



# Collaborative language teaching and learning in local secondary English education: project-based learning

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Learning by doing is a familiar phrase that is widely used, often misused, when hands-on activities are introduced to expect what seems to be a crystal-clear piece of fact that they involve a lot of hard work, but with no guarantee of success. In fact, learning by doing is a beneficial pedagogical principle based on experiential learning whose process, not solely the end-products, should be focused on, and the impacts it generates can be remarkable. Further, learning by doing collaboratively, when assisted appropriately, is a method believed to be able to generate effects that work like a charm as Mezirow (1991) suggests that the exploitation of the method, which weighs heavily on the process

to its end-products, aims not only at acquiring knowledge, but also at transforming the way of thinking and changing attitudes.

In viewing Macao's advocacies of educational trends through its official documents, one can easily connote the encouragement of the cultivation of skills for effective communication. According to Law no. 9/2006, Fundamental Law of Non-Tertiary Education System, of the Macao S.A.R. Government, the senior secondary level capacities of collecting, sorting and analyzing information, enhancing the capacity of making use of information technology to develop the habits of self-learning and

cooperation study, as well as promoting lifelong development are emphasized in the tenth Article, Senior secondary education, of Chapter 3, Composition of Non-tertiary Education (Legislative Assembly of Macao, 2006). Seeing these particular needs, teaching methods such as Project-based Learning (hereinafter PBL), Communicative Approach, Guided Discovery, and Presentation, Practice and Production Approach (known as PPP), etc. are thus used not only on subjects such as Science, Geography, Chemistry and Biology which involve abounding exploratory project work, but also on subjects of languages, such as, English (and many others).

When examining closely the local English education development, we can see policies concerning this particular aspect echo loudly with details stated in legislations. More recently, in the revised Requirements of Basic Academic Attainments for Senior Secondary English language proficiency applied to non-English speaking secondary schools (Macao Special Administrative Region, 2017), an affiliating document to Decree Law no. 10/2015 (known as the BAA), effective communication is an omnipresent requirement in all four learning domains - listening (signified as category A in the document), speaking (category B), reading (category C) and writing (category

D). Seemingly, Macao's educational policy-makers can be seen to be highly confident about the collaborative methods of language teaching and learning. Yet, how these methods can be implemented, often left for schools to ponder upon, is a field that can wait until we extract the essence of their effectiveness.

This passage aims to discuss the effectiveness of one of the collaborative methods, PBL, for teaching and learning English as a second language for local private Chinese medium secondary schools. Theoretically, PBL is a student-centered pedagogy in which students learn the knowledge of an area focused through experiencing problem solving. The goals of PBL in English teaching are to develop students' flexibility in learning through collaboratively engaging in promoting linguistic competence. In general, students' competence in collaboration, engagement and language proficiency will thus be promoted.

**Students' collaboration:** As emphasized in Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, collaboration through discussion and problem solving shapes higher order thinking and learning, to levels of analyzing, evaluating, and even the top of the pyramid of Bloom's Taxonomy - creating. Barkley (2010) also




claims that collaboration promotes student engagement and creates synergy between motivation, student empowerment, and active learning. It also encourages students to learn actively as they construct and reconstruct knowledge in groups. Meanwhile, academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, social skills, attitude in learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), and many believe, problem-solving abilities, resource-management skills, and media research skills can be elevated as well through collaborative project-work.

**Students' engagement:** Apart from transmitting information, a vital aspect in teaching is to engage students actively and collaboratively in learning with peers, since successful engagement functions as a tool for higher levels of reasoning, building on their current knowledge, understanding, and skills (Monteiro & Morrison 2014; Weimer, 2002) while creating conditions that serve the work at hand. Since PBL increases learners' motivation with autonomy in choosing the extents of contents, and the presentation modes, it is important to investigate the level of engagement during the process of project work as learning is a social process which takes place when the individual is engaged in social activities with teachers and peers (Pritchard, 2009; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). At the same time, since the students,

sometimes as well as the teacher, are communicating and acting collectively, every individual is in essence a learning system, a form of distributed cognition or learning in action as argued by Hutchins (1995, no. 764).

**Students' English proficiency:** It is believed that the backbone of the adoption of PBL in a language classroom is to facilitate students' linguistic competence (Fragoulis, 2009) during the process of active and autonomous engagement of collaborative project-work. The operation leading to the end-products provides opportunities for students to develop their confident and independent working ability (Fried-Booth, 2002) in using the target language communicatively and authentically. According to Lightbown and Spada, (1999:31), students are more eager to experiment about new language since they are less concerned about 'sounding silly' when engaged in the project-work at hand. In other words, students are to practically experience the use of the target language without consciously knowing they are risking making mistakes, which are often less important when fluency is summoned as Canale and Swain (1980) explain that it is common for second language learners to have good knowledge of the linguistic system of the target language, but little listening



comprehension and speaking skills. To accomplish the group outcomes, the students are to develop these linguistic abilities through engagement amongst individuals and the whole class in the very long, repetitive but purposeful course of cooperation which includes initiating the topics, planning, negotiating, compromising, doing researches, summarizing, writing up reports, self- and peer-assessing the reports, commenting, revising, editing, presenting the products, etc. The process opens up opportunities to use the language in a relatively natural context (Haines, 1989) with authentic activities and situations that allow students to select appropriate levels of difficulty comfortable for themselves.

Meanwhile, whether the students are learning English in the expected PBL way mentioned depends heavily on two variables: the linguistic promotion foci, and classroom interaction patterns. Although it is believed that students benefit from PBL significantly in advancing fluency and accuracy in learning: contextual and thematic vocabulary; social language in authentic communication; and group cohesiveness in language production (Fragoulis, 2009; Dörnyei, 2001), the adaptation of PBL, though different from traditional methods, has to be accompanied by effective distribution of interaction patterns.

According to interaction theory, patterns of classroom interaction in an English lesson are categorized into four groups: teacher-whole class interaction, teacher-individual student interaction, individual student-teacher interaction, and individual student-individual student (Malamah-Thomas, 1987; Byrne, 1992), while van Lier (1988) added that the interaction pattern of teacher-group should not be neglected when evaluating a language lesson. Theoretically, an ideal proportion of the dominance of classroom interaction is approximately 50% for S-S interaction, 20% for T-S interaction, 15% for T-C interaction, 10% for S-T interaction, and 5% for T-G interaction (Kasim, 2004).

Fragoulis (2009), in the premises, argues in a research conducted in Turkey in 2009 that knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics and phonology and sociocultural competence (using language in a social context) showed less improvement in a PBL English classroom. Hence, in realizing the effectiveness of PBL in English teaching and learning, it is very important to assess carefully the improvement made in students' language proficiency in a multifaceted way. Not only will it be vital to view the implementation regarding the school's context, but it is also crucial to



consider Macao's official requirements - stated in The Requirements of Basic Academic Attainments for Senior Secondary English language proficiency (Macao Special Administrative Region, 2017) - English teaching and learning objectives, goals and aims in all four language domains. In Macao, a post-colonial Asian city, where the balance between individualism from the western world and our innate collectivism from the Chinese genes is greatly needed yet lacking, it is certainly not to discount the cultural and social depression resulted from insufficient collaborative experience when fostering our future generations. In response to our rapidly changing internationalized home, education no long purely follows perennialism. Perhaps, we really should start considering utilizing collaborative tools to develop self-regulated learners who can steer their own future for learning. 學

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