

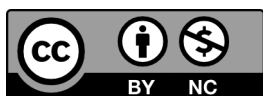
Innovation in the Safe Zone: A Study of Project-Based TBLT in Chinese Secondary EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: This paper examined the distinctive Chinese adaptation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) within secondary English language education. It argues that what is often implemented as “PBL” in practice is, in reality, a hybrid methodology – termed “Project-Based Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)”. This approach strategically incorporates the framework of PBL while retaining the instructional core of TBLT. According to an analysis of the whole process of the initiation, process, and outcomes phases of Chinese English classroom practices, this paper reveals that teachers often employ a centrally designed, textbook-aligned driving question. The subsequent sub-tasks, though student-facing, are delicately scaffolded by the teacher, culminating in an academic output that ensures mastery of foundational knowledge. Hence, the project-based TBLT serves as a “safe” version of PBL that aligns with the constraints of the current educational system by maintaining teacher guidance and curricular alignment. It offers a comfort zone for both instructors and learners while providing an incremental step beyond passive rote learning. This paper concludes that project-based TBLT should be considered as a pragmatic and transitional phase. It posits that through deliberate improvements- such as posing authentic, cross-disciplinary driving questions and gradually raising student agency - this model can evolve into a more authentic form of PBL, ultimately better serving the goal of nurturing students’ holistic competencies within the Chinese context.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning (PBL); Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT); Educational localization; Secondary English education; Hybrid pedagogy



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1 Introduction

Since the promotion and implementation of quality-oriented education in China, the English-learning curriculum objective has been translated into a holistic criterion, which highlights students’ overall cultivation in English competencies. Moreover, project-based learning (PBL) serves as an instructional approach to cultivate students’ holistic development, which aligns well with its concepts. As its well-functioning has been demonstrated in foreign countries, students gain a distinct overarching rise in critical thinking, diverse thinking, etc. Hence, an increasing number of SLT

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scholars have begun to focus on the application of China-style PBL.

Numerous successful practices combining PBL into English language teaching have also been observed globally. For instance, Torres (2017) has examined students' enhancement in oral expression in Grand 9, which is an area particularly challenging for Chinese learners. This evidence has sparked the emergence of various English teaching theories and practices with Chinese characteristics, all aimed at improving students' comprehensive capacities in English.

However, influenced by the limitations of the subject-specific implementation and knowledge-oriented instruction (Xia, 2020), this paper has examined that numerous pedagogical practices in secondary English language education have demonstrated the conflated utilization of PBL and TBLT (Task-Based Language Learning). Based on the identical emphasis of an authentic context and the completion of tangible outcomes, PBL is often misinterpreted as an exclusively variant of TBLT. Based on the Chinese practical conditions, a hybrid pedagogy is generated: the Projected-Based TBLT. It is a method that combines the framework of PBL and the essence of TBLT, which allows students to learn fundamental knowledge and improve their holistic competencies to some extent.

Notwithstanding, rooted in the theoretical foundations and diverse practical paradigms, this paper will focus on the fundamental distinction between these two pedagogical methods and attempt to find the underlying reasons for this hybrid pedagogy. Moreover, it also helps educators to identify that the project-based TBLT is not equivalent to PBL. The method fails to provide a similar cultivation force as the PBL. Besides, in this new era, a pedagogy that could nurture students' multifaceted abilities beyond knowledge acquisition is necessary in Chinese development. Given the prodigious role of PBL in improving students' holistic competencies, it is indispensable to upgrade the project-based TBLT into the PBL. Hence, this paper strives to deliver a sobering perspective on the distinction between the true essence of PBL and the Chinese-style PBL, thereby calling for a conceptual and methodological upgrade in its implementation in the secondary English language education.

2 The Difference between PBL and TBLT in English Learning

Both PBL and TBLT serve as significant teaching methods in secondary English language education that enable students to acquire language knowledge through their construction. With the introduction of foreign language PBL and the practice of Chinese PBL, it is indispensable to figure out the distinctions between these two methods in this part.

2.1 The Essence of PBL and Its Application in English Learning

The PBL aims to cultivate learners' comprehensive ability in tackling open-ended questions in the real world, corresponding to "learning by doing" (Dewey). In this learning mode, teachers and students play a distinctive role. Moreover, Buck Institution for Education (2008) has proposed eight core principles to define it. In this paper, the five principles will be elaborated as they are the pivotal features that can make a distinction of TBLT: (1) A challenging question without a pre-existing answer, which serves as the guide for the learning; (2) The sustained inquiry empowers students to propose and solve subproblems, which equates to an in-depth and continuous process; (3) The whole process must keep the authenticity. Especially, the display and the judgment of the final achievements must be those of the individuals in the real world; (4) Besides, students are the primary agents, which means that teachers must fully respect their opinions and choices; (5) Their achievements should be exhibited and probably be utilized. Hence, in this

paper, the PBL means that teachers propose a real-context open and challenging question in a long-term, continuous exploration process. Students, as the leaders, positively solve questions according to a series of sub-questions, whose achievements will be exhibited in a public exhibition and may be utilized by the judges.

As it's implemented in English learning, the role of PBL becomes a tool to learn English, namely, foreign language PBL. Beckett (1999) advocates this learning method that enables students to plan, investigate, analyze, and synthesize data through a series of individual or group activities integrating language and content, followed by written or oral reflection on both the learning process and outcomes. The "project" in this definition means a student-centered thematic learning approach that integrates multiple skills, aimed at promoting the simultaneous development of language proficiency, content knowledge, and competencies, based on Hedge (1993). Besides, as the achievements of the foreign language PBL, a visual output is essential for students, which requires them to participate in various disciplinary practice activities in various forms and levels. However, in practice, teachers will fail to change their role and tend to be influenced by textbooks. The PBL will be transformed into a project-oriented activity, according to Wang (2019). In this light, the project-oriented activity may mirror the procedural steps of PBL, but fails to ultimately cultivate learners' multiple competencies, thereby losing the essential spirit and transformative potential of authentic PBL.

2.2 The Essence of TBLT and Its Application in English Learning

The TBLT serves as the pedagogy of foreign languages, aiming to assist students learn how to communicate in their foreign languages and become good problem solvers in language. In this light, the five principles of TBLT should be followed: (1) The central role of a task should focus on the language meaning; (2) Tackling this task should be through language utilization; (3) The similarities between the real world and the tasks; (4) Finishing the task initially; (5) Evaluating the degree of task completion based on the outcome. Hence, in this paper, the definition of TBLT is that teachers intentionally design an authentic task with a focus on meaning, to enable students to acquire language and use it for communication through the process of task completion.

Through a myriad of practices, TBLT has witnessed its successful application in China in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English classes. In a TBLT, three steps are designed by teachers centered on a task: pre-task, during-task, and post-task. Ultimately, after lessons, teachers should organize students to reflect on their performance, which leads them to learn the use of language more applicable in a real context. Therefore, the function of their outcome lies in examining the efficiency of students' learning of language.

2.3 The Comparison of Foreign Language PBL and TBLT

Since the introduction of PBL, Xia (2020) has advocated disciplinary PBL. Therefore, in her framework of disciplinary PBL, the application of PBL should focus on the three principles: no significantly extending class hours, no introducing extensive additional teaching materials, and no compromising academic standards. Influenced by these requirements, frontline teachers have been confused about leveraging TBLT and PBL in their teaching practices, as these methods have some similar yet different steps. Initially, they all pursue authenticity in the learning process. PBL focuses on the open and challenging questions in the real world, while TBLT stresses the task in the real world. Besides, "learning by doing" is the consistent principle: the PBL is learning in a project without pre-existing answers, and the "TBLT" is learning in a task designed by teachers. Moreover, they advocate the student-centered principle. In PBL, students could engage in the whole process of problem-solving, obscuring the dominance. In TBLT, students could construct their own

knowledge frameworks.

Furthermore, the self-reflection is the main step for both methods. However, the PBL requires students to participate in self-reflection in the process through their metacognitive strategies. The TBLT allows students to reflect on themselves in the final steps. Hence, limited in a foreign language and a single unit in PBL, the teacher tends to utilize the foreign language PBL through the TBLT of multiple tasks.

Nevertheless, these two methods have totally different core principles followed by a list form (Table 1).

Table 1 A Comparative Framework of Foreign Language PBL and TBLT

Dimensions	Foreign language PBL	TBLT
Students Aims	Holistic competency	Communicated Capacity in one language
The Driven Force	An Open and Complex Question	A Designed Task for Language Communication
The Learning Process	Exploration by Students	Lead by Teachers
The Ultimate Goals	A Public and Visual Product	An Output of Language for Teachers
The Function of Teachers	Initiator and Consultant	Designers
The Duration and Scale	Long-term and Interdisciplinary or	Short-term and A Single Disciplinary

Therefore, through the analysis of their confusion features and the different core principles, it can be clearly distinguished that the integrated utilization of the two methods occurs in Chinese practices.

3 The Integration in Practice: Project-Based TBLT as a Distinctly Chinese Adaptation

However, through the analysis of the practices in secondary English language education, it can be found that the divergent core requirements are beneath seemingly similar yet different requests. In practice, the foreign language PBL of Chinese characteristics assigns true frameworks of the true PBL. However, the essence of foreign language PBL of Chinese style equates to TBLT. Hence, through this innovation, this hybrid method enables students to master fundamental knowledge and improve their competencies to some extent.

3.1 The Seemingly Open yet Closed Question in Practice

In the application of disciplinary PBL, Xia (2020) has also called on the significant role of the open question, namely, the driving question. Through this question, students could pose a myriad of sub-questions to solve this driving and big question. During this problem-solving process, students can integrate their basic knowledge and skills and learning the vital concepts, definitions, and competencies. However, limited by the curriculum objectives and the content of textbooks, teachers propose that the questions are closed questions with pre-existing answers in the textbooks. For instance, in Huang's practice (2020), the open question is to compare the disparities between American and Chinese High School Experiences. However, students can probe the answer in the text of *The Freshman Challenge*.

It is significant to understand that the function of open questions in PBL is to enable students to apply their critical and divergent thinking to solve an unknown and complex question. Put in foreign language PBL, this question also sparks students' desire to explore. However, in Huang's practice (2020), the students' work changes into answering the question through the text, which equates to a step of pre-task in TBLT. In this method, this question can be changed into a normal reading class question: please read the text and tell me the difference between you and the American students, mirroring a task in TBLT. By doing so, this closed question allows students to explore on a limited scale, decreasing the

risk of the PBL's limitless explorations.

3.2 The Illusion of Agency: Teacher-Directed Processes and the Subverted Student Role

The essence of PBL lies in having the transfer of dominant role in the class. The decision-making power of the learning process belongs to students, not teachers. Notwithstanding, in the Chinese practices concerning teaching efficiency, subject knowledge, and class management, a “control paradigm” has occurred in the PBL classrooms: on the prerequisite of the educator's maintenance of ultimate control right, students can automatically explore. Therefore, each step and sub-question in PBL should be proposed by students. In this light, students can implement the metacognitive strategies to supervise in maintaining that each step is correct. If their exploratory pathways have deviated from the central question, they can inspect and change their directions. During this process, teachers serve as consultants and supervisors to observe every step in the process and assist students when they are in need. Thus, the true exploration lies in the unknown processes and no design.

However, based on the current circumstances in China. Students struggle with self-directed learning. Therefore, in the Chinese practice, each sub-question has been designed by teachers. In Liu's practice (2023), he has held that the sub-question is the learning activities, which teachers can design. In the Unit 2 practice, the open question is how much do you know about your inner core – your beliefs, values, emotional reserves, and feelings? Then, he has designed a package of questions to respond to the general questions. Besides, students could pose this chain of questions under the guidance of teachers. Hence, teachers' design shifted into scaffolding, which provides support to students' autonomous study. Hence, in this application, the roles of teachers and students are identical to TBLT, namely, teachers dominate the learning processes, and students carry out the tasks. Moreover, the finishing of the sub-question is similar to a task, requiring the three steps of pre-task, during-task, and post-task. Therefore, the project-based TBLT offers a pathway for teachers to instruct students on how to learn independently.

3.3 The Seemingly Public yet Academic Exercise

The PBL requires the publication of the outcomes, in which the judges will become the authentic audience. Besides, the outcomes of PBL will be put into application in the real world. Thus, the foreign language PBL requires students to demonstrate their outcomes through a visual format. In this light, the real outcomes of foreign language output should stem from authentic and social value, and can be recognized by the real public. However, restricted by the course duration and teaching objectives, the outcomes of foreign language PBL in China are identical to the academic output, whose role lies in the practice and reinforcement of basic knowledge.

Moreover, the three features exist in practice according to Liu's practice. Firstly, the unchanged judge. During the exercise of the continuing writing of the little prince, the judges are still teachers and students. In this light, students' writing aims to complete the task. Meanwhile, they demonstrate and communicate with a simulated audience, which corresponds to TBLT's concept: create a chance to use language in a real context. Moreover, the criteria of judgement. In practice, this poetry rubric has been provided to the students, allowing them to set clear standards for excellence from the beginning of the creative process. Moreover, through the poetry rubric, the focus on their outcomes is on the linguistic forms, the language style, and the understanding of learning content. Over the evaluation process, teachers concentrate on the correction of linguistic expression and task completion, which conforms to TBLT's core principle of giving priority to meaning and framework equally. Ultimately, the essence of the outcome. Through the presentation of

continuation work, a handwritten poster devoid of any content beyond a sequel text and illustration of *The Little Prince* fails to resonate with an authentic audience. Rather, it merely demonstrates a comprehensive linguistic exercise. Overall, these three features of Chinese practice proved that these activities aim to gain language enhancement, resonating with the purpose of TBLT. By doing so, the project-based TBLT can also guarantee students' language proficiency.

4 The Reason for the Generation of the Project-Based TBLT

The generation of the projected-based TBLT in secondary English language education represents an innovative pathway under existing conditions through the joint influence of the education system, teachers, and students. The education system demands quantifiable student outcomes, teachers resort to familiar drilling methods for the sake of stability, and students, due to ingrained habits and role uncertainty, require explicit instructions. These factors collectively reduce PBL to a framework of project-based TBLT. As a result, foreign language PBL with Chinese characteristics often retains the framework of PBL but embodies the essence of TBLT, aiming primarily to enhance language proficiency through goal-oriented project execution.

4.1 The Requirement of the Educational System and Concepts

Significantly, the ultimate goal in the secondary phases of Chinese education is to participate in the Gaokao, thereby entering the university. In the junior phase, students attempt to pass the Senior High School Entrance Exam. In essence, these two exams all serve as high-stakes exams to Chinese students, as they gain merely one chance to join them. The core resort of these high stakes is the quantification of students' standards. In this light, in English learning, students are required to master grammar knowledge precisely and acquire a large vocabulary to improve their reading and writing skills. Inversely, the goal of real foreign language PBL is to cultivate students' holistic competencies. Besides, students can acquire language skills through a project. Hence, the language points that students will acquire are uncertain. Therefore, through careful consideration, teachers decided to change the project into a package of tasks with clear aims and a controlled output, thereby corresponding to the requirements of these high-stakes exams.

Moreover, in the long history of Chinese education, all participants in education hold the concept that learning has to be about achieving results, namely, a rise in scores. However, the real PBL aims to pursue students' enhancement of critical thinking, divergent thinking, and teamwork skills, which all fail to be examined in a visual way. Thus, in the localized process, the Chinese PBL's core principle changes into a pursuit of academic rise, resonating with the education concept of all members in Chinese education.

4.2 The Transformational Dilemma of Teachers' Education Role

Through various years of educational practice, the role of Chinese teachers is to impart basic knowledge and, later, to guide students to construct their knowledge structure. Both of these functions require them to design the educational process. Meanwhile, when they were students, their teachers also adopted the identical methods to instruct them. They are accommodated in their role, which assists students to learn knowledge. Nevertheless, the PBL calls on teachers to transform into a facilitator of study. Hence, the subversion of this role can trigger a strong sense of identity anxiety. Many teachers have not yet genuinely adapted to the role shift.

Furthermore, Chinese teachers don't have experience with the process of PBL. In the real PBL, the requirement - the openness question, the dynamic exploration process, and the non-quantified evaluative outcomes – Chinese teachers don't all master in their training. Naturally, as students, they fail to adopt a teaching method that they are not an expert in. Therefore, retreating to the familiar task-oriented design model becomes a safe yet reluctant choice.

4.3 The Transformational Dilemma of Students' Learning Role

During their learning process, Chinese students tend to acquire knowledge under the guidance of their teachers. In this mode, they can rapidly acquire knowledge, waiting for teachers to provide distinct learning instructions and standard answers. For instance, in a common English writing class, teachers have a tendency to provide a template essay and allow students to copy it. Nevertheless, the demands of the PBL for self-directed inquiry, group collaboration, and personal decision-making may instead lead to students' confusion, anxiety, and resistance. Their desire for teachers' assistance reinforces the need for detailed task design within the project-based TBLT.

Besides, not all students can gain improvements through this method, especially in a large-class teaching system. Through the survey of Xia (2019), student with fine cognitive strategies and self-regulation could witness their improvements in PBL. In this light, effective foreign language PBL requires students to possess robust metacognitive skills to adjust their own learning and social collaboration abilities. These are precisely the competencies ignored in traditional education. As a result, even when teachers strive to step back, students often struggle to raise questions, collaborate effectively, and manage project progress. Ultimately, this phenomenon hinders the advancement of projects, forcing teachers to reassert control and revert to TBLT.

5 Conclusion

This paper has figured out that the prevalent implementation of foreign language PBL in China, in fact, is most accurately characterized as project-based TBLT – a hybrid pedagogy that integrates the macro-framework of PBL with the micro-mechanics of TBLT. Rather than merely viewing this as a dilution of the “authenticity” of PBL, this paper advocates that its emergence constitutes a contextually pragmatic adaptation of the realities of the Chinese secondary education system. It effectively balances innovation with security: the project format provides a container for engaging, student-centered activities, while the underlying task-based structure ensures curricular alignment, manageable application for teachers, and the merger of core knowledge for students. This enables both educators and learners to navigate educational innovation in their “comfort zones”, thereby facilitating a gradual change away from passive learning.

Ultimately, project-based TBLT should be acknowledged as a necessary and valuable transitional production. It symbolizes the system's current capacity for change. The pathway forward lies not in discarding this model but in consciously upgrading it. By progressively more authentic, open-ended problems, gradually transferring processual ownership of students, and valuing non-academic outcomes, educators can leverage this transitional framework as a springboard. Through such continuous modification, project-based TBLT can fulfill its potential as a stable bridge toward a more authentic, competency-oriented PBL that genuinely cultivates the core competencies required of students in China.

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