CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Project-based Learning to Facilitate Learner Autonomy

Zakia Sarwar

Abstract

This chapter reports on teacher-initiated research to investigate what materials, strategies and approaches could be practically used to teach English in under-resourced EFL environments, which have outdated syllabi and untrained teachers. It has gradually evolved to its current position in the last two decades during which the researcher first individually experimented with communicative methodology in a class of more than 100 students and then evolved an indigenous model of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in the next phase, which involved three colleagues from one college. In the third phase, the concept of PBL was further fine-tuned for a wider context, which involved three colleges and five collaborating researchers.

The PBL model used in this research differs from the usual practice in which project work is built around a curriculum, its instructional objectives and themes (Fried-Booth, 1986; A. P. Papanderous, 1994; J. L. Eyring, 1998; and K. Gerret, 1998). This article investigates the ways in which PBL facilitated learner autonomy for college students in an EFL learning environment.

The chapter outlines the teachers’ and learners’ perceptions of learner autonomy and successful learning outcomes through PBL in which learners discover their capacity to be independent, and therefore feel liberated as they are able to see that they can use English in real life, rather than rote learn it meaninglessly.

Introduction: The story of my research

This is the story of a teacher-initiated exploration that gradually evolved into classroom action research, looking into how learning could be managed in difficult EFL contexts where large classes abound and students do not have exposure to real world English.

I started with a class of 40 in the 1960s that swelled to over a 100 a decade later. Coping with these numbers seemed almost impossible, and I was almost on the verge of abandoning teaching. Luckily, I was introduced to a new vision of teaching
when I did a diploma in TEFL from the University of Sydney in the early 1980s, when communicative language teaching was in its heyday. As a trainee, I tried my best to relate those ELT principles to my classroom in Karachi. But I realised that this may not be possible given Pakistan’s ELT scenario, aptly described as a terminally sick person suffering from ‘multiple injuries in some catastrophic accident’ or one who has ‘been attacked by a great number of severe illnesses’, such as outdated syllabi, large classes, an obsolete testing system and untrained teachers (Campbell, 1985: 44). Although it seemed a hard nut to crack, the focus on the cognitive processes of learning to learn and making large class EFL learners autonomous held the possibility of moving out of the quagmire I had found myself in. I realised that no matter how difficult the classroom conditions were, I could not go back to ‘open your books to page 10’ and explain by translating the English text into Urdu.

Even before doing the course at Sydney, I had done a survey of students’ proficiency at the secondary and college levels. Although they scored well in grammar tests, they were unable to write a single sentence of English correctly without rote learning. However, they were knocking at the ‘Golden Gates of English’ looking for the key to bring them success (Sarwar, 2000) in studies as well as in future jobs. In Pakistan, English is a compulsory subject in all public sector institutions from class 6 to the Bachelor’s level – in some cases from class 1. It has a high social status and is the language of power and upward social mobility. My learners seemed to be victims of a vicious circle in which they lacked exposure to real world English resulting in a lack of self-esteem and poor language skills.

![Diagram showing the vicious circle which engulfs the EFL learner]

**Figure 1.** The vicious circle which engulfs the EFL learner
So what could I do to make learning of English efficient enough to meet my learners’ needs despite the constraints of managing large classes of over 100 students with an inflexible curriculum and classroom schedules? That was my puzzle. Without knowing much about ‘action research’ and ‘learner autonomy’, I stumbled on an exciting path and have never looked back (see Appendix 2a). Armed with some insights into how language is learnt, I started experimenting with materials and techniques that would work in my class. The college timetable would not allow changes, so I decided to take a voluntary class of 100 students for two hours, three times a week. In all, I ran and re-ran a 50-hour course for three years (Sarwar, 2001). I realised my learners were keen to learn English and were willing to devote extra time and effort to learning if the materials and activities could be made relevant to their needs and socio-cultural environment. Together we navigated a path ‘which made sense to us and felt right’ (Allwright, 1979: 179).

Due to political disturbances in Pakistan, the replication mentioned in Appendix 2a, could not be continued. I picked up the threads of this action research again in 1999, along with three colleagues working in the same institution (Sarwar, 2000). Now the effort was to integrate self-learning activities and materials in our own classrooms where we still had to contend with the ground realities mentioned above. However, we were determined to avoid teacher-fronted instruction promoting learner dependency and the lack of opportunities for meaningful language use. Project-based learning (PBL) seemed to be an option that could be adapted to our needs.

However, the PBL model used in this research differed from the usual practice in which project work (Fried-Booth D. L., 1986; J. L. Eyring, 1998; K. Gerret, 1998) is built around the curriculum, its instructional objectives, and its themes. The main difference was that in our PBL, students’ learning was totally voluntary, outside the classroom, and not to be counted in their formal grades in the exams.

**Current research**

**Background**

I conducted the third phase of the research reported in this paper to try out the refined model of PBL in wider contexts, because handling both large and small classes continues to pose a problem for EFL teachers who are aware that there is a mismatch between classroom English instruction and learner needs. Since English is not just a status symbol in Pakistan, but is also the language of upward social mobility and a job requirement for a lot of lucrative posts, learners are unable to cope with the demands being made on them. They need to become confident and autonomous in their use of English as means of communication in various settings. The objective of doing this research in three different socio-economic locations in one city was to find out if PBL can be successfully used to foster learner autonomy and effective learning of English in large and small classes in different surroundings.
Research setting

Initially, this classroom research was to focus on the outcomes of PBL in EFL large classes. Only one collaborating researcher out of the five had a class of 150. The other classes from which we collected data had an average population of 35 students each; these were two government colleges (all female) and one private college (mixed class of boys and girls) in a major city in Pakistan. A total of 225 students, all aged between 18-20 years, enrolled for PBL; 153 completed the project. Their proficiency in English ranged from false beginners to intermediate/post-intermediate level students.

The collaborative researchers were all female with no formal training in ELT. Researchers A and B were senior teachers who wanted to try out new ways to motivate their learners. Researchers C and D were in the middle of their teaching careers. C had worked in the same department with me and had successfully tried some PBL activities in her classes. Researcher D was highly motivated and wanted to do research to improve her career opportunities. Researcher E was a new, enthusiastic entrant to the profession. They all willingly took up this research although it meant more work since including PBL in their class work meant that they would need to devote extra time and effort compared to the routine work they did normally.

Research design

We initially took up PBL as an activity outside the classroom because the inflexible, outdated syllabi, and testing and teaching methods do not correspond to learners' present day needs. These, in conjunction with time and space constraints, make for a lethal combination. Fostering learner independence in such a scenario gains utmost importance, firstly because becoming independent provides learners with confidence they badly need. Since language learning is a skill and cannot be rote-learned, it requires the learner's engagement, motivation and initiative (Sarwar, 2001). Secondly, as teachers find it difficult to give individual attention to learners in large classes, learning to learn to gain autonomy is vitally essential.

The following operational definition of PBL has evolved over a period of time and was used for this phase of research:

PBL is a voluntary, collaborative or individual process, initiated by the teacher to provide EFL learners a meaningful use of the target language outside the classroom. The contents of the project may or may not relate to the learners’ prescribed curriculum. The focal aims are to give learners opportunities to become fluent, confident and autonomous in using English by utilizing and expanding their existing language repertoire.

(Sarwar, 2002)

Analysis of the structure of PBL

According to the PBL’s operational definition, it is a voluntary activity, involving the learner’s personal decision to enrol for extra studies that do not directly relate to
their 'course' or grades. Secondly, as a completely out-of-the-class activity, it moves the students out of the teacher-fronted classroom and gives them an opportunity to learn on their own.

**Project-based learning**

**Stage 1**
- Making groups
- Choice of topics/area of enquiry
- Analysis: what, why and how
- Negotiations/discussions
- Oral/social skills

**Stage 2**
- Looking for materials
- Answering questions/interviews
- Study skills: information gathering/reading, note-making

**Stage 5**
- Project work
- Finished product
- Sharing with others

**Stage 3**
- Collating information
- Organising/sequencing
- Writing out drafts
- Peer-correction: editing/proof-reading
- Decisions about format illustrations

**Figure 2.**

- Stage one: personal decisions are required on whether the activity will be done individually or in groups and what tasks or themes will be selected for the project
- Stage two: information gathering 'strategies'
- Stage three: organising, sequencing, editing, self/peer 'monitoring' skills
- Stage four: final selection and presentation skills
- Stage five, organising display and sharing with others in the 'development and execution of plans'.

The process took 10 weeks at the beginning of the term and ended well before the formal exam anxiety hit students.

The PBL activities were:
- Creating a profile card
- Self-monitored radio news
• Practising self-created cloze exercises regularly
• Completing a book with information and pictures about a topic of their choice, and/or selecting interesting news items to make a newspaper or creating a class newsletter/magazine.

The flexible activities gave learners a choice to work at their own pace, copying or doing original writing at their level of language proficiency (Appendix 2b, c and d).

Learners' responses show that they took up PBL as they desired to learn English. All respondents in the pre-PBL questionnaire said they wanted to join the project to improve their English in one way or another: spoken skills, 58%; overall language skills, 27%; reading and writing, 18%; grammar, 18%; and 12% to learn something new. It was clear they had goals and were conscious that learning in their English classrooms was not satisfactory. Secondly, the majority of learners in their reflective writing said they had never done activities like this before. Being used to rote learning, producing a newspaper or a project book on their own was like achieving a 'mission impossible' (Entry 16). Learners at the lowest rung of the ladder in terms of learner autonomy found PBL a confidence-building activity and saw it as their first step towards independence.

Question in focus

In what ways did PBL facilitate learner autonomy for college students in an EFL learning environment?

The ancillary questions are:
• What PBL activities are designed to facilitate learner autonomy?
• As initiators of PBL, what are teachers' perceptions about learner autonomy?
• What are learners' views on PBL?
• What are the outcomes?

Procedure

Not being involved in the direct application of PBL in the classes, I took an introductory session with the five collaborating researchers (referred to as researcher A, B, C, D and E) to explain the project's rationale and the process. We prepared a handout with guidelines for the students and explained that they would receive a certificate of participation for participating in PBL, apart from first, second and third prizes for different project activities in each class.

The five teacher researchers who were working on PBL in their classes filled in pre- and post-PBL questionnaires (Appendix 2e and f) and were interviewed after the completion of the project. Similarly, 225 students who initially enrolled for the project
filled in a questionnaire. The 153 students who completed the project also filled in a post-PBL questionnaire (Appendix 2g and h) of which random samples from different institutions were selected for analysis. Available students were randomly selected for group interviews. Telephone interviews were also conducted with a random sampling of students.

Moreover, students were encouraged to share their open-ended reflections on their experience of project-based learning (38 responded). During the final display and certificate award of the project, I also observed the students’ work. The data collected is extremely rich, but for the purposes of this paper only responses dealing with learner autonomy will be discussed.

**Analysis and discussion**

*Teachers’ perceptions of autonomous learning*

Prior to working on PBL, two senior teacher researchers (A and B) expressed doubts about the students opting to work on a project not directly related to examinations and grades: “Our students in government colleges are comparatively slow, lazy, lack concentration to work, and are not often ready to accept new ideas.” Researcher C opined that “there is always unlimited capacity in every learner to learn, only the learning environment is limited.” Researcher D gave a more positive response: “My learners are enthusiastic about learning English. I believe that if this enthusiasm is channelled and guided properly, they are surely capable of learning on their own.” Researchers A and B accepted that they had never heard of the term ‘learner autonomy’. It was clear from the interviews that none of them had ever considered learner autonomy as a teaching strategy. This may suggest that teachers are unaware of this rich resource for effective learning.

Another interesting point that emerged was that being used to the ‘product oriented’ culture, researcher E was very disappointed that only 10 out of her 35 students completed PBL. Being young and enthusiastic, she had expected that her hard work would motivate all her learners to join. She felt so embarrassed that it took a lot of encouragement from the principal researcher to encourage her to share her data and reflections. It is likely that she did not understand that ethnographic research does not necessarily report on success, but is an effort to understand the issues involved in a probe. This could account for the erroneous opinions that many teachers hold about research. The difficulty of achieving success in such ventures could be a significant deterrent to teachers in pursuing classroom research.

*Learners’ views*

1. Anxiety

In their open-ended reflections, learners show anxiety about how they would gather materials for a newspaper:
• “Before starting the newspaper, I was very worried about collection of materials, its compilation” [Entry (E)18 and 25].
• “... in the beginning it was looking a difficult task” (E 3).
• “concerned” (E 5)
• “confused, puzzled” (E 13, 16, 19, and 31)
• “In the past I never thought I could create anything. I was curious and nervous” (E 2, 15, 20, 30, 32, and 33).
• “It was tough and difficult” (E 10, 11, and 34).

Researcher A substantiates the stress and anxiety felt by the students, saying, “Initially the assignment seemed too difficult to achieve ... it was contrary to the conventional methods of teaching ... it was an uphill task.”

Their anxiety and nervousness might have been due to the fact that until that point, the students had never worked on their own. They were ‘stunned’ (E 35) by the thought that apart from learning in class, there were other options for practising English.

2. Group dynamics

An interesting fact that emerged in the general analysis of the pre-PBL questionnaire was that the majority of learners who opted for working alone had secured high marks in public exams and perhaps did not feel the need for group/peer support.

Another view is presented by a learner (E 10): “I hope this research goes well. One thing this programme has already proven to me: it’s very difficult for girls to work together in a group, especially if two of them want to be ‘the boss’”. This problem was also voiced in the group interview. One interviewee said, “There should be rules of behaviour in projects like these.”

Another learner (E 29) in the same group made a revealing reflection: “First of all, I thought the programme will go to heights, but this moment when I am in the depths of water ... it is no more interesting ... I am not enjoying the way I want because of lots of burden, maybe nervousness of my group members.”

Out of the 35 reflections, this is the only entry in which a student admits to not enjoying PBL. It may also be that in EFL teacher-fronted classrooms the learners never get a chance to work on collaborative projects and find it difficult to grasp the principles of cooperative learning.

3. Lack of time

Although most of the learners enjoyed the PBL activity, a few complained of lack of time. “It gets stressful sometimes when we get many assignments of other subjects and we have to do this. One cannot give much time to this and enjoy it” (E 22).

Another adds, “I would like to criticise one thing, because sometimes we do not have sufficient time to complete these exercises, and we feel embarrassment before our teacher” (E 34). Another learner observes, “If we had more time to spare, we might
have done more than what we did. Anyway, it helped us a lot” (E 38). It appears that learners were aware of the vast possibilities offered by PBL, but the demands of regular studies prevented them from performing as well as they wanted to. This tension is inherent in PBL, being an out-of-the-class activity and not connected directly to the learners’ studies. However, the majority of entries also accept that PBL improved their English language skills a great deal.

4. Teachers’ Role

For learners, the teacher is still a very important figure in PBL. “At first I was quite confused about the planning of the newspaper, but the teacher’s coordination made it easier” (E 18).

Another learner reports, “At first I couldn’t make out what the teacher said, but when she explained, I was satisfied. My teacher is nice and cooperative. She helped us and gave us ideas. It was my first experience and I don’t know how to accomplish it. But she encouraged us and enabled us to do a marvellous job” (E 37).

Teachers’ appreciation also appears to be instrumental in pushing learners towards better performance. “Now when the project is complete, I’m quite satisfied and happy with my work, as our teacher appreciated our work a lot. I feel a big tension is released from my mind” (E 3).

This may indicate that these EFL learners are not very sure as yet of the value of their work and require their teachers’ approval to feel satisfied. The PBL operational definition takes into account the teacher’s role and terms the teacher the ‘initiator’, whose role is to introduce the programme to learners and give them ideas about the options available for learning through PBL.

5. Profile of one PBL learner

It is tempting to share the profile of one PBL learner (E4). She secured the first prize for the book as well as the newspaper activity. A discussion with her teacher (Researcher A) revealed that she was doing bad as a science student and was transferred to the humanities department. Her teacher reports that “she still remained disinterested in her studies. But when PBL was introduced she was magically transformed, became active and excelled over all others.” It is likely that E4 preferred to work independently and PBL gave her an opportunity to work on her own, which brought out her potential.

Her reflections record how she went from place to place looking for materials for the activity. She finally found them in magazines bought from a roadside hawker. In a telephonic interview, the learner said that she had first chosen Princess Diana as the subject of her project. She changed her mind when she found out that a lot of girls had selected the same topic. She wanted to do something different. This may indicate a conscious use of a strategy to achieve success through the selection of an uncommon topic.

E4’s reflection also provides another dimension of her development while working on PBL: “Throughout this book I have been learning about people and relationships –
what I have found important was the precious treasure of people I have by my side. I am thankful to all of them for being with me in their own different ways at all times I needed them”. Her acknowledgements at the beginning of her book on the Windsors are very professional, impressive, and touching and indicate the level of maturity she gained while working on the project with others.

Researcher B’s reflections substantiate the view that the potential of learners comes to the surface once they are given occasions to explore their capabilities. She says, “The project was open for all. First the motivated and the intelligent ones came forward. But later, the other students – the weaker ones – also started getting involved. This proves that the girls we call ‘weak students’ can also be motivated.”

Outcomes

Positive views on learning

On the whole, the learners viewed working on the PBL positively. In the post-PBL questionnaire, 90% of the participants recommended that PBL should be introduced as a regular programme for learning English. Following are some of their comments and reflections:

- “A great challenge” (E 32)
- “The only way to remove our deficiency in English” (E 9)
- “I have learnt very much from this project about difficult words and their meanings” (E 17).
- “I gained a lot of information” (E 18).
- “I gained a great amount of knowledge and felt a responsible person” (E 13).
- “The most precious and unforgettable experience of my life. My feelings are more than I can express” (E 5).

The learners’ overall response indicates that they found PBL a useful and enjoyable activity.

Use of strategies

The learners used conscious strategies to achieve success such as choosing an unusual topic to be different from others (E4, quoted above). E11’s reflection throws light on another strategy: “Above all, I gained remarkable confidence to stand up and speak ... I started preparing to discuss in the [group]. I started improving my vocabulary so that I can prove myself and make my point clear.” Another strategy is learning to transfer their skills to future tasks. “It was a difficult task. But when we have completed it, it’s very easy to say that now we can easily make another” (E 20) [errors retained]. Such responses indicate that PBL learners became active and used their thinking skills to improve themselves.
Confidence building

A characteristic of learner autonomy is confidence building and consciousness of skills learnt. E6 records, "With the making of profile cards, we were able to know our skills at presenting each and every aspect of our life in a beautiful manner." Another entry (E31) says, "After making the newspaper all tensions were gone ... I am happy and thinking that nothing is difficult if you have the true spirit." The reflection in E2 says, "I have made a beautiful newspaper and I think it was a great experience to make an informative assignment with my own ideas. I have made many assignments but making the newspaper was a wonderful experience of my life."

Working on her own and discovering her potential gave E14 the confidence to say, "I feel after completing the newspaper that I have the ability to do something." E28 says that PBL has brought out the 'hidden abilities of the students'. Similar responses can be seen in a number of entries indicating that, on the whole, having realised their potential, learners felt confident after doing the PBL activities.

Researcher A's reflection also corroborates this finding: "The whole exercise brought a tremendous change in my students. They were overwhelmed with their work. They became confident, independent, and self-reliant. They were proud of their achievement and wished to do more such work". Researcher B adds, "The thrill of working together, interacting in English and finally succeeding in compiling something which they could call their own, gave them a sense of achievement."

Improvement in language skills

The learners' primary reason for joining PBL was to improve their English language skills. Many recorded entries indicate what learners' felt about their progress. E24 writes, "By this programme we have improved our English and the ability to write." E25 and E26 describe it as a 'good programme for improving English'. E6 calls it "a healthy activity which improved our overall powers of English reading and writing."

Reviewing students' progress, researcher C says, "Some students had written paragraphs about themselves depicting their growing awareness in language conventions. Although these paragraphs were not accurate, they could be considered an effort towards fluency in written language." Another comment is offered by researcher D: "It broke their inhibition of writing when they saw they could write meaningful sentences on their own. Previously they copied responses from texts. Now they discovered their capability to write on their own and their answers were much better. [It] also helped them learn to streamline and arrange their thoughts on paper. This improved their essay writing skills."

Researcher B talks about improvement in comprehension, "Searching and selecting suitable materials sharpened their sense of judgement, improved their understanding, and developed their power of comprehension." Although no language test was taken before or after PBL, the teachers' and students' responses may be taken as an
indication of the language improvement that is possible through PBL, since it provides a meaningful exposure to language use in an EFL environment.

**Teachers’ awareness of learner autonomy as a potential for learning**

An interesting and perhaps unexpected outcome of PBL research was a change in the attitude of some researchers towards learner autonomy. Researcher A frankly admits, “The designs, colour combinations plus the information about themselves were a sight to watch. I could not believe that the work was done by the same students whom I had labelled as dull, slow and lazy ... so much can be achieved by a little effort on the part of a teacher!” Researcher D was surprised that “students who relied completely on the teacher, for understanding a text before PBL, gain[ed] some independence by scanning newspapers for useful and meaningful information.”

Researcher E, who was initially disappointed with the response of her students, reflects, “I think we can further think about the effect of PBL on those who did not participate; maybe they regretted it. When they saw the outcome, and realised PBL activities were fun, some of them actually came up to me and said they wish they had also joined the programme.”

**Conclusion**

This paper has analysed in what ways PBL facilitated learner autonomy in five EFL classrooms as an out-of-class and voluntary activity as well as teachers’ perceptions and learners’ views about it.

The outcomes indicate that learners have positive views about PBL, arising from their use of various strategies, increased confidence and improvement in language skills. Teachers of the five classes where PBL was introduced became aware of the potential of building up learner autonomy as a method for learning. These outcomes reinforce earlier research findings.

The transition from learner dependence to independence was not an easy process, especially in a system of education where spoon-feeding and rote learning are commonly taught learning strategies ... On the other hand, relegating learning tasks and responsibilities to students involved risks and ensuing frustrations ... But the students’ responses and enthusiasm lent a lot of support. In the last stages, their increased output and productivity became a reward in itself.

[Sarwar, 2001: 135]

Weiner (2002: 1-2) supports this view: “It seemed to me that what prevented students from doing well was a lack of confidence ... It came to me that I might address the problem by making the learners feel more in control ... I was stunned by how willing they were to work and with no complaints. Less concrete, but no less real was the change in atmosphere and energy in the class.”
It can be surmised that learner autonomy, used in this research introducing PBL in five EFL learning environments, is a powerful strategy. So PBL is particularly pertinent in EFL settings because as learners gain confidence:

They are able to see the power of language and how to use it for their purposes. It’s like a person discovering that she can walk without a crutch – She will never want to use a crutch again and give up the freedom to walk independently. The same paradigm can be used for a language learner released from the shackles of rote learning.

(Sarwar, 2000: 51)

Further questions

This research has given a number of broad insights into teacher/learner perceptions and outcomes of PBL. Further questions which emerge from it are:

- Who are the learners who opt/opt not to take up this voluntary mode of learning and why?
- Would class size make a difference in learners’ opting to do voluntary learning such as PBL?
- What are teacher/learner attitudes to self-learning?
- Would these attitudes change after seeing the outcomes of PBL?
- How much language improvement do learners really go through as a result of using PBL? What benchmarks should be used to gauge this progress?
- Will providing learners with training in learning strategies improve language skills?
- How does group work and peer support help/hinder students’ personal progress (specially the weak ones) in autonomous learning?
- How does training in ELT help teachers to introduce and convince learners to use learner autonomy?
- How much support should be given to learners at the lowest rung of the continuum in learner autonomy?

Questions abound. The point of teacher research is to peel off one skin of the onion, then begin the cycle of research again.

Acknowledgements: I would like to acknowledge the support given by TESOL and the Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (SPLET) who provided the opportunity for this research through the Tailor Made Professional Development Pilot Programme, Pakistan, in 1999–2000. I am equally grateful to Dr Kathryn Riley and Dr Bonny Norton for their professional consultations before and after the research began. I would like
to thank Dr Richard Smith for his peer-review of this paper and on-going discussions, which helped me refine this paper.

I would also like to acknowledge the inputs of my colleagues, Fatima Shahabuddin in research planning in the initial stages, Hina H. Kazmi (D), Mehmooda Asif (C), Pervin Niaz (A), Sameera Yoonus Khan (E) and Zeba Qamar (B) who did the PBL in their classes to help gather data for this research and gave me useful feedback and suggestions during the research and review of this paper.

References


---. 2002. 'Research on Project-Based Learning to facilitate Learner Autonomy' (Paper presented at the AILA Conference, Singapore.)