Reflections on Student-Led Lessons as Part of Project-Based Language Learning

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Reference Data

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With its focus on content, authentic language and experiences, group work, and learner responsibility, project-based language learning (PBLL) is an approach that can foster learner autonomy. This paper describes the *Students as Teachers Project*, which was implemented in a private university in Japan as part of an intensive four-skills English course. A primary focus is the analysis of student reflections, which were collected at the end of the project. Overall, the students perceived positive developments in their language, academic, and professional skills, as well as emotional engagement with the project, leading to new perspectives on the teacher/student roles in the classroom. These findings supplement claims within the PBLL literature about its positive effects on the development of learner autonomy with additional student perspectives on those benefits.

コンテンツ、本物の言語と実体験、グループワーク、学習者の主体性に焦点を合わせたプロジェクト型言語学習（PBLL）は、学習者の自律性を育むことができるアプローチである。本稿では、日本の私立大学において、4技能英語集中コースの一環として作成・実施された「Students as Teachersプロジェクト」について紹介する。本稿はプロジェクト終了時に行われた学生の振り返りのデータ分析を重視している。結果として学生たちは、言語能力、学力、専門能力の向上、プロジェクトへの感情的関与、教室における教師・学生の役割に対する新たな視点などを認識したことがわかった。これらの結果は、PBLLが学習者の自律性の発達にプラスの効果をもたらすという主張を裏付けるだけでなく、PBLLの利点について学生の視点を追加するものである。

"It is boring that ONLY teacher teaches class. I am glad to make a class all together."
—Student reflection

Fostering language learners' sense of initiative and responsibility for their own learning is a goal that language teachers should strive for, particularly in educational settings such as Japan, where students are accustomed to being fed information for reproduction on exams. As a result, many Japanese students graduate from university with few productive English skills (Hood, Elwood, & Falout, 2009).

When given more responsibility, learners become eager to take on greater challenges and demonstrate their abilities, which greatly benefits their long-term learning outcomes. Project-based language learning (PBLL), with its focus on content, authentic language and experiences, group work, and increased individual responsibility, provides an ideal framework for learners to achieve autonomy (Skehan, 1998).

Slater, Beckett and Aufderhaar (2006) define PBLL as "a social practice into which students are socialized through a series of individual or group activities that involve the simultaneous learning of language, content and skills" (p. 242). Patton (2012), on the other hand, characterizes PBLL simply as "students designing, planning, and carrying out an extended project that produces a publicly-exhibited output such as a product, publication, or presentation" (p. 13). PBLL is, however, more commonly described via its characteristics (Beckett, 2006). Based on Stoller (2006), PBLL is an approach that:

1. maintains focus on content;
2. allows students to make some of their own choices throughout the project;
3. stimulates interest;
4. affords opportunities to contribute equally and use individual skills during group work;
5. ensures all students take responsibility and are held accountable for their work;
6. includes activities which focus on practicing both linguistic form and skills;
7. provides continuous feedback and opportunities for reflection.

Research in the field of PBLL has consisted of numerous empirical studies (Beckett, Slater, & Mohan, 2020), development of theoretical and practical models (Beckett & Miller, 2006), exploration of the impact of technology (Thomas, 2017), and PBLL use in multilingual/multicultural communities of practice (Gras-Velázquez, 2020). However, research focusing primarily on the language learners' point of view has not received much attention (Grant, 2011). The present study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing student reflections collected at the end of the *Students as Teachers Project* (SasTP), a project that was developed and implemented in an EFL course at a Japanese university. The SasTP involves groups of students teaching a 90-minute lesson to their peers in the same class, based on content from an EFL textbook. This study examines student reflections data from 2014 to 2019, before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. After a detailed overview of the SasTP, including an example of student-produced work, the research design is introduced. The six themes that emerged from the student reflections data are then discussed and some conclusions are drawn.

The Students as Teachers Project

Course Description

The SasTP was developed for a compulsory intensive English language course offered by the language center at a large private university in Japan. The course takes place over two semesters and meets three times a week for 90 minutes at a time. Designed as a four-skills English course, all decisions regarding the textbook and curriculum are left to the instructors of the different sections.

The textbook involved in this study was from a major EFL publisher and comprised 12 units. As the material was rather dense, only four units could be covered in the first semester alongside other tasks and small projects. In the second semester, student groups chose one of the remaining units and prepared a 90-minute lesson which they taught to their peers.

Participating Students

Because enrollment in the intensive English course is optional, the students are generally quite motivated to participate. Amongst reasons why they choose to enroll are a chance to participate in classes conducted mostly in English, learning with peers who are also highly motivated to improve their English, and the opportunity to have a non-Japanese English teacher (Rettig-Miki, 2022). The course is offered to students in different departments, such as economics, law, business administration and humanities, but not to students majoring in education or English. Students are placed in one of the 30 different sections based on their TOEIC scores, so each section is made up of students from different departments. The highest level sections have an average TOEIC score in the low to mid 800s, while the lowest level sections average 400. The data collected for the present study comes from nine different sections of the course, with TOEIC scores ranging from 560 to 830.

Project Design

The SasTP was developed as a way for non-English or education majors to assume more responsibility for their own learning. The idea of student-taught units was devised in order to encourage students to fully engage with their EFL textbook and simultaneously consolidate their language skills. To further enhance the students' ownership of the project, each teaching group also had to create an original activity based on the textbook content.

A two-stage framework was employed, consisting of a content input and a content output stage (Cusen, 2013). These stages correspond to two factors deemed essential for language learning, namely comprehensible input and meaningful output (Stoller, 2006). The project ended with an extensive reflection process, considered essential for the consolidation of knowledge and skills acquired through PBLL (Cusen, 2013).

The content input stage took place mainly in the first semester of the course, during which several units in the textbook and tasks designed by the teacher were covered with the whole class. For example, after working on a reading passage on the topic of European story-telling traditions, the students had to research and present about Japanese folk tales in English.

In the second semester, the students moved to the content output stage, in which they were responsible for selecting one of the remaining units in the textbook and preparing a 90-minute lesson for their peers. Following a 5-week lesson preparation process, each group led the class for their assigned period as "teachers" with the other students in the class participating as "students."

At the beginning of the project, all students were randomly assigned to groups of three or four, and they chose a unit to focus on. Each group then completed the textbook activities for their chosen unit and confirmed their understanding of the content, grammar, and vocabulary with each other and the teacher. Next, groups created a lesson plan which included an original activity based on the textbook content. While the teacher offered some guidelines for sharing the workload, the students were ultimately

responsible for deciding who was in charge of what. Throughout the preparation process, each group received extensive feedback from the teacher, and they were given ample time to practice. Finally, each group was assigned one class period to teach, during which they were responsible for every aspect of the lesson, including classroom management, content and task explanations, and giving feedback to the other students. Table 1 offers a summary of the process approach followed at the output stage of the SasTP.

Table 1

Content Output Process Steps

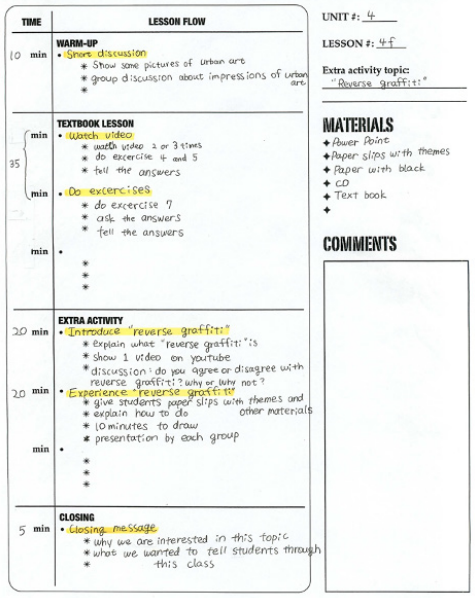
	Process steps	Tasks
Week 1	Form groups Choose textbook unit	Team building activities
Week 2	Study textbook unit	Textbook activities – grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, speaking Check answers and clarify difficult points with the course teacher
Week 3	Create lesson plan	Decide on what part of the unit to teach Brainstorm for extra activity Receive feedback
Week 4	Create teaching materials	Make presentation slides, handouts, etc. Receive feedback
Week 5	Practice lesson	Individual and group practice sessions
Weeks 6-7	Group-taught lessons	Each group teaches a 90-minute lesson to the rest of the class
Week 8	Reflections	Group discussion Written reflections Message videos with advice for future students

Student-Led Lesson Example

The following example clearly illustrates what the SasTP entailed. This particular group chose to cover a textbook lesson on *reverse graffiti*, which is the process of creating an image on surfaces in public spaces by removing the dirt rather than using paint. The reading passage was about the Brazilian artist, Alexandre Orion, who used a power washer to create a "tunnel of skulls" in a Sao Paulo tunnel (Smillie, 2007). The group followed the assigned lesson plan template (Figure 1) and planned a short discussion about urban art as a warm-up activity, followed by a number of activities from the textbook, the extra original activity, and finally a closing message for their peers on the power of art. Two of the four group members were in charge of the warm-up and the textbook activities, while the others were responsible for the extra activity and closing. Everyone worked together to make sure that the lesson flowed smoothly from beginning to end. Each student not only planned and created the materials for their group-assigned part of the lesson, but also stood at the front of the class when leading that particular activity.

Figure 1

Group Lesson Plan on the Topic of Reverse Graffiti.



For their extra activity, this group devised a task in which their peers, also in groups, could experience the process of creating reverse graffiti. Each group had to choose one of four themes (war, air pollution, global warming, or advertising) and create a poster by using wooden sticks to remove black crayon from a large sheet of paper. Finally, each group presented their poster in front of the class and explained how it related to their chosen theme. Figure 2 shows three of the posters created for this activity.

Figure 2

Posters Created by Student Groups for the Reverse Graffiti Extra Activity

Project Reflections

The two-stage reflection process at the end of the project was designed to be extensive because it was arguably the actual culmination of the event, during which students got the opportunity to "reflect on what they have learned from project engagement" (Stoller & Chandel Myers, 2020, p. 31). In the first stage, the teaching groups responded to a set of questions by discussing their opinions as a group and then by formulating written answers. Next, they prepared a video message for the students who would take this compulsory English course in subsequent years, in which they gave advice about the best ways to succeed.

The reflection questions were:

1. What do you think was the strongest point of your lesson? Why do you think so?
2. What part of the lesson did you have most problems with? How did you overcome those problems?
3. If you could teach your lesson again, what would you do differently?
4. What skills do you think you improved through preparing and teaching this lesson with your group?
5. What is the most useful comment you received from other groups? Why did you choose it?
6. Do you have any other comments?

These questions were developed specifically for the SasTP, but they are based on similar ones used for project-based learning in general[1] and for PBLL in particular (Saricaoglu & Geluso, 2020).

Research Design

Background

During the project, the teacher could observe very high levels of learner engagement, defined as "a state of heightened attention and involvement" (Philip & Duchesne, 2016, p. 510). Students were extremely motivated to create an interesting and engaging lesson for their peers and seemed to keenly feel the pressure of presenting their lesson to the class. They experienced what Dörnyei, Henry, and Muir (2016) have called *group directed motivational currents* (group DMCs), i.e. "powerful currents of motivated energy which are capable of empowering individuals to achieve remarkable feats" (p. 167). PBLL is, in fact, a very effective way to generate such emotional states in the classroom. The ways in

which the students viewed their experiences with the SasTP was of primary interest for this study not only because their views on PBLL are less represented in the literature, but also because "teachers learn a tremendous amount from students' reflections" (Stoller & Chandel Myers, 2020, p. 31). Moreover, Beckett (2005) has argued that the students' perspectives on PBLL can be quite complex, so research studies should incorporate both the ways students approach projects and the dilemmas they face.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was collected from the group project reflections submitted in written form at the end of the project, which were used for exploratory research. As these reflections were not an overall evaluation but an important final stage of the project itself, anonymity was not considered necessary in order for the students to reflect on their participation in the project. As a rich source of qualitative data, such reflections could provide a greater range of possible answers than a traditional questionnaire (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Student reflections from 2014 to 2019 were utilized, involving nine classes, 56 teaching groups, and 206 total participants. Each of the teaching groups provided one set of group answers to the reflection questions. Data collection was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical research norms, and all students gave verbal informed consent for their comments to be used. The data was analyzed for key concepts and then grouped into main themes via a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). A final stage of analysis established the percentages for each salient category.

Findings

Six main themes were identified from the student reflections data, which are summarized in Table 2, along with the representative percentages for the coded key concepts within each one. These percentages represent all 56 group responses.

Table 2

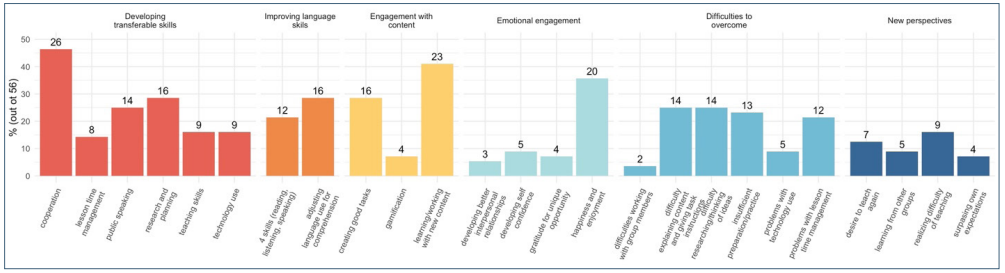
Themes and Concepts

Main Themes	Key Concepts	Incidence %
Developing transferable skills	Cooperation	46.4
	Public speaking	25.0
	Lesson time management	14.2
	Teaching skills	16.0
	Research and planning	28.5
	Technology use	16.0
Improving language skills	Language skills (reading, listening, speaking)	21.4
	Adjusting language use for comprehension	28.5
Engagement with content	Learning/working with new content	41.0
	Creating good tasks	28.5
	Gamification	7.1
Emotional engagement	Developing self confidence	8.9
	Happiness and enjoyment	35.7
	Gratitude for unique opportunity	7.1
	Developing better interpersonal relationships	5.3
Difficulties to overcome	Insufficient preparation/practice	23.2
	Problems with lesson time management	21.4
	Difficulty researching/thinking of ideas	25.0
	Difficulty explaining content and giving task instructions	25.0
	Problems with technology use	8.9
	Difficulties working with group members	3.5
New perspectives	Learning from other groups	8.9
	Desire to teach again	12.5
	Realizing difficulty of teaching	16.0
	Surpassing own expectations	7.1

Figure 3 visualizes the raw numbers for each key concept. For three of the main themes (*Improving language skills*, *Difficulties to overcome*, *New perspectives*), the distribution of key concepts was rather balanced, except for one or two that were less common. For example, in the *Difficulties to overcome* theme, *Problems with technology use* and *Difficulties working with group members* accounted for only 8.9% and 3.5% respectively. On the other hand, the other main themes featured one key concept that was much more common than the others: *Cooperation* (46.4%), *Happiness and enjoyment* (35.7%), and *Learning/working with new content* (41.0%).

Figure 3

Visual Summary of Findings



Developing Transferable Skills

In their reflections, students mentioned a range of transferable skills that they were able to improve throughout the project such as critical thinking, conducting research, and delivering presentations. Professional skills such as group work, time management, and using technology effectively were also noted. In the Japanese educational context, developing certain academic or professional skills is rarely prioritized, so students appreciated the opportunity to do so.

> *Our presentation went very well, and our skills were improved! You gave us the way of very creative thinking to commit in good result.*

> *We think we could improve to work together. We give a role to each other. We had responsibility to complete each role.*

> *We improved the skills of making PowerPoint well and making speech in public. We learned from other groups how to check the time, and we could take advantage of the skill in our turn.*

Students also realized that the skills they gained were transferable to other areas of their academic careers.

> *Teaching in the class was very good opportunity, because we could learn our weaknesses. We could get many critical comments. It will be helpful in other classes, too.*

Improving Language Skills

Even though participating students were not asked directly about the improvement of their English language skills, this was a theme observed in the data. They reported improvements in their reading, listening, and speaking. More importantly, they felt the increased levels of English input they received throughout the project helped them improve.

> *We read a lot of English sentences, and watched English video. Through them, we improved reading and listening skills.*

A number of groups mentioned an increased ability to paraphrase. By experiencing the frustration of not being able to get their messages across, students realized the importance of adjusting their speech so that their peers could follow instructions and understand the lesson content.

> *We could know that we couldn't express what we wanted to talk. But we try to do our best. And we could improve expressing skills.*

> *We got ability to paraphrase difficult thing to easy thing in order to understand with ease.*

Engagement With Content

Given the way PBLL in general and this project in particular emphasized the final product, the students became quite invested in issues related to the content of their lessons. The importance of choosing appropriate and interesting topics, understanding the textbook content, and then making it comprehensible and engaging for their peers were often mentioned. Students seemed eager to teach the things they had learned.

Students not only have experienced of drawing reverse graffiti but also faced social and environmental problems.

Furthermore, because each teaching group was tasked with developing an original activity, they were eager to create activities that would be well received by the other students. A few groups even incorporated gamification into their lessons by awarding points for correct answers and then giving small prizes at the end of the lesson.

Emotional Engagement

The participants reported a wide range of emotional engagement throughout the project. One outcome mentioned was improved confidence levels as a result of overcoming nerves and in response to a successful lesson.

Though I was so afraid, I had a really valuable experience and could gain a little confidence.

I was shy in front of many people, but I think I could do performance without being shy.

We thought "we can't do that!" But in real, we did it!

Many groups also reported feeling joy when seeing peer engagement during their lessons, and also when receiving positive feedback. This type of excitement has been reported in the PBLL literature, usually based on teachers reporting their observations of the class (Patton, 2012).

After our lesson, some students said your lesson was interesting. We were so happy! We could enjoy!

Finally, some students reflected on a marked improvement in interpersonal relationships within the group.

Through this preparing and teaching the lesson, we could break the wall between us and finally we could become good friends. Thank you for the chance for us to be good friends.

Difficulties to Overcome

In their reflections, students brought up many difficulties they had faced throughout the SasTP, such as coming up with ideas for their original activity or dealing with technology issues during their lessons. One especially difficult problem many student groups had was related to content, research, and activity design. Not only did they find it very hard to think of innovative ideas for class activities, but they also felt intense pressure to plan a lesson their peers would enjoy.

We had problems with setting part of extra activity. At first we thought using real materials. But we imagined that students act using these materials and it was not interesting. So we thought it again and again.

Another issue was difficulty explaining the content and giving clear task instructions.

Video part had problems. Because its part was so long and too difficult to understand.

We couldn't let students to discuss actively and say their opinions.

After teaching their lesson, many groups felt their preparation had been insufficient due to a lack of practice. Some groups provided concrete details of how they could have improved this aspect.

We should prepare for a class and do rehearsal from start to finish. Especially we could prepare explanation phrase and rules more.

Students also insightfully reflected on what they could have done to overcome the problems they faced.

There were many things which we had to tell the audience and it was complex. We should do kids of things to be understood what we want to say, for example, we use simple grammar and gestures and PowerPoint well. Also, it is important that teammates help each other, too.

New Perspectives

One final theme that emerged from the student reflections was their changing perspective on the roles of teacher and student. Despite not majoring in education or English, students expressed a new-found understanding and appreciation for the work of teachers.

We know the difficulty of teaching with ease.

We thought it was very precious experience to be teacher. We realized how hard teacher's work is.

They could see that students play a major role in creating successful lessons, as their lesson very much depended on peer participation.

A good class needs not only a good teacher, but also good students.

This also led to an occasionally humorous reexamination of their own participation and contribution during class.

Teaching is very difficult. Sorry! I'll do my best not to sleep.

Finally, students realized that learning and teaching are not opposite concepts, but are, in fact, often complementary.

I learned that teaching something was more difficult than I expected, and I could learn a lot through teaching.

Through the final presentation I learned how difficult teaching is and also thought teaching means studying.

Discussion

Overall, the students' reflections at the end of the SasTP suggest that most, if not all of them experienced group DMCs because of the depth of thought they put into various aspects of the project. They reflected both on the successes and difficulties they encountered, expressing interesting insights into the skills they developed and how these could be applied in the future. Like new teachers-in-training, students had to grapple with the difficulties of lesson planning and class time management, gaining firsthand experience of the importance of proper preparation and planning. Some groups were successful, some clearly struggled, while others managed to adjust their lesson plan on the fly to better manage the time. This experience could prove valuable for students as they consider their future careers, whether as teachers or in other professions that involve working with people.

One drawback of how the reflection questions were formulated was that not many groups explicitly mentioned their language gains outside of efforts made to make themselves understood to their peers in English. Throughout the project, there was very little explicit language instruction other than in the form of targeted feedback to each teaching group during the lesson preparation stage. As Beckett, Slater, & Mohan (2020) note, PBLL can be perceived as not paying enough attention to the explicit instruction of linguistic forms. However, in exchange, it offers numerous affordances for language learning and development in all four skills in addition to building accuracy, logic, and argumentation.

One interesting observation from the data is that similar key concepts emerged in opposing main themes. For example, some groups mentioned that they developed their research and planning skills, whereas others had difficulty researching and coming up with ideas for their lessons. Similarly, regarding technology use, some groups improved their skills while others struggled. Finally, some students appreciated getting to know their peers better and developing interpersonal relationships, but others failed to establish good rapport, to the detriment of their lesson preparation and delivery.

Cooperation skills, *Learning new content*, and *Happiness and enjoyment* were the top three key concepts. All three are commonly mentioned in PBLL literature as benefits of this approach (Stoller, 2006), so this study can further confirm that students themselves seem to be aware of them. Finally, the fact that most students enjoyed the SasTP and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to experience a teaching role highlights the value of the PBLL approach and its importance for the development of student autonomy.

Conclusion

This study examined the themes that emerged from data collected from student reflections provided at the end of the SasTP. It adds a much-needed student perspective to the PBLL field, and demonstrates that learning benefits such as improved language, academic, and professional skills and enhanced confidence are, in fact, perceived by the students themselves. The current study also highlighted various difficulties that students identified, thus providing a well-rounded look at an overall student experience with PBLL. Furthermore, by reconstructing the traditional teacher/student roles in the classroom, the SasTP led to new perspectives on the meaning and value of language learning for the students.

Notes

1. See https://www.pblworks.org for more information.

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