

Implementing project-based language learning with adult multilingual learners of English

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This article demonstrates how Project-based Language Learning (PBL) can be implemented in an intermediate-high ESL class with Adult Multilingual Learners of English (MLEs) who are immigrants and refugees. Through a human rights project adapted from Ellii (formerly ESL Library), the teams of students researched and reported on topics of their own choosing. Pedagogical implications are shared on the best practices for using PBL in the classroom. This article concludes that instructing Adult MLEs can be enhanced by using PBL to contextualize instruction, promote learner autonomy and build project management skills.

Keywords: Project-based Language Learning, PBL, Adult Multilingual Learners of English, Human Rights; Adult Basic Education; project management skills

Introduction

Recently, the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's National Foreign Language Center (NFLRC) offered a 5-module open-enrollment Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on "Envisioning Project Based Language Learning" from October 22, 2022 to March 31, 2023 (n.d.). The MOOC offered an extraordinary insight into how Project-based Language Learning (PBL) can enhance classroom instruction. Upon completing the MOOC, I reflected on my past experiences as an instructor of Adult Multilingual Learners of English (MLEs) and realized that I had implemented this form of action research last year in an intermediate-high ESL course that I taught in 2022. As a scholar-practitioner, I found that in the adult immigrant and refugee ESL classroom, PBL hasn't been used extensively (Beckett, 2005; Doherty and Eyring, 2006; Hoose, 2017; Lee, 2014; Petersen, 2008; Petersen & Nassaji, 2016; Sidman-Taveau, 2006; Tims, 2009), as it is often classified as a "dessert project", something that is used in addition to prior instruction in a prescribed unit in a course. From a pedagogical standpoint, I was interested in sharing my experience using the latest research in the teaching-learning cycle. This paper aims to

- describe the seven essential project design elements and teaching practices of the [Gold Standard of Project-based Learning](#);
- highlight the importance of coaching instructors of Adult MLEs in project management skills through scaffolding and reflecting;
- suggest how to implement PBL in the classroom with Adult MLEs.

According to the Buck Institute of Education (BIE), Project-based Learning (PBL) is a "teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects." PBL differs from "doing a project," or from a "dessert project"—a short, intellectually-light project served up after the teacher covers content of a unit in the usual way—but is instead a "main course" project, in which the project is the unit (BIE, 2019). In PBL, the project is the vehicle for teaching and the important knowledge and skills students need to learn. The project contains and frames curriculum and instruction (2019). High-quality PBL ensures students are getting the "main course" and BIE promotes a research-informed model for Gold Standard PBL. Language instructors who use teaching practices from the Gold Standard PBL can create transformative experiences in the classroom.

The Seven Essential Project Design Elements

These elements (see Figure 1) provide a framework for developing high-quality projects for the classroom. According to BIE (2019a, as cited from Hainline et al., 2021), the seven elements are:

1. **A challenging problem or question** The project is framed by a meaningful problem to be solved or a question to answer, at the appropriate level of challenge.
2. **Sustained inquiry** Students engage in a rigorous, extended process of posing questions, finding resources, and applying information.
3. **Authenticity** The project involves real-world context, tasks and tools, quality standards, or impact, or the project speaks to personal concerns, interests, and issues in the students' lives.
4. **Student voice and choice** Students make some decisions about the project, including how they work and what they create, and express their own ideas in their own voices.
5. **Reflection** Students and teachers reflect on the learning, the effectiveness of their inquiry and project activities, the quality of student work, and obstacles that arise, and strategies for overcoming them.
6. **Critique and revision** Students give, receive, and apply feedback to improve their processes and products.
7. **Public product** Students make their project work public by sharing it with and explaining or presenting it to people beyond the classroom.

The Seven Project-based Teaching Practices

These practices help teachers, schools, and organizations improve, calibrate, and assess their practice (see Figure 2). According to the BIE (2019b), these practices are:

1. **Design and plan** Teachers create or adapt a project for their context and students, and plan its implementation from launch to culmination while allowing for some degree of student voice and choice.
2. **Align to standards** Teachers use standards to plan the project and make sure it addresses key knowledge and understanding from subject areas to be included.
3. **Build the culture** Teachers explicitly and implicitly promote student independence and growth, open-ended inquiry, team spirit, and attention to quality.
4. **Manage activities** Teachers work with students to organize tasks and schedules, set checkpoints and deadlines, find and use resources, create products and make them public.
5. **Scaffold student learning** Teachers employ a variety of lessons, tools, and instructional strategies to support all students in reaching project goals.

Gold Standard PBL

Seven Essential Project Design Elements



Figure 1: Gold Standard PBL seven essential project design elements (used with permission)

Gold Standard PBL

Seven Project Based Teachers Practices



Figure 2: Gold Standard PBL seven project-based teaching practices (used with permission)

6. **Assess student learning** Teachers use formative and summative assessments of knowledge, understanding, and success skills, and include self and peer assessments of team and individual work.

7. **Engage and coach** Teachers engage in learning and creating alongside students, and identify when they need skill-building, redirection, encouragement, and celebration.

The context

I implemented PBL in an intermediate-high ESL class with Adult MLEs that were immigrants and refugees in an adult basic education program in Seattle, Washington during the spring of 2022 in the greater Seattle Area. The program serves over a thousand MLEs in their ESL program, and the students are working professionals, stay-at-home parents, or pre-college students hoping to transition into matriculated college level courses. They speak a variety of languages, such as Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Portuguese, Somali, Amharic, and Vietnamese. In this course, I employed the Gold Standard of PBL which allows critical learning experiences through a [Human Rights Project](#) offered through [Ellii](#) (formerly ESL Library, an online repository that English Language practitioners can subscribe to use for a fee). The students developed critical reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, which help them to transition from intermediate-high ESL to College and Career Readiness ESL in the summer of 2022.

Participants

All nine students were Adult MLEs from diverse parts of the world: six from Latin America, one from China, and two from Ethiopia (see Table 1). After conducting a short questionnaire with the class, I learned that none of the students had done a Human Rights Project before in an English class. In the past, I had taught this intermediate-high ESL course without infusing Project-based Language Learning elements, which didn't seem to engage students sufficiently in human rights

Student (pseudonyms)	Country of Origin	Age	Project Group Name
Javier	Honduras	Mid 20s	LGBTQ Rights
Santiago	Colombia	Mid 20s	LGBTQ Rights
Lucia	Ecuador	Mid 20s	Women On Fire
Luna	Mexico	Mid 20s	Women On Fire
Carlos	Guatemala	Mid 20s	Women On Fire
Jiayu	China	Mid 20s	Women On Fire
Salam	Ethiopia	Mid 40s	Ethiopian Politics
Abebe	Ethiopia	Mid 50s	Women's Rights

Table 1: Students' demographic information

injustices and violations around the world. For that reason, I thought it was necessary to implement elements of PBL in my class (Teaching Practice 1: Design and plan).

Human Rights Project

During the first week of this unit, I asked an initial challenging question (Design Element 1: A challenging problem or question): “*What human rights issue needs more attention?*” After that, the students read Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*” The students then discussed the following questions:

1. What is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?
2. What human rights have people fought for in the past?
3. What human rights have people been fighting for recently?

Afterwards, the students discussed, and then completed a chart (see Figure 3) to identify “My Human Rights & Freedoms” (Design Element 2: Sustained inquiry). Each student read the description of the human right listed and checked the box next to it if they agreed that it was, indeed, a human right. They were then encouraged to add any human rights not listed in the blank boxes at the bottom. Students then worked in pairs or small groups to discuss what responses/additions they had in common.

Since some of the students said that they have never heard of these, I thought it was critical to review historic human rights violations to provide context (see Figure 4). The students learned some of the many traumatic injustices that the Jewish people faced which led to the Holocaust as well as the ongoing antisemitism that is perpetuated globally. In addition, they learned from indigenous perspectives of the First Nations people about forced assimilation by the Canadian government. This provided a model for language use that they could follow as they took on the role of researchers and reporters in the next stage of the process.

Then, the students took notes on human rights violations currently happening from digital news sites and newspapers, such as [Human Rights Watch](#) (Design Element 3: Authenticity), a trustworthy news source on human rights. Following this exercise, the students

conducted a class survey to decide which human rights issues they wanted to learn more about, so that they could form project groups centered on an issue of their choice (Design Element 4: Student voice and choice).

The topic chosen by Group 1 was Women’s Rights in Latin America, which centered on the liberation of women’s lives in what some might characterize as misogynistic culture(s) perpetuated by toxic masculinity. The topic of Group 2 was LGBTQ+ Rights, which argued for accepting queer-identified individuals for who they are and supporting LGBTQ+ youth in their development by being comfortable with their sexuality. The topic of Group 3 focused on human rights injustices in some African countries such as violence between some religious groups in Ethiopia and Somalia. In their groups, the students discussed a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.: *“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”* Reflecting on the meaning of this motivated the students to begin the research on their projects that they would later report to the class (Design Element 5: Reflection).

Once the groups were formed, project requirements were discussed, which included the following sections that were necessary for their final product, with “checkpoints” that were soft deadlines to measure progress in the project (Teaching Practices 2 and 4: Align to standards and Manage activities):

- About (a brief overview)
- Mission, vision, and vision statement(s) (group purpose, future goal, and shared beliefs)
- Background information (research to find evidence/specific examples)
- Human rights activist (identify a person or organization/group’s advocacy on human right/freedom)
- Signs and slogans (to hold at the demonstration)
- Presentation (convince classmates to join the demonstration)

Human Rights		Human Freedoms	
	The right to life, liberty, and security		Freedom of movement
	The right to work		Freedom of religion & beliefs
	The right to equality		Freedom from racial, gender, age, and other discrimination
	The right to equal protection by the law		Freedom of expression
	The right to rest and leisure		Freedom of sexual orientation
	The rights of a child/minor		Freedom from torture and degrading treatment
	The right to education		Freedom from slavery

Figure 3: My Human Rights and Freedoms from Ellii’s Human Rights Project lesson plan

#	Description	Human Right Violation The right/freedom to...
1	Africans, forcibly taken from their homeland, were enslaved in American colonies.	
2	Jews were placed in concentration camps and killed.	
3	Indigenous children were torn from their families and sent to schools to learn how to become part of European-Canadian society.	
4	Over 1,000 workers died after the collapse of a rundown Bangladesh factory.	
5	Women in Saudi Arabia were prevented from driving due to their gender.	
6	LGBT people in Gambia were placed in prison for life based on their sexual orientation.	
7	Approximately 70% of the Tutsi population was killed in an act of genocide in Rwanda.	
8	Girls in Pakistan were told they were no longer allowed to attend school.	
9	People with dark skin had to use different washrooms than people with light skin.	
10	Prisoners in Syria were tortured.	

Figure 4: Human Rights Violations from Ellii’s Human Rights Project lesson plan

As this project spanned the course of five weeks, I assisted the students with each project requirement and offered extra assistance by providing feedback (Design Element 6: Critique and revision). It was important to structure constructive feedback for students and to guide them through the revision process as they were learning more about their topics in their individual groups (Teaching Practices 5: Scaffold student learning). The students were reminded that they would be graded both individually and as a group based on four evaluation areas: Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity (from *Ellii*). Teams created 'team norms' outlining which parts of their project each would be responsible for (Teaching Practice 3: Build the culture) and then each student signed an agreement acknowledging their responsibilities. Students provided weekly updates to the team as well as to me so that their classmates and I could assist when needed. During the final week of the school term, the groups shared what they had learned in a 20-minute presentation (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). I graded these with the assessment information provided by *Ellii* (p. 19).

Once the presentations were completed, the students wrote a final two-page reflection paper on their experiences with PBL. Their reflections revealed that they enjoyed working in groups together ("enjoyed working with group members with diverse perspectives and backgrounds on human rights issues") and that they were able to foster more understanding of "different human rights issues around the world." Students noted they were able to critically evaluate human rights issues in certain contexts such as women's rights in Latin America and LGBTQ+ rights in the United States. They also noted that it was a collaborative experience that they developed new skills in such as developing intercultural competence working with people from diverse backgrounds that they have never worked with before. In line with Hoose (2017), the students reported in their final written reflection that preparing for the presentation and answering questions about their topic was the most enriching and challenging part of the PBL experience.

From a simple knowledge of pragmatics, with "rich target input and output and linguistic development afforded through the use of technology, which attends to important psychological components in learning" (Sidman-Taveau, 2006), they were able to progress to language learning strategies and higher order language skills (Teaching Practices 6 and 7: Assess student learning & Engage and coach). Their reflections and my own experience have

convinced me that PBL benefits the students in many ways. First, students are able to demonstrate practical pragmatic abilities such as knowing when it's one's turn to speak and being able to express disagreement in culturally appropriate ways (for example, "Since we have different cultural backgrounds, I have some difficulty understanding this point. Would you be able to explain more in detail?") (NFLRC, n.d.). The project management skills that the students developed were meaningful and transformative, as was evident when they continued to work together as colleagues in combined ESL courses titled "ESL 081 A/B: College and Career Readiness", which I taught in the summer of 2022 (Tang, 2023). This is in line with similar findings in Adult ESL classes reported by Petersen (2008).

As the course wrapped up, I was unable to share my students' work (Design Element 7: Public product) since most classes during the spring of 2022 were offered virtually, and I was the only instructor to hold classes in-person. The students said that they did not want to have their work shared virtually with other instructors as they were worried about their privacy. Respecting their wishes, I did not share their final presentations as a public product. However, after consulting with the students again later to see if they would be comfortable sharing their work for this paper, they gladly obliged.

Pedagogical Implications

According to Tims (2009), Project-based Learning helps Adult MLEs practice and improve English because it promotes hands-on learning as well as provides the possibility of integrating the four language skills (p. 9). With the assistance of *Ellii's* Human Rights Project, this long-term semi-structured project (Doherty and Eyring, 2006) allowed me to lead the students' learning on historic human rights violations which transformed into self-directed learning on the human rights topic of their own choosing. In this study, the groups of students established and monitored accountability and worked together towards a common goal during the eleven-week school term, and accountability was monitored within groups. This long-term semi-structured project allowed me as an instructor to introduce new project management skills that may have inspired, challenged, or frustrated students. Also, similar to Lee (2014), the students in this course noted in their final reflections that they enjoyed the different stages of PBL and were motivated to participate in future projects designed with the PBL elements. There were no "clashes" found between the instructor and students, which was initially noted in

Beckett (2005), and there were no “clashes” between students in groups, perhaps because of the team agreement they had all signed.

Reflecting on the Golden Standard PBL, I believe the seven project-based teaching practices were necessary for ensuring student success with the assistance of the Human Rights Project lesson plan prepared by *Ellii*. I planned and implemented a Human Rights Project by allowing student voice and choice of their topic of interest, as well as addressing key knowledge objectives in subject areas required in the intermediate-high ESL program learning standards. Through building culture in the classroom, I was able to promote student independence and growth, open-ended inquiry, team comradery, and attention to quality explicitly and implicitly. I encouraged self-management of activities by scaffolding tasks, setting deadlines, requiring weekly scheduling check-ins by student teams. I scaffolded student learning by using a variety of tools and instructional strategies and by offering to support them in finding resources so that all students could reach their project goals.

Conclusion

Project-based Learning is different from more traditional approaches because it engages both teachers and students in a collaborative exploration of open-ended questions for which they do not yet have answers (NFLRC, n.d.; Petersen & Nassaji, 2016). The power of the PBL framework integrates many different aspects of proficiency (intercultural learning, content knowledge, collaboration, critical thinking, communication) into a single endeavor (NFLRC, n.d.). The primary factor that drives meaningful, enduring learning is a pressing “need to know” initiative on the topic. Remember, optimal critique and revision should occur throughout the project. By implementing the Golden Standard PBL, I was able to support the Adult MLEs in the intermediate-high ESL course in developing the necessary project management skills, which prepared them for the final course of the basic skills program, Career and Career Readiness ESL. In addition, they were able to critically reflect on their transformative Project-based language learning experiences.



Figure 5: Title and vision of Group 1



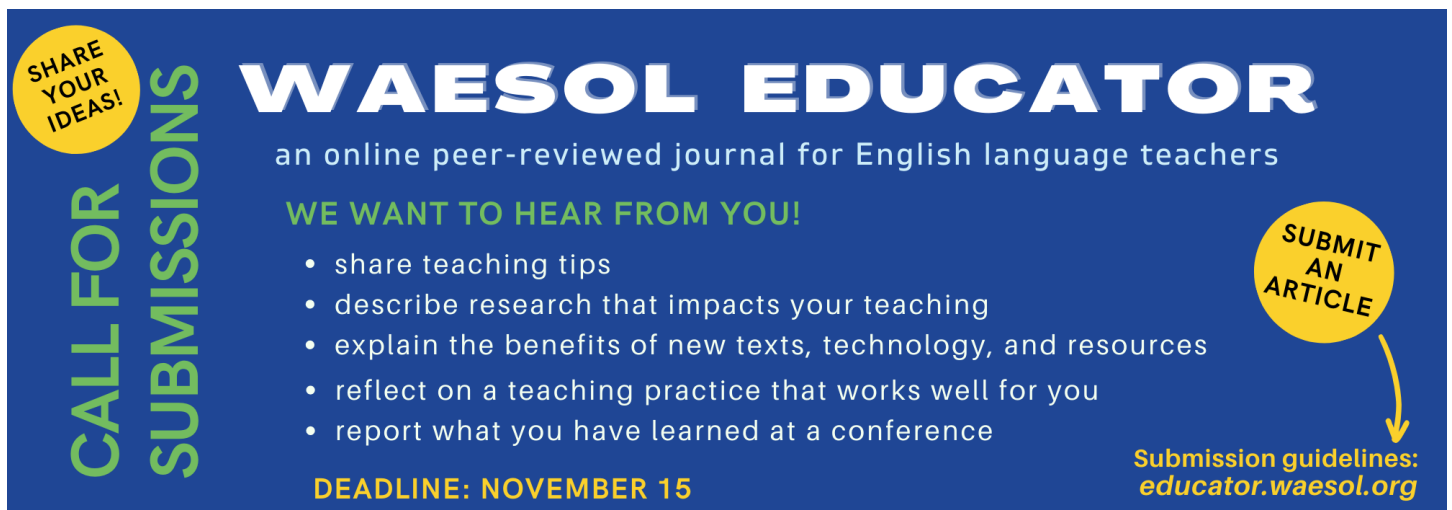
Figure 6: Title and vision of Group 2

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