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The Application of PBL in College English Teaching

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Abstract

Project-based learning is a new type of teaching or learning model under the guidance of constructivism. A lot of researches have shown that the application of PBL in foreign language teaching can arouse students' interest in second language learning and improve their cooperative ability. In this paper, the author made a summary of the current researching trend of PBL in second language teaching abroad and in China, as well as an empirical research of PBL in English teaching with aim to find out the efficiency of PBL. By the research, it is found that the application of PBL in English class to some extent can make positive effect on students' learning.

Key words: PBL; English teaching; Empirical study

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INTRODUCTION

Project-based Learning (PBL) is also called project-based learning, "project teaching", thematic learning, program-based learning, and subject-based learning. It is a practical teaching activity carried out by students under the guidance of teachers to carry out cooperative learning and inquiry learning in groups to complete some practical "project". Project-based learning mainly applies project management to teaching and embodies the "student-centered" teaching philosophy. The purpose of Project-based learning is to help students grasp specific knowledge and increase their capacity by accomplishing particular project with the aid of their specific knowledge and abundant learning resources in definite time. In the process of learning, teachers should build a real problem-solving situation for students and help students set up a learning group in which students can develop their cooperative learning and independent inquiry. In short, the purpose of project learning —a kind of teaching carried out by the aid of "project", in which "project" is the carrier and "teaching" the theme, is to cultivate students' practical ability, team cooperation and problem solving ability.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 The Academic History and Research Trends of PBL Models Aboard

1.1.1 The Academic History and Research Trends of PBL Models in General

As early as the late 16th Century, project learning began to rise in Italy, and was primarily used for architectural and engineering education activities. 300 years later, in September 1918, Qu Burke, one of the students of Dewey, a famous educator, firstly put forward the concept of project learning in his paper "*project (Design) teaching method: the application of purposeful activities in the course of teaching"*. Till the late of twentieth Century, project learning was widely promoted and applied in western countries.

Researches on Project-based Learning abroad have achieved great progress both in theory and practice. By studying the foreign researches, it can be found that the previous and starting study focused on the theoretical basis and its application, and then shifted to study the application of information technology in project learning.

By the end of the twentieth Century, the study of PBL mode by foreign scholars mainly embodied in three aspects: firstly, the application of PBL in different educational levels. For example, in American primary and secondary schools, every course would be designed in different projects for teachers to assign homework to students who could choose to finish by preference. In the French professional high school, the PPCP course is carried out in order to get the students to know the knowledge related to the profession by completing a specific item that is associated with the real professional work. In this course, students could acquire essential knowledge and capacity which is helpful for their future career. More than that, PBL is also widely used in vocational schools in Germany.

Secondly, it is the study of the learning efficiency of PBL application in different fields. For example, scholars did researches on the effectiveness of PBL on promoting students' learning and development, the extent of its effectiveness, and how to improve such effectiveness. By doing these researches, researchers or scholars generally applied experimental researches, qualitative researches, design researches and other researching methods to study the effectiveness. Thirdly, with the popularization and development of computer technology and network application, the integration and development of network information technology and PBL mode had been explored. For example, the PBL+MM project (i.e., multimedia based project learning) emphasizes information technology as a tool for searching information and knowledge in project learning, a toll for processing and analyzing information, a tool for expressing ideas and knowledge, and a tool for communicating information and knowledge. More than that, a PBL-Online course had been greatly developed by Buck educational institutions. Some other researchers have studied web-based PBL courses, and explored new tools for assisting teachers in project-based learning.

1.1.2 The Academic History and Research Trends of PBL Models Abroad in the Field of Foreign Language and Bilingual Language Teaching

Firstly, the mid of 1970s witnessed the early sprout of studies on PBL in the field of second language and bilingual language teaching abroad. The researches or practices of PBL model in this period, generally scattered or lack of order, are usually the summary of second language teaching in the English environment, whose features were characterized by non-systematic or non-normative as well as explorative. The most representative article in that period is the one titled as "*A project course in spoken English*" published by Eslava & Lawson (1979) on TESOL Quarterly, in which a group of German EFL learners were divided into severeal separative groups to dub for a 40 minute long British silent TV play. This project is the earliest attempt to solve the context problems in oral language learning.

Secondly, 1980s till the end of twentieth Century saw the initial development of PBL in the bilingual and foreign language teaching field. Foreign language educational experts begin to probe into the theoretical basis of PBL, such as, the probing researches of the practice of PBL class model, or researches of advantages and benefits of the teaching model by combining language and subject content, as well as the study of teaching or evaluation issues of PBL (Ribe & Vidal, 1993; Henry, 1994; Sheppard & Stoller, 1995; Stoller, 1997; Moss, 1998)). Basing on practical standpoint, Haines (1989) summed up the content of PBL and published a book, *Projects for the EFL Classroom: Resource Material for Teachers,* for the instruction of EFL teaching, which brought a positive impact on the promotion of PBL in English teaching in non-English speaking countries.

Thirdly, the new century is a period for the further and systematic development of PBL model. The most representative research at this stage is the book *Project-based Second and Foreign Language Education: Past, Present and Future* (Beckett &Miller, 2006), edited by Beckett and Miller in 2006. This book, the first and earliest specific research collections in this field, which had made an important step for the formation of the international community in this field and an innovative research situation, not only collected the researching results of the researchers in different regions, but also explored the relevance and inheritance between bilingual language / foreign language teaching on the basis of PBL and philosophical theories, social practice theories, systemic functional linguistics, education, and second language acquisition, and finally enhanced the academic position of PBL from a kind of foreign language teaching method to a channel of foreign language education.

1.2 The Related Academic History and Research Trends in China

1.2.1 The Academic History and Research Trends of PBL Model in General in China

Researches of PBL firstly appeared in 1990s in China, and had been gradually increased since 2001, the number of which had been increased significantly especially after 2006. In summary, domestic researches on PBL can be roughly divided into the following aspects: The first one is the theoretical study of PBL, including the researches on the connotation, characteristics, theoretical basis and practical significance of PBL, whose focus is not to study how to apply PBL to specific subjects, but only to demonstrate the significance and value of PBL in theoretical level. The second is the researches of integration of PBL and specific subject courses, in which PBL is carried out in a specific course, as well as its efficacy in practice. The third, a hot topic of current research, is researches of PBL application in teaching supported by modern information technology. Researchers have mainly explored the design or related experiments

of Project-based Learning under the network environment or based on the network platform. With the help of information technology, the method of applying PBL to comprehensive teaching practice or exploring the process of PBL teaching system design under the information technology environment is explored.

1.2.2 The Academic History and Research Trends of PBL Research in the Field of Foreign Language / Second Language Teaching in China

From the study of references, in the second language / foreign language field, since the introduction of project-based research in 2004, related researches have been on the rise. Generally speaking, the study of PBL in the field of second language / foreign language in China can be categorized in three aspects: firstly, the theoretical study of PBL. In 2010, Professor Zhang Wenzhong published an article *Three Decades of Project-based SL/FL Learning and Instruction: A Review of Literature* in Chinese Foreign Language, in which he elaborated the history and trend of the research on PBL study in foreign languages. Secondly, the study is concerned with the application and empirical research of PBL in foreign language teaching, such as teaching in listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation and other fields. For example, Wang Xiangling and He Xiaolan (2008) put forward a "project driven collaborative" translation teaching model, emphasizing that students should be regarded as the core of the class. In translation teaching, students, under the guidance of teachers, cooperate with each other in real translation projects and accomplish translation tasks like professional translators. Yang Liping and Han Guang (2012) have carried out an empirical study on the teaching of College English writing based on a project based learning model. The research shows that the implementation of project teaching in academic writing helps to improve the students' writing ability and innovation consciousness. Thirdly, the study is concerned with the integration of PBL mode and network resources in foreign language teaching. Zhao Xuemin (2009) proposed the establishment of a project based collaborative learning network and multimedia assisted classroom integrated business English teaching mode. This mode takes the cooperation project in the virtual business environment as the main line, and assists multimedia classroom teaching to establish the "student centered" teaching structure. More than that, the researchers also have studied the integration of the flipping classroom and the English project style learning, trying to build a project type flipping classroom model suitable for English teaching, and implementing the teaching practice and experimental design (Xu Yanmei, Li Xiaodong, 2014; Zhang Yun, 2016).

1.3 A brief Evaluation of Research Trend at Home and Abroad

The literature review shows that, for the study of project learning itself, the research of PBL model abroad is early and more abundant, while researches in china are comparatively late. Moreover, the common trend of PBL research at home and abroad is to explore the integration of network resources and PBL in teaching. In addition, with the development of network platform resources and network classrooms and the research of PBL in various fields, it is very necessary to further expand the PBL research based on the network platform in the field of foreign language / second language.

2. AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

2.1 Participants

The participants of the research are 122 sophomores of non-English majors in two natural classes of a normal university. The two classes have a random selection of 61 students in each class. In this research, Class 1 is chosen as the experimental class (EC) while Class 2 as the control class (CC) for the reason that the flexible elements of two classes are comparatively same, that is, students of two classes are mathematics majors, as well as their English scores of last two terms are under the same level.

2.2 Purposes

This study has the following purposes:

(a) To prove whether the application of PBL in English teaching can arouse students' learning interest and cooperative ability;

(b) To find out to which extent the application of PBL affects students' learning efficiency.

2.3 Instruments and Time

There were two instruments in the research: tests and questionnaires.

The time of the experiment lasted one term.

2.4 Experimental Processes

(a) Two tests (pre-test and post-test) were used to find out the efficiency of PBL in English learning. The purpose of the pretest is to find out or make certain that the experimental class and the control class are in the same level of English proficiency and practical application ability, meanwhile, the post-test is to find out the changes of two classes after the experiment. By the use of independent sample T test of pre-test to analyze whether there is a significant difference between the experimental class and the control class in listening, vocabulary and grammar, reading comprehension, as well as total scores. At the same time, a paired sample T test is used to analyze the significance of changes of EC and CC in those aspects.

(b)Two questionnaires were used for realizing if PBL could affect students' learning interest, learning attitude, learning autonomy and learning strategies in English learning. Pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires were respectively given to students at the beginning of the experiment and at the end of the experiment. At the end

of the experiment, the author aims to find out whether the application of PBL can inspire students' interests in English learning by analyzing and comparing the data of the pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Before the experiment, a comparative study was made on the academic performance of the two classes, and the result of the performance of two classes is as follows:

Table 1
Comparison of Scores of EC and CC Before the Experiment

Before the experiment		Mean	number	T	Sig.
Comparative sample 1	Listening (EC)	11.4461	61	1.7880	.084
	Listening (CC)	12.1531	61		
Comparative sample 2	Grammar &vocabulary (EC)	6.2601	61	.07300	.942
	Grammar &vocabulary (CC)	6.3001	61		
Comparative sample 3	Reading comprehension (EC)	21.4067	61	1.5030	.144
	Reading comprehension(CC)	22.7661	61		
Comparative sample 4	Writing (EC)	10.4331	61	1.5360	.135
	Writing (CC)	11.1331	61		
Comparative sample 5	Total score(EC)	50.5461	61	1.9690	.059
	Total score（CC）	52.3532	61		

(**P≤0.01；*P≤0.05)

The data in Table 1 show that the average scores of listening level of EC and CC are respectively 11.4461 and 12.1513, with the value of significance change—— P=0.084 (that is P > 0.05); secondly, the average scores in the aspect of vocabulary and grammar level are respectively 6.2601 and 6.3001, with the value of significance change——P=0.942 (that is P > 0.05); thirdly, the average scores of reading comprehension of the two classes are respectively 21.4067 and 22.7661, with the value of significance change——P=0.144 (that is P > 0.05); the fourth, as for the average scores in writing, they are respectively 10.4331 and 11.133, with the value of significance change——P=0.135 (that is P > 0.05); and moreover, the average level of the total scores of two classes are 50.5461 and 52.2532, with the value of significance change—— P=0.059 (that is P > 0.05). From the above comparison, the significance change of the two classes are above 0.05, which is higher than the value that signifies the significant change of comparative samples since only the P-value is lower than 0.05, which signifies the significant difference according to the SPSS analysis principle.

In order to prove the significant change of learning attitude of two classes, two questionnaires are sent out and collected before and after the experiment. The data were shown as the following.

Table 2
Comparison of EC's Pre-Questionnaire and Post Questionnaire After the Experiment

		Mean -value	Number	T	Sig.
Pair sample 1	Learning interest（pre-experiment）	64.2333	61	-6.9162	.0012
	Learning interest (post-experiment)	78.9003	61		
Pair sample 2	Learning attitude（pre-experiment）	31.7333	61	-5.3222	.0000
	Learning attitude (post-experiment)	39.4663	61		
Pair sample 3	Learning autonomy（pre-experiment）	32.5003	61	-6.2702	.0016
	Learning autonomy (post-experiment)	39.4333	61		
Pair sample 4	Learning cooperation （pre-experiment）	33.2003	61	-8.6172	.0001
	Learning cooperation (post-experiment)	40.1663	61		

(**P≤0.01；*P≤0.05)

From the table 2, it can be seen that there are significant differences in the aspect of learning attitude, learning interest, learning autonomy and learning strategy in EC after the experiment. From the pair sample 1, it shows that the mean-value of learning interest is 64.2333 before the experiment while it is 78.9003 after the experiment. The pair sample 2 shows that the mean-value of learning attitude before the experiment is 31.7333 while it is 39.4663 after the experiment. The same change can also be shown in pair sample 3 and sample 4, which signify the significant changes in the aspect of learning autonomy and learning cooperation. From the point of significance, the P-values of the four samples are respectively 0.012, 0.000, 0.016, and 0.001, that is P is lower than 0.05, which demonstrates that there are significant differences before and after the experiment.

Table 3
Comparison of CC's Pre-Questionnaire and Post Questionnaire After the Experiment

		Mean -value	Number	T	Sig.
Pair sample 1	Learning interest（pre-experiment）	63.1000	61	-.748	.461
	Learning interest (post-experiment)	64.2332	61		
Pair sample 2	Learning attitude（pre-experiment）	31.1001	61	-.646	.523
	Learning attitude (post-experiment)	31.6667	61		
Pair sample 3	Learning autonomy（pre-experiment）	32.0001	61	-.662	.513
	Learning autonomy (post-experiment)	32.5667	61		
Pair sample 4	Learning cooperation（pre-experiment）	35.5667	61	-.685	.499
	Learning cooperation (post-experiment)	36.4667	61		

(**P≤0.01； *P≤0.05)

From the table 3, it can be seen that there are significant differences in the aspect of learning attitude, learning interest, learning autonomy and learning strategy in CC after the experiment. From the pair sample 1, it shows that the mean-value of learning interest is 63.1000 before the experiment while it is 64.2332 after the experiment. The pair sample 2 shows that the mean-value of learning attitude before the experiment is 31.1002 while it is 31.6667 after the experiment. The same change can also be shown in pair sample 3 and sample 4, which signify the significant changes in the aspect of learning autonomy and learning cooperation. From the point of significance, P-values of the four samples are respectively 0.461, 0.523, 0.513, and 0.499, that is, P is higher than 0.05, which demonstrates that there are no significant differences before and after the experiment.

In order to analyze the learning efficiency of two classes before and after the experiment, a comparison of their scores is analyzed which can be shown by table 4 and table 5:

Table 4
Comparison of Pre and Post-Experiment Score of EC

		Mean -value	Number	T	Sig.
Pair sample 1	Listening (pre-experiment）	11.4461	61	-5.427	.0012
	Listening (post-experiment)	14.8733	61		
Pair sample 2	Grammar &vocabulary (pre-experiment）	6.2601	61	-2.486	.002
	Grammar& vocabulary (post-experiment）	7.5200	61		
Pair sample 3	Reading comprehension(pre-experiment）	21.4067	61	-8.630	.0016
	Reading comprehension（post-experiment）	24.4667	61		
Pair sample 4	Writing （pre-experiment）	10.4331	61	-8.963	.0002
	Writing (post-experiment）	14.066	61		
Pair sample 5	Total score（pre-experiment）	50.5461	61	-7.998	.0003
	Total score（post-experiment）	61.2600	61		

Table 4 shows the changes of EC's score in the four aspects of English learning before and after the experiment. The average score of the students' listening performance before and after the experiment was 11.4461 and 14.8733, as well as the P-value is 0.0012, that is, P < 0.01 (which demonstrates obvious significance of change); the average score of vocabulary and grammar was 6.2600 and 7.5200, with P=0.002, that is, P < 0.01(which also demonstrates obvious significance of change). Meanwhile, the average score of reading comprehension was respectively 21.4067 and 24.4667, with P=0.0016 (P < 0.01), which shows obvious significance of change in this respect. As for the average score of writing pre-experiment and post-experiment, it was 10.4333 and 14.0667 respectively; whose P-value is 0.0002, (that is, P < 0.01). And from the comparison of last aspect, the average of the total score was 50.5467 and 61. 2600 respectively before and after the experiment, with P=0.003(P is below 0.01). By analyzing the data, it can be found that performances of EC students had undergone significant changes before and after the experiment.

Table 5
Comparison of Pre and Post-Experiment Score of CC

		Mean-value	Number	T	sig
Pair sample 1	Listening (pre-experiment）	12.1531	61	.311	.758
	Listening (post-experiment)	12.8933	61		
Pair sample 2	Grammar &vocabulary (pre-experiment）	6.3001	61	-2.320	.028
	Grammar& vocabulary (post-experiment）	7.4800	61		
Pair sample 3	Reading comprehension (pre-experiment）	22.7661	61	.840	.408
	Reading comprehension（post-experiment）	23.0933	61		
Pair sample 4	Writing （pre-experiment）	11.1331	61	-3.565	.096
	Writing (post-experiment）	12.8000	61		
Pair sample 5	Total score（pre-experiment）	52.3532	61	-1.136	.265
	Total score（post-experiment）	54.2633	61		

Table 5 shows the changes of CC's score in the four aspects of English learning before and after the experiment. The average score of the students' listening performance before and after the experiment was 12.1531 and 12.8933, as well as the P-value is 0.758, that is, P > 0.01 (which demonstrates no obvious significance of change); the average score of vocabulary and grammar was 6.3001 and 7.4800, with P=0.028, that is, P > 0.01 (which also demonstrates no obvious significance of change). Meanwhile, the average score of reading comprehension was respectively 22.7661 and 23.0933, with P=0.408 (P > 0.01), which shows no obvious significance of change in this respect. As for the average score of writing pre-experiment and post-experiment, it was 10.4333 and 11.1331 respectively, whose P-value is 0.135, (that is P > 0.01). And from the comparison of last aspect, the average of the total score was 50.5461 and 52.3532 respectively before and after the experiment, with P=0.059(that is P > 0.01). By analyzing the data, it can be found that performances of CC students hadn't undergone significant changes before and after the experiment.

4. MAJOR FINDINGS

By the comparison and analysis of the researching data, it can be found that through one semester's study, the two classes have achieved a certain degree of improvement in the learning attitude, learning strategy and learning effect, but the experimental class is faster and more effective than the control class in all aspects. Through the analysis of the independent sample of the experimental class and the control class, it can be found that both of the classes have undergone changes in aspect of the learning strategy, the learning attitude, the total achievement before and after the experiment. However, by the comparison of pair examples of each class, it obviously demonstrated that students from EC had undergone obvious changes in every aspects of study. This shows that the implementation of PBL in teaching affords a significant effect on students' learning affection and learning score.

5. TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Designing appropriate PBL programs and creating authentic and interesting PBL teaching situations can arouse students' learning autonomy and their cooperation. One operational element of foreign teaching is to design classroom activities. The purpose of applying PBL is to make students play a role and enhance students' appeal for knowledge. Those who work together to finish cooperative work in class must abide by the following principles: The cooperation must have a certain task or purpose; the cooperation must have a set of rules; cooperation must be fun and competitive. Therefore, cooperation creation should arouse students' interests with abundant information and various forms. In addition, it should accord with the characteristics of students' psychological development.

With the development of the technology, it is advisable for teachers to apply PBL abiding by modern multi-media. With the rapid development of information technology, multi-media technology has been widely used in class, which can be fully utilized in developing English curriculum resources. Computer Aided Instruction has changed the traditional, one-way teaching methods and created a vivid teaching environment for students to experience English knowledge in terms of sight, hearing, and speaking. It can stimulate students' interests in learning and optimize classroom teaching. By creating intuitive, and understandable situations, multimedia can help to create more authentic projects in which students can enrich their experience in solving tasks.

CONCLUSION

The project-based learning approach has demonstrated its remarkable advantages and efficiency in motivating students and in developing their learning ability. In this research, the author aims to prove that PBL is expected to provide some inspiration on college English teaching. Through the experimental study of PBL, the research finds that Project-based learning could improve students' autonomous learning and their English performance. This is due to the fact that students should collaborate with each other to complete a project together within their groups, which develop their team spirit.

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