something in English.”

Sample projects

Now that we have stated the main benefits of project-based learning, we will give step-by-step guidelines for two of our most popular student projects. Again, the emphasis here is on proper planning and implementation. Even if you choose not to follow our steps exactly, the main point is to be prepared and have a concrete reason for everything you ask your students to do.

Sample project 1: Student-led discussions

Discussions are the type of class activity that can be a great success but can just as easily be a disaster. Common teacher complaints are that the students are hesitant to say their opinions, do not have enough knowledge about the topic,

or simply are not interested in the given issue. Fortunately, a solution for all of these problems is the student-led discussion. What follows are guidelines for both teacher and student preparation for these discussions and what students have to do on their actual discussion day.

Giving an example

As with any project, the student-led discussion should be introduced by a teacher example. In order to make the discussion style more understandable, a good starting point is Position A vs. Position B type discussions, where students are required to choose a position and explain their decision. The advantage of such a discussion is the topics are easily adjustable for different levels of classes, so you could demonstrate anything from living in a small town-vs.-living in a big city to legalizing-vs.-not legalizing same-sex marriage. In order to show students that they do not have to copy the teacher's style exactly, it is sometimes better to do more than one example or provide them with a variety of handouts from previous student-led discussions.

Brainstorming topics

After the teacher's example(s), it is time for the students to choose their own topic. Supply a variety of examples, but stress to students that they can also come up with their own topics. It is a fine balance. You need enough examples so students can get an understanding of what topics are appropriate for a good discussion. However, you also want to leave it open-ended, as students are often better than the teacher at choosing current topics which will interest their

classmates. For homework, ask students to choose two or three topics and explain why they think each one will lead to a successful discussion.

Choosing the final topic

After students bring in their topics for homework, put them into groups at random. They then have to read all their topics and make a final decision as a group. It is a good warm-up, as it forces the group to immediately start making decisions together. As a means of keeping them from taking too long to decide, tell them that each group must have a different topic. This encourages them to make a decision quickly if they have a topic which they are particularly interested in. After they have chosen their topic, they are ready to start researching and creating the contents for their discussion, which is the next homework assignment.

Research and editing

For homework, assign each student to come up with their own ideas in several categories, usually consisting of the following: some background information on their topic (to be explained later), 1-2 warm-up questions, background information on the topic, 3-4 pros of each position, and 2-3 discussion questions.

The reason for having each student work on their own at first is so each group can share ideas and work on editing, or choosing the best ideas. They will have a group meeting in a subsequent class when they read their ideas to each other and decide the final contents. Once the final contents are decided, each group hands in their paper to the teacher. Check all the

contents, type up a handout, and make copies for all class members.

Students should have one more short group meeting to help them organize their presentation and divide roles. They are then ready to lead their discussion. You can usually schedule two discussions per class. After each discussion, classmates also write feedback for the leaders, so each round can take up to 45 minutes. Each student-led discussion follows these steps:

1. Warm-up/Introduction. Students should start their discussion with a warm-up question or activity. What this means is asking their classmates a question in order to get everyone interested in their topic. For example, if the topic is for or against international marriage, they might start by giving a quiz about the current percent of international marriages in Japan. The reason for this is so students can practice alternatives to starting every presentation with the same old formula, such as “Hello everyone, we are Kenji and Mariko, and today we want to discuss international marriage with you. Let’s start.”
2. Background information. The group now needs to provide some background information on their topic. This can be any type of factual information that shows that they have done their research and know a lot about their topic. For example, if the students are leading a discussion on same-sex marriage, they might teach the class about countries or states where it is currently allowed or other key facts about the issue. The purpose of this is to integrate discussion skills with content-based learning.
3. Pros of both positions. The students now want to present their classmates with 3-5 pros of each position. You can structure the discussion so that the presenting group is on the fence. Their role in the discussion is to provide the content, not to persuade the class to choose a certain position.
4. Final decision. After the leaders have given their classmates enough points to ponder for each position, it is time to move on to the discussion. You can divide the discussion into two different parts. Of course there is the final decision, in which students choose whether they support Position A or Position B. Leaders can either ask each group to make a group decision or allow all students to make their own decision.
5. Expansion discussion questions. In addition to the final decision, each group will also have several discussion questions. The purpose of these is to think about issues surrounding the topic instead of just making a quick decision about which position they agree with and ending the discussion. For example, if the topic is living in Kansai vs. living in Kanto, discussion questions could be anything from “If you had to move to Kanto, what would you miss most about Kansai?” to “Why do you think so many comedians come from Kansai?” In addition to choosing a position, you want a variety of open-ended discussion questions that keep students from taking the easy way out by just saying, “I agree with Position A. That’s all.” As you can see, there are a variety of ways to expand a discussion, even for lower-level students.

6. Conclusion. After wrapping up the discussion, the group should close their presentation. Again, you want to avoid a simplified closing like, “Thank you for discussing. Finished!” The group members could prepare a closing statement summarizing opinions or comment on how the number of class members who chose each position compared with the leaders’ predictions.

Benefits of student-led discussions

From our experience, discussions which are student-led tend to be livelier than those presented from a course book. Some reasons discussions fail is students do not know enough about the topic beforehand or do not have an investment in the material. With student-led discussions, however, the students themselves are deciding the contents of the discussion. So, at least one group is very familiar with the topic. Additionally, as mentioned previously, when students choose the topics themselves, they tend to have a better understanding than the teacher of what their peers will be interested in. Finally, students want to support their classmates. Again, if they are just given a random discussion topic from the textbook, there is no investment in the material. If they know that their classmates have worked hard to prepare the contents, however, they are more willing to try to speak and show respect to their classmates’ efforts.

Sample project 2: Survey project

Surveys are something students already have at least a vague understanding of as they are seen in the media daily when discussing politics, social trends, market research, and a host

of other subjects. This project is particularly effective with students who do not have a great deal of English speaking experience but may have a solid grasp of math and science. The calculations, while not overly difficult, play to the strength of engineering students who may lack confidence in English but not statistics.

This project leads to a presentation and seven steps that can be completed in as many meetings.

1. Introduction. When introducing this presentation, on the first day show the students every step that will eventually take place in miniature. An example mini-topic is Work and Study. Each student fills out a paper stating the number of hours he works per week and the number of hours studied. In groups, predictions are made from these four questions: What percent of this class works? What is the average hours worked per week? Studied? And finally, do students who have a job, study less? The teacher then tallies the always eye-opening results while the students have a chance to interact in their new groups. The results are then discussed as a class with emphasis on their methods of predicting. These two questions actually encompass all the steps the groups will take en route to their presentation.
2. Choosing a topic. The teacher facilitates each group’s choice by reminding them of the 3 I’s; interest, importance, and imagination. They must be interested in their own topic, it should be something important in their life or society as a whole, and they should imagine the final step of presenting their findings.

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3. Making questions. Questioning is an art form that can be taught. One way of teaching it is through this method. All topics must have at least 10 questions with 4 or more multiple choice answers. In specifying that there are to be no yes/no answers, students are obliged to work on quantifiers. Students should be instructed to make 6-7 questions from the main topic and 3-4 that they hope to connect to that topic.
 4. Making predictions. This step is often skipped but it can actually be the most important. It not only weeds out useless questions and possible answers but is a great resource when presenting. Students can compare their predicted percentages and reasons to the actual results. If the result varies by a wide margin, the students have a chance to re-evaluate their original theory.
 5. Results. It is important that groups, at this point, organize their information so that questions, answers, predictions, results and reasons are all on the same page.
 6. Making connections. This is the time to work with identifying focus groups and possible cause and effect relations. By comparing the focus group of “very happy people” to “unhappy people,” students have found that the number of hours watching TV and playing video games to be “absolutely connected!”
 7. The presentation. Emphasize that editing is the key here. You should recommend that each presentation begin with the reason that they chose the topic. Next, find 1 or 2 questions where predictions matched results.

After that, find 1 or 2 where predictions did not match results. This is followed by interesting connections and finally reflection and what was learned.

What we have found through many years of doing this project is that students, regardless of level, respond well because they are invested in a creative process. The steps are simple and can be adjusted but in every case, it is clear what is expected. There is genuine discovery in each step but the instructor may need to emphasize this. Of course, not every group considers their project a success but every group, in the end, knows how to succeed if they were to do it again.

Final pointers for designing student projects

Project-based learning involves a lot of trial and error. Things will obviously seldom go perfectly on the first attempt. However, from what we have learned through the years, we would like to offer what we feel are the most important tips for implementing successful projects.

Grading transparency and value

It is vital to tell the students exactly what is expected of them and how they will be graded on each step and component of the project. It is a common mistake among inexperienced teachers to just keep giving assignments throughout the semester and then add it all up at the end. Students need to know the value of each assignment. If you are able to make a statement like, “This project will be a lot of work, but will make up 30 percent of your final grade,” you are guaranteed to make your students wake up and take notice. Make sure the students know exactly what is expected of them in order to get a good grade.

Calendar

Making a schedule for project work can be complicated. Estimating how long each step will take and how much time students will need to deliver quality work is no easy task. Still, a strict calendar is a necessity. A common mistake is to tell the students “Let’s see how much we can get done today and then if you need more time we can work more in the next class.” A message like that pretty much guarantees they will still be working on their project in the next class. At the start of each project, give a detailed calendar that shows what needs to be completed each class. If you are combining the project with work in the course book, it is usually a good idea to combine both project preparation and course book work in each class period. This can help with attendance, as students view each class as important.

Although you need to be strict with the calendar, it is important to allow some flexibility. Despite your best intentions, project preparation is still likely to take longer than you anticipate. As long as the students are working hard, however, you can give them more time with a positive message such as “Because you have put so much work into this, I don’t want to rush you. I want to make sure you have time to ask final questions and rehearse for your presentation day.” Hard work should be rewarded with extra time for preparation. “Goofing off” and not staying on task should not.

Keep all involved

Project-based learning will usually culminate in a presentation of some type. The problem with presentations

is the audience often loses interest if there are too many of them. Although highly motivated students will see every presentation as a time to practice listening skills, some students may see it as an opportunity to daydream or even sleep. Even during presentations it is therefore important to keep all members of the class fully involved.

There are several ways to keep everyone involved. The most obvious way is to require feedback from the audience. For each presentation, ask the audience members to give the group a score and comments. Another way is to put the contents of presentations on the quiz. That way, the audience will not only have to listen, but also ask questions and confirm information. Similarly, you can also treat each presentation as a listening exercise. For example, during student-led discussions, you could give the audience a worksheet that has blanks under the different headings, requiring them to fill in the information as they listen to the presentation. One final suggestion is to change the traditional presenting format. Instead of having every group present in front of the class only once, an alternative is to have students present to smaller groups and repeat the same presentation two or three times. These smaller groups make for a format that is more conducive to interaction. Since they have more than one chance to give their presentation, it is also useful for increasing fluency and confidence.

Show don’t tell

A common teacher complaint after student presentations might sound something like, “I told my students not to use their notes too much, but most of them still did it!” Instead of telling students what you want them to do, showing them

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is always far more effective. Whether you want students to speak without using notes, lead discussions more effectively, or make better use of visuals, you need to show them examples of quality. With their permission, build up a library of work from previous students. Whether it is in the form of a poster, video, or handout, show your current students what students from the same institution are capable of when they work together and put their minds to it.

In addition to work from previous students, the teacher should also give their own examples. If you want the students to lead a discussion, do the first example or two. If you want them to make good questions for a survey project, do your own survey first. Again, it shows examples of quality and also shows your learners that you are invested in helping them improve their English skills.

Reflection

Even the best plan does not always work. Time needs to be set aside for students to reflect on the process and reflect on what they have learned. After the final presentation and while everything is still fresh, 10-15 minutes of class time is allotted for students to grade themselves and their partners on participation and effort. You can make this worth 5-10% of the final grade. This is done for a few reasons, the obvious being that students think about their own contribution and responsibility. The hope is that when students reflect on their work they are thinking of how they can improve. It is a given that mistakes have been made; the question is whether or not the teacher allows time to learn from those mistakes. Finally, it gives students a platform to inform the teacher of the process as seen from their point of view. Teachers may have

an idea of who accomplished each task but even the most attentive of us cannot know exactly what went on outside the classroom. In having each student grade himself, and each member of the group give a grade and their reasons for it, teachers will have a much better understanding of the entire process. Will some students lie or have an inflated sense of worth? Perhaps, but the majority will reflect on their learning and provide insight to the instructor.

Trust

This one is simple. Trust that students want to learn what they are invested in. Set up the class with enough freedom to be creative while at the same time providing a clear structure and system of grading so that students will know exactly what is expected from them. This kind of transparency is key to the student-centered project and should promote an atmosphere of trust.

Conclusion

When properly implemented, project-based learning can result in a creative learner-centered classroom where students get constructive feedback from the teacher and finish the class with a sense of accomplishment. Additionally, projects have the advantage of being easily adjustable for all ages and levels of learners (Haines, 1989).

Again, the focus here is on being *properly* implemented. Projects are not something that can be introduced at the last minute when teachers have run out of ideas. Before asking the students to make this investment, teachers first have to answer the following questions:

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1. What am I asking the students to do and how much should each component be worth?
 2. How long will each step take?
 3. How can I keep all students involved through the whole project?
 4. How can I concretely show students what I expect of them?

There will still be times during any project when you have a sense of impending disaster. From our experience, however, a prepared teacher who believes in what they are doing and can show their students past examples of successful projects will continue to get quality work from their learners.

John Rucynski, Jr. has taught EFL/ESL for more than 10 years in the U.S., Japan, Morocco, and New Zealand. He currently teaches in the Institute for Language and Culture at Doshisha University in Kyoto.

Todd Rucynski has been teaching at universities in Japan for 11 years. He is interested primarily in the use of video and authentic language in the classroom. The new Impact Series published by Pearson/Longman contains his latest work.

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