Authenticity in Project Based Learning: Building Community

Michael Stockwell, Sugiyama Jogakuen University, Japan

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Abstract

Implementing project-based learning (PBL) in an English as a foreign language EFL context can be problematic. A possible solution is to increase attention to authenticity in project design. In this paper I argue that there are four features of authenticity for PBL in an EFL context. The first feature, authentic input, is widely discussed in the literature and is the focus of much of what is considered authentic. This paper argues that there are three other important features of authenticity regarding the implementation of PBL. They are authentic task, authentic output, and authentic audience. The authenticity of these the features may improve the benefit of PBL for learners and instructors.

Keywords: Project based learning, authenticity

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PBL (Project Based Learning) is widely viewed as a valuable pedagogical approach that gives learners the freedom to explore and learn about topics that interest them. Combine this with the opportunity for simultaneously learning life-based skills while stretching out their language abilities, and it appears we have a perfect match.

Teachers who have used PBL report a wide range of benefits with the most common being authenticity of experience that the language learners were exposed to during the project cycle (Stoller, 2006). PBL affords flexibility for teachers in curriculum design and allows teachers to target material that motivates students (Tomei, Glick, & Holst, 1999) PBL allows the learner to be at the center of the process and promotes autonomy, problem-solving, critical thinking, as well as interpersonal and life skills.

However, there are a number of challenges in implementing PBL for foreign language study in particular in contexts where learners are homogenous in their first language and have limited opportunities and time to focus on language studies. This paper discusses four elements of authenticity: input, task, output and audience. I further argue that when designing a project, wider application of authenticity across these four elements might help overcome some of the problems associated with applying PBL in an EFL context.

PBL for language learning is defined in this paper as a pedagogical approach to learning that strives to integrate content with language learning to encourage both collaboration and autonomy while exposing learners to practical, real-life skills. "Students drive their own learning through inquiry, as well as work collaboratively to research and create projects that reflect their knowledge" (Bell, 2010, p. 39). With this approach, learners have both a voice and choice in the process and product aspect of PBL.

Beckett (2002) proposes that problems with PBL in foreign language study can be overcome by explicitly teaching learners the value of this language learning approach. However, this paper argues that in EFL contexts this is still less than optimal. There is a need to prove to learners that time spent away from direct language study is also valuable in its own right. Wentzel and Brophy (2014) write about the instrumental value of learning activities that have life application potential either for the learners' current situation or what will be useful in the future. They posit mastery of these skills can be powerful incentives for motivating learners. The outcome PBL projects possibly can be improved by designing authenticity throughout the project cycle. To do this, I propose that authenticity features of PBL also need to be maximized and explicitly communicated within the framework of PBL project design.

Literature Review

As a teacher in an EFL context in Japan, I have two main issues regarding PBL. First, when PBL is applied to the study of a foreign language, it is often in the English as a Second Language (ESL) and not EFL context. With projects, if learners are all of the same first language (L1) I have observed a tendency to drift into L1 use during the part of the process that is most beneficial for language study. The product comes before the process, and L_1 predominates in the group work.

Secondly, the majority of research on PBL focuses on mainstream education where the medium of communication is in the learners' first language. PBL in contexts such

as science, engineering, and commerce have proven to be very successful (Beckett, 2002). However, while there is widespread use of PBL in foreign language learning, the effectiveness of this approach has yet to be satisfactorily proven (Beckett, 2002). Numerous anecdotal comments from project teachers and students indicate that there are problems and issues with the use and effectiveness of PBL. A major problem is learners' perceptions of the value of PBL (Beckett & Slater, 2005, p. 108). Eyring (1989) found that students were dissatisfied with the project approach, as they did not seem to think the tasks were worthwhile pursuits in ESL classes. In Beckett's (1999) study of high school ESL students, less than one-fifth of the 73 participants enjoyed project work or valued the project approach. Furthermore, participants were in an ESL context. According to Moulton and Holmes (2000), many students dropped out of project-based classes since they believed that ESL classes should be limited to the study of language, and they resented being asked to accomplish non-linguistic tasks. Similar findings were reported by Guo (2006), where students in China also wanted teachers to "teach for the test" (p. 150).

From my own classroom, I was told by students that they preferred to focus directly on four skills and vocabulary acquisition. It seems to students that the focus on content and skills were getting in the way of their language studies. Their objective is to obtain a high TOEIC test score and not develop computer skills or other life skills. These goals seemed to be worthy, but not as important as a TOEIC score. This unfamiliarity with PBL makes it difficult for learners to be able to set appropriate learning goals required for successful completion of a project. An equally important consideration is to encourage learners to use the target language in the process of completing the project. Fragoulis and Tsiplakides (2009), also reported on problems with Greek EFL students not using the target language for communication. Students also found the projects to be too long and lost interest and motivation before it was completed. Kemaloglu (2010) also described the difficulties of getting students to use English both inside and outside of class to complete their projects. She also reported that her students predominantly used resources found in their first language and not the target language. It is all too often that learners will use their first language to complete the project tasks.

The problem regarding motivation appears to be twofold. First learners place a higher priority on direct language study of the four skills and vocabulary acquisition than experiential learning. Project work tasks seem to be more of an annoyance than a route to mastery of a foreign language. Secondly, and closely related, learners may become demotivated when the content material of the project is viewed as inauthentic or unrelated to themselves.

According to Beckett and Slater (2005) a methodological tool called "The Project Framework" helps socialize learners to the usefulness of PBL and language learning in general. The idea being that explicit knowledge of the goals associated with project work in ESL classes will increase motivation. However, while this is helpful in improving the perceived value of PBL in an EFL context, it is still insufficient.

Learners will likely focus their attention on projects that they value as useful to their current or future lives. Often curriculum is too abstract or focused on an issue or topic that the learner will likely never have to attend with. Features that are authentic have the potential to be meaningful for learners in their own right. What constitutes

meaningful life skills is not easy to determine. However authentic instrumental value learning activities can motivate students by helping them appreciate the knowledge or skills focused on in a project because it will help them currently, provide them with the means to social advancement, or prepare for future occupational or achievement later in life. Student motivation, Wentzel and Brophy (2014) argue, should be at the center of curriculum design.

The need for authenticity in language teaching is not universally accepted. Some, like Taylor (1994) have the view that classrooms by their? very nature are authentic. This is a valid point, and with competent instructors there hopefully are? numerous incidences of authentic communication. However, Taylor (1994) concludes that we should have faith in the ability of our students to use their sociolinguistic abilities, education and experiences to engineer authentic discourse within the classroom. I strongly disagree with this aspect, and especially regarding PBL in an EFL context. Taylor's point may hold true for different kinds of classroom activities. However, when we are asking our students to invest hours and weeks in a project, they need to perceive that the project is meaningful. Even if we take a weak version of the need for authenticity, it is plausible that motivation can be increased if projects are designed with the concept of authenticity in features of PBL project design.

In classes with the same first language, it is essential that authenticity move beyond providing elements of authentic inputs and contexts and considers the need for other authentic features. When applying PBL in foreign language study, we need to consider the level of authenticity at various stages of the project. If the objective is to use authenticity to increase learner motivation, we need to go beyond realia and focus on the task, output and audience for the project. The next section reviews some of the definitions that are used for authenticity. I'm a bit lost throughout this section, particularly in the early sections, where you seem to be interspersing aspects of your own experience. I think you need to take a funnel approach here—start by summarizing some of the general issues that have come up in research on PBL, then focus on the specific issues that your four features are designed to address. It seems that a related issue is motivation, so perhaps that is the overall theme under which aspects of authenticity should be discussed. Also, at this point I am giving up on marking the many grammatical and stylistic problems. This needs to be checked and addressed more carefully before you submit the next draft.

Authenticity in PBL

Stoller (2006) in her influential study, an analysis of 16 studies of different aspects of PBL, reported eight common benefits of project work. Stoller emphasizes that the most commonly cited benefit of PBL is the authenticity of experience and language. However, it does not elaborate on what authentic experience entails, and could be limited to only what is described as authentic sources of input and themes.

Gilmore (2007) details eight possible definitions of authenticity that emerges from the literature. While these definitions are not limited to PBL, they are interesting in that they demonstrate the wide differences in opinion on authenticity and how the definitions are interrelated when discussing authenticity in language learning. In addition, Gilmore (2007) and Tatsuki (2006), highlight the difficulties in trying to anchor a workable definition of authenticity. In analyzing the eight definitions,

Gilmore (2007) holds the view that "the concepts can be situated in either the text itself, in the participants, in the social or cultural situation and purposes of the communicative act, or some combination of these" (p. 98). This is consistent with a definition of authenticity for PBL, in that we have to look at authenticity as being multifaceted and apparent at various stages. Also, this relationship is interrelated between the various steps of a project based on PBL.

Both Taylor and Gilmore refer to Morrow (1977) for their definition of authenticity. "An authentic text is a stretch of real language, produced and designed to convey a real message of some sort" (p. 14). This is a good place to start, but falls short when attempting to define authenticity in regard to PBL. To define authenticity in PBL, there is a need to recognize the various aspects of authenticity that spans beyond initial input and moves to what Taylor (1994) proposes "not only a function of language but also of the participants, the use to which language is put, the setting, the nature of the interaction, and the interpretation the participants bring both the setting and the activity" (p. 8).

To fully explain authenticity in PBL, I identify four features of authenticity: input, task, output and audience. The following section will discuss the potential role authenticity has to play in PBL in an EFL context. To contrast the differences in authenticity, I will compare two projects. One is a typical project for an EFL class with the theme planning a trip to Australia. The second is designing a website for visitors attending a conference at the learners' own university.

Authentic Input

What is regarded as authentic is often limited to the selection of project themes or real-world items that form authentic input. The selected themes, which are often generated by the language instructor, thus act to frame the context of the project. Within PBL literature, a considerable amount has been written about authentic tasks that address real-world problems such as finding an apartment, deciding a study-abroad program, creating an advertisement to support a cause or other tasks that may be of interest to learners.

This focus of context with real-world themes or issues provides the authenticity that teachers strive for, and learners often appreciate. The problem with limiting authenticity to the initial stage of the project cycle is it essentially only provides the background content that learners need to process to complete the project. As Stoller (2006) writes, the vast majority of project work exposes learners to the target language through the use of authentic information sources. However, it is questionable whether this is sufficient to motivate learners to communicate in the target language throughout the project-cycle.

Teachers are well versed in the benefits of using realia in the classroom. Many teaching material and even test use authentic or authentic-like materials. Unfortunately, if one looks at the projects that are recommended in PBL books for foreign language learning, you will find that authenticity often stops at this point. Examples of authentic input commonly employed are films, commercials, text from print media, audio recording and many other types.

In regard to input for our Australian Trip project, we could have learners visit websites or travel agents and gather the necessary information. With the advent of Skype and free telecommunication learners could actually call hotels and ask for availability and prices for a variety of rooms. All would have a high degree of authenticity. With the conference website, students would visit the conferences previous website or interview conference organizers or previous attendees. They'll likely also need to converse with the teacher on what kind of requirements would be necessary. Once again, there is a high degree of authenticity.

Authentic Task

Tatsuki (2006) brings up a very interesting point about the modern philosophical meaning of authenticity. She states that there are two types. In Type 1 Authenticity is established based on the quality of realness, Type 2 authenticity is based on the product of quality interaction. Citing MacDonald (2005, n.p.) who argues that "language teaching – and in particular English Language Teaching – has clung too long to the first of these notions of authenticity at the expense of the other". This is the point that is being made in this paper in regard to PBL. The authenticity of material is insufficient to motivate students to commit to a project program.

"The notion of authenticity has largely been restricted to the discussions about texts; there have been few systematic attempts to address the question of task authenticity" (Guariento & Morley, 2001). As discussed previously the important aspect of projects is not necessarily in the authenticity of the input, but how the input is manipulated for pedagogical purposes. The goal of the project teacher is to find a proper "fitness to the learning purpose" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 159). Authentic tasks will have real-world relevance if it is purposeful for the learner.

Authentic tasks are defined as pedagogical activities that allow learners to demonstrate their knowledge to solve real-world problems. Authentic tasks "create a bridge between what is learned in the classroom and why this knowledge is important to the world outside of the classroom" (Kolk, n.d.). A crucial part of task authenticity is the degree of real communication that takes place in conveying a genuine message. However as Fanselow (1982) cautions it is not easy. Fanselow cites the case of a Chinese chef who had been taught to describe his work as he goes about it. "But does a Chinese chef need to be able to say, I'm cutting the onions" (p. 180)? Other more practical uses might be to be able to book a reservation. Breen (1985) argues that the most authentic tasks are able to exploit the learning situation.

In the Australian Trip project, numerous authentic tasks could be negotiated. For example: determining the most economical airfare, hotels, meals package, and car rental. Also, a plan for sight-seeing could be tasked. In the case of the conference website, learners could be tasked to research and interview conference organizers, draw up sketches of the website and develop content for the site and learn the necessary computer skills. All of these tasks would have a high degree of authenticity.

Authentic Output

For authentic output to be a feature of a project, the form, style and standards that are associated with a context need to be adhered to. Returning to the Australia trip

project, an itinerary with all relevant times, flight numbers, arrival and departure information and other details would need to be clearly stated following standard style of the industry. An oral report, or a poster presentation would lack authenticity. Authentic output is dictated by the task set in the project design. With the conference website, the learners would need to follow proper formatting for websites. Clear, uncluttered format with relevant information clearly tagged and accessible. There would also be the need to follow proper file and image standards that learners would likely have to research.

Related to my commented about examples of authentic output, I'm noticing a lack of positive examples throughout the whole paper. That is, you tell us what is wrong with PBL, what the limitations are, why particular practices, tasks, etc. are inauthentic, but you do not always give us an example of something that actually would be authentic (or at least more authentic).

Authentic Audience

Allan and Stoller (2005) detailed key factors for successful project work which were: the need to focus on real-world issues, student collaboration, focus on form, focus on process as well as product, and an emphasis on integrated skills and end-of-project-reflection. In this and the majority of other studies, there is no direct discussion on the benefits of authentic audience. In most cases, it appears that projects are designed with the final product to be presented to an instructor or to a simulated audience. Learners are required to do enough to satisfy the requirements of the teacher. With authentic audience, students are tasked with creating a product that could be used in a real-world context. It is argued that this can be motivating for students, as they need to think outside of the confines of the classroom. That is not to say that the classroom is irrelevant. The negotiating of the project requirements between the learner and instructor is very much authentic as is, hopefully, the group work that occurs in the process stage of the project.

If the final product is going to be used by an authentic audience, students might be more likely to use a second language in carrying out the tasks in homogenous classrooms. When learners submit work to their instructor, they likely believe that the instructor will be able to fill in the gaps in language and content. When they submit project work to peers, they are likely to believe their peers will forgive them for gaps in their knowledge of content or the target language. Learners are possibly motivated to work harder when their work has a sense of permanence and an authentic audience. Also, ideally learners will be able to receive authentic feedback from the audience, which also will, hopefully, be motivating. In the case of the conference website project, the organizers had a great deal of contact with the learners over the duration of the semester and were able to provide feedback on their website. With the Australian Trip and similar kinds of projects, the audience is not authentic. The project settles on the instructor's desk, and the project will likely never be authentically used.

While the objective is to design projects that maximize authenticity, clearly due to pedagogical constraints it will not always be satisfied. However, in the EFL context, whenever possible, effort should be made to include some of the criteria listed below

during the initial designing stages. The following are an adapted list from (Stockwell, 2015). In the bracket of each line is the authentic feature that the item supports.

1. The target audience for the final product is apposite for the learners. Learners will judge if the audience is in a position to benefit from the content of the project. (Audience)
2. The target language will be the natural mode of communication between the audience and the learners. (Output)
3. Learners will have access to relevant information and knowledge that the audience will value. (Input)
4. The product will have a sense of permanence and completeness. (Output)
5. The product for the audience will have significant content that will be useful for the learner as well as the audience. (Task) (Audience)
6. Learners will have input on the direction and outcome of the project. (All)
7. The audience for the project will likely provide feedback in the target language. (Audience) (Input)

Perception of Learners

Regardless of the efforts by the teacher, if the learners do not perceive the various elements as authentic then there will be no benefit or change in motivation. Lee (1995, p. 323) warns "learner authenticity is only possible if learners feel positive about the materials and react to them as was pedagogically intended." Lee continues that learners will not automatically be engaged with materials just because they are "authentic" – the materials need to have communicative potential and be relevant to learners' experiences now or in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a number of obstacles in implementing PBL in an EFL context. However, there are numerous benefits and with proper foresight by instructors in the planning stage, leaners may be motivated to exert the needed effort to benefit from this type of experiential learning. This paper argues that when appropriate authenticity should be designed in PBL at input, task, output, and audience stages of the project cycle.

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