

Assessing the Efficacy of Project-Based Learning in Higher Vocational English Courses for Developing Practical Communication Skills

Yiyin Zhang¹, Boli Li²

Abstract

This research looks into how well Project-Based Learning (PBL) helps Chinese higher vocational college students to learn and communicate in real life. The main research question looks into how PBL, which includes incorporating the real world, learner-centered approaches, working with Chinese higher vocational college students from different fields, real-world assessment, and ongoing reflection, affects students' oral communication, writing, critical thinking as well as intercultural communication abilities. Systematic literature review was done, looking at English-language peer-reviewed papers from databases like PubMed, ERIC, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO to find out what effects PBL has on practical communication skills. The review included parts of PBL, such as, speaking and writing, critical thinking, active listening, and intercultural communication. It led to a comprehensive understanding of the way it affects English education at the higher vocational education level. The synthesized literature highlights the transformative influence of PBL on practical communication skills, emphasizing its role in fostering learner engagement, critical thinking, and adaptability in cross-cultural contexts. Oral communication, written expression, and interdisciplinary collaboration emerged as key domains positively influenced by PBL in the Chinese higher vocational education landscape. Teachers are advised to make using PBL methods a priority if they want to help Chinese higher vocational college students improve their speaking skills. This means creating a dynamic and collaborative learning space, encouraging collaboration across disciplines, and using real evaluations that are in line with learner-centered principles. The study shows how PBL can be used in the real world to help Chinese higher vocational college students improve their communication, critical thinking, and ability to work with people from other cultures. The results support the use of PBL along with successful professional development programs to adapt to the changing needs of the globalized professional world.

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning, Higher Vocational Education, English Courses, Practical Communication Skills.*

Introduction

Vocational education is one of a kind and meets the needs of a job market that changes quickly (Mathur et al., 2022). Vocational colleges and schools are becoming increasingly important in China as its economy in addition, technology change, which are able to help the country grow by training skilled workers. Higher vocational colleges in China generates a significant effect on the national education system for assisting higher vocational college students to put what they have learned into practice (Ling et al., 2023). While Chinese higher vocational college students present individual requirements in the process of learning, schools should firstly guide students to prepare for specific job paths in different fields so as to function work-related practical skills and hands-on training. Jabarullah and Iqbal Hussain (2019) indicated that vocational education is crucial for improving not only academic performance but also the social, emotional, and mental growth of Chinese higher vocational college students during these pivotal developmental years.

Project-Based Learning (PBL in short) refers to an instructional methodology centered on student engagement through hands-on, collaborative projects (Viswambaran & Shafeek, 2019). For Chinese higher vocational college students, PBL offers an experiential learning approach that extends beyond conventional classroom techniques, simulating authentic work environments (Fajra & Novalinda, 2020). Priyatni and As'ari (2019) stated that the key to PBL's success is its ability to get Chinese higher vocational college students involved while also pushing them to think critically and have deep conversations. When actual skills are needed in the workplace, PBL changes into a way to teach that allows students conduct what they have learned in schools to solve problems in the real world, and teachers intervene when deviations occur.

¹ PhD in Educational Management International College, Krirk University, Bangkok, THAILAND, Email: 13710984018@163.com

² PhD in Education International College, Krirk University, Bangkok, THAILAND. Email: Berlinlee998@ctbu.edu.cn

Therefore, PBL returns the learning initiative to students and relatively fully mobilizing the intrinsic motivation of students' learning.

PBL is of great concern when it is used in vocational English courses for stressing learning by doing. Chinese higher vocational college students learn how to start and conduct proper conversations in specific fields (Sun & Wang, 2020). Therefore, it gives them chances to get better at talking to people in situations that are related to their future careers. PBL is a specific way to get better at the kinds of interactions that are needed at many jobs (Sirisrimangkorn, 2021), such as, proceeding group projects, delivering talks and speeches, and writing reports. It is helpful for students to be proficient in speaking, writing, and collaboration in business communication. Proficiency in practical communication skills, as emphasized by Asih & Ellianawati (2019), encompasses clear writing, articulate speech, active listening, adept public speaking, and adaptability across varied communication channels. This extends beyond mere dissemination of knowledge in the workplace; effective communication demands an understanding and adaptability to diverse professional contexts. Consider the scenario of collaborative work: clear articulation, attentive listening, and coherent idea explanation become paramount. Within the context of higher vocational English courses, PBL assumes a pivotal role. PBL serves as a catalyst for honing these crucial communication proficiencies in a real-world, job-oriented setting, enabling Chinese higher vocational college students to align their conversational skills with the dynamic demands of their future careers. This aligns with the findings of Hsu et al. (2022), underscoring the necessity for students to tailor their communication approaches to suit the specific requisites of the business world. Furthermore, PBL, when integrated into higher vocational English courses, transcends the conventional classroom experience by providing a platform for students to engage in practical, industry-relevant tasks. It facilitates an environment where students not only develop language proficiency but also enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. By immersing themselves in PBL activities, students cultivate adaptability, resilience, and readiness to navigate the complex and ever-evolving landscape of their future professional endeavors.

Literature Review

Key Components of Effective Project-Based Learning Models

Integration of Real-World Contexts: Putting real-life situations into learning events is at the heart of PBL models that work (Ningsih et al., 2020). This part focuses on how the projects that Sayuti et al.'s (2020) study shows the importance of PBL tasks to be aligned with real-life workplace situations. Firstly, PBL focuses on real-world work makes it easier for Chinese students at higher vocational colleges to use their communication skills in real-life professional situations. These projects not only improve language skills, but they also teach teamwork and problem-solving skills that are necessary to get along in the complex world of work. Secondly, it emphasizes the effectiveness of PBL framework in real work-related tasks, which provides students opportunities to improve communication skills and improve their communication skills through hands-on experience. Therefore, Using real-life situations in PBL not only improves Chinese higher vocational colleges students language skills but also gives them the flexibility and preparation they need to equip in future work settings.

Learner-Centered Approaches: Applying learner-centered methods through PBL is an emerging way to teach in Chinese higher vocational education system (Liu, 2019). Moving away from traditional methods that focus on the teacher and toward approaches that give Chinese higher vocational college students' initiatives and put them at the center of their educational journey is a gist of this strategy. In 2023, Wang did research in China confirmed that learner-centered PBL models increase Chinese higher vocational college students' independence and curiosity by letting them do self-directed study. PBL has notably shifted the paradigm from traditional teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning, empowering students to take charge of their projects and decisions (Almulla, 2020). Wang's study further emphasizes this shift by highlighting how PBL fosters a collaborative learning environment. However, the direct correlation between students making decisions about their projects and improving English communication skills might require further scrutiny in the context of language learning. While Almulla's study posits that PBL, through student-driven project decisions, creates a conducive environment for enhancing English communication

skills, it is essential to acknowledge the need for contextualization. The mere act of decision-making in projects might not inherently target language skill improvement. Instead, it could facilitate collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. Therefore, the assertion that it directly leads to improvements in English communication skills might require a more nuanced exploration within the specific domain of language learning environments.

PBL encourages Chinese higher vocational college students to work together, creating a positive social and academic environment that enhances learning experiences and contributes to the overall success and satisfaction of students in vocational education (Abu-Bakar et al.'s 2019). Chinese higher vocational college students improve their speaking abilities by working together on projects that require them to talk, negotiate, and share ideas in English. Peer-to-peer exchanges, which are daily routine in the workplace, are also encouraged by PBL. This helps Chinese higher vocational college students develop experienced social and teamwork skills (Kumar, 2021). Learner-centered methods in PBL not only let Chinese higher vocational college students take charge of their own learning, but they also give them a chance to improve their public speaking and presentation skills. Wang (2023) did research in China that shows a positive link between taking part in PBL and improving English speaking skills

Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Interdisciplinary collaboration in PBL in China focuses on combining skills and information from different fields, which fits with how the job market is changing in the country (Ray & Shaw, 2022). An important part of multidisciplinary teamwork in PBL is learning how to talk to people from different fields. The study by Reckinger and Wille (2018) shows that working with people from different fields can help to improve English language skills. Chinese higher vocational college students use English by talking, trading, and sharing what they know through group projects that require them to combine ideas from different subjects (Kardiansyah & Qodriani, 2018). This helps them improve their speaking skills as well as their ability to be flexible and creative in how to express themselves in different situations.

The group work part of PBL also helps Chinese higher vocational college students improve their ability to conduct teamwork. The study by Owens and Hite (2022) underscores the critical significance of interdisciplinary collaboration in enhancing team communication dynamics. Their research findings emphasize that collaborative efforts involving individuals from diverse fields significantly contribute to improved communication within teams. This highlights the pivotal role of cross-disciplinary collaboration as a catalyst for fostering more effective and robust communication strategies among team members. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the paramount importance of interdisciplinary in enriching and optimizing communication dynamics within collaborative team environments. English skills are necessary for students to be able to handle a wide range of professional settings in a world that is becoming more and more connected. Chinese higher vocational college students can work on their social skills through Project-Based Learning, which makes them better prepared for the workforce in general and helps them connect with peers from different fields (Shin, 2018).

Authentic Assessment Methods: When PBL models work well, the ways of testing match up with the real-life nature of the lessons (Bessa et al., 2019). Authentic assessment is more than just tests and quizzes; it also looks at how well students can use what they have learned in real life. Tasks like presentations, portfolios, and project demos are used for authentic assessment in PBL (Ridlo, 2019). This part not only tests students' practical communication skills, but it also reinforces the link between what they are learning and how they can use it in real life. This helps Chinese higher vocational college students get ready for tests like this in their future jobs.

Continuous Reflection and Feedback: An essential element of PBL models is the incorporation of tools to allow for continuous reflection and feedback. studies by Boey et al. (2023) stress the use of different tools including structured reflection journals, peer evaluations, rubrics, and technology-enabled feedback mechanisms. Under PBL, such tools play multifaceted roles. They promote a culture of continuous improvement, and improve the learning experience. Gillies (2019) suggest peer evaluations, in which students can be both criticized constructively and offered different perspectives, deepening understanding of their work, and promoting collaborative learning. Moreover, the use of rubrics provides objective criteria

for assessment, so that students can self-assess and be aware of the directions and requirements of the project. A study by Jarvis and Baloyi (2020) depicts that continuous reflection and feedback not only enhance self-awareness and meta-cognitive skills, but also encourage critical thinking and problem-solving and promote effective communication within teams.

Selected English Practical Communication Skills

Oral Communication: PBL focuses on oral communication since it is an integral aspect of professional communication in China, following the changing needs (Klinhom, & Wuttphan, 2022). In this cooperative setting, students get to refine their spoken communication skills while working on projects that are usually completed together. It helps them to articulate complex ideas in a clear and straight-forward manner. The interactive nature of project talks encourages students to explore different perspectives and learn good communication strategies, which are crucial for success in the Chinese business world (Weizheng, 2019). In PBL, a significant component is presentation during which Chinese higher vocational college students are given an opportunity to present their work to their fellow classmates, their teachers, and sometimes, even external stakeholders (Boss & Krauss, 2022).

Written Communication: PBL in Chinese higher vocational education and its contribution to develop the written communication skills. PBL assignments often require Chinese higher vocational college students to document and report, serving as a foundation of improving their talents to write complex concepts in professional communication. The iterative nature of project work leads students to engage in ongoing written communication, record the development of the project, share ideas, and jointly produce writings (Bazerman and Russell, 2020). To be a communicable professional in the Chinese setting, an individual is required to adhere to the written communication standards, also be factual and precise during work interactions underpinned by professional ethics. The collaborative setting enabled by PBL facilitates regular written conversation between students, teachers, and sometimes other stakeholders (Phuong & Tham, 2022). The learner-centered PBL models also promote a sense of responsibility and independence among the Chinese students (Cheng & Ding, 2021). In the same way, students also learn orality on the written side by developing the capacity to communicate clearly and produce essays that capture the message and information (Alexander et al., 2023).

Critical Thinking: In the realm of PBL and higher vocational education development of critical thinking skill as an essential outcome (Liu, 2019). PBL provides the Chinese higher vocational college students with the right setting in which they can develop a relatively comprehensive understanding of critical thinking needed for effective communication at the workplace (Gong, 2017). PBL assignments are relatively challenging, to some extent, because of the complexity and uncertainty (Nawangarsi et al., 2022). Critical thinking involves students' data analysis, alternative choice and decision making. This set of skills is crucial in China's dynamic professional landscape (Rehman et al., 2023). Chinese higher vocational college students are guided through cognitive processes through a facilitative teacher's role which takes place within the PBL framework by challenging presumptions, considering perspectives and reflectively thinking (Fang et al., 2023). This approach conforms to the Chinese philosophy of holistic education, which focuses on developing a critical thinker who can fit well in all situations.

Active Listening Skills: Promoting active listening as one of the English practical communication ability in the context of Chinese higher vocational education via PBL (Macaro & Han, 2020). Listening is more than just hearing spoken messages, understanding information, and making a voluntary decision regarding the response. PBL involves teamwork and regular communication between the students. In the Chinese culture setting, active listening becomes crucial as politeness in communication is highly valued (Yang, 2018). PBL project participants engage in active listening, understand different perspectives and translate these into their group work. PBL projects are such that most of the time student have to work multicultural teams and deal with language variation and accent. This experience helps students appreciate the capability of making sense of several communication nuances, and even styles, and in effect improve their cross-cultural communication competency (Lin et al., 2023). The role of teachers in the development of active listening in Chinese higher vocational education is to help students increase concentrations and improve comprehensive ability (Cao & Lin, 2020). Structured

exercises, reflective conversations, and peer assessment are additional ways to highlight the importance of active listening within learning-centered approaches. Moreover, PBL is interdisciplinary hence, students can be exposed to different technical language and some subject-specific language (Al-Sowaidi, 2021). As a result, these learners expand their vocabulary and comprehension capacities for efficient listening. As facilitators, instructors ensure students engage in listening and responding constructively so that they can develop understanding amongst themselves and learn the subject matter.

Cross-Cultural Communication Competence in Project-Based Learning

Cross-cultural communication skill plays a pivotal role in current globalized world, thus higher vocational English learning should infuse it with Project-Based Learning (PBL). This part talks about how PBL helps Chinese higher vocational college students learn to communicate with people from other cultures. It also looks at previous research to find out what factors affect this skill.

Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness: A Cornerstone of Cross-Cultural Competence

Cultural sensitivity and awareness constitute fundamental building blocks for instilling cross-cultural competency amid PBL immersive landscape. Therefore, Umar and Ko (2022) highlight the important role instructors have on assisting students in becoming more aware of cultural differences in communication patterns, norms, and expectations. Chinese higher vocational college students come to realize and respect the complexity and depth of other cultural views which forms an essential basis for successful intercultural communication (Samuels, 2018). PBL adopts a relatively dynamic environment that exposes students to multiple cultural nuances, hence requiring teacher to be tactical. In these settings, cultural sensitivity plays an essential part in influencing the way students interact with each other in different and continually changing environment in their PBL projects (Barak & Yuan, 2021). Additionally, instilling cultural awareness in PBL is not only confined to understanding but also actual implementation of its principles. Through this, instructors facilitate students to apply cultural sensitivity in the practical communication techniques that will help them cope with challenges of working in diverse professional environments (Naji et al., 2020). The development of cross cultural competence requires iterative support and guidance from educators who understand the continuous development of intercultural communication. The web of PBL, teachers act as mentors, and it is the stage whereby the learners participate with numerous culture contexts (Wang, & Lin, 2021). In this set up, cultural sensitivity becomes a pillar as it influences communication and navigation skills of Chinese higher vocational college students within the multitude and dynamic environments of a PBL project. In addition, PBL emphasizes cultural competency that goes beyond understanding the text to practicing in society (Revelle et al., 2020). Through this, teachers assist students to translate their cultural awareness into useful communicative strategies to deal with professional diversity problems.

Digital Platforms and Global Connectivity: Expanding Cross-Cultural Horizons

Currently, PBL in the modern educational system includes digital platforms as major tools for interaction between higher vocational college students resulting in international communication environment. According to Owens and Hite (2022), transformation in cross-cultural communication within PBL involves utilization of digital communication tools. As mentors, mentors have to train the students to use these applications and assist them to learn to communicate in different cultures. It is vital for teachers to assist students in understanding the cultural nature of the interaction channels that underlie their digital communication (Barton & Riddle, 2022). Also, the exposure to different digital communication channels acts as a stimulus for increasing students' adaptation to the new interconnected professional arena of modern life. However, this focuses on digital platforms is consistent with a changing workplace where cross-cultural communication is no longer just a skill (Nam & Kannan, 2020). In addition, PBL projects conducted via digital platforms enhance cross-cultural communication skills. Educators mentor students communicating about meaningful aspects of their interactions with others from different cultural origins, this promotes self-efficacy (Cruz et al. 2020). This experience creates students with global mindset ready to deal with the challenges of inter-cultural communication in professional life.

Theory of the Study

Donald Kirkpatrick created a detailed plan in the late 1950s called Kirkpatrick's Model of Training Evaluation (Swuste et al., 2021). This study is based on this plan (Asih & Ellianawati, 2019). Kirkpatrick's model has been improved over time and is now widely used to judge the impact and usefulness of training programs in variously different fields. In figure 1, a structured way to evaluate training programs based on four levels: behavior, learning, response, and results is shown.

Figure 1: *Kirkpatrick's four-level training evaluation model*



Source : Boland et al. (2020)

When Kirkpatrick's Model was developed in 1959 it relied on evaluating participants' immediate views, opinions and participation with the training session in order to determine how effective the program was. This stage mainly involves the gathering of feedback from the participants to see if what they have been doing suits them (Boland et al., 2020). Kirkpatrick's model includes learning assessment for the second level that goes beyond reactions. At this stage, participant's attitudes, abilities and knowledge acquired during the program is assessed. It measures the extent of the learners' deep understanding and attainment of the learning objectives.

Kirkpatrick's Model takes a third level that is concerned with modifying behavior and focuses much on applying skills and acquired knowledge in actual situations. It examines the extent to which the participants put into practice the knowledge acquired in relation to their daily routines and activities. At the last phase of Kirkpatrick's Model, which is the fourth level, the main objective is to evaluate the overall outcomes and effects of the training program. This stage considers broader outcomes such as the immediate benefits, long-term effects, and organization implications of the training. This study uses Kirkpatrick's Model to examine whether PBL training improves practical communication skills in higher vocational English courses. Here, every stage of evaluation is crucial because it helps to ascertain whether the training has led to the expected modifications and progresses. Assessment of students' responses to the PBL method can provide valuable information on students' participation, satisfaction and viewpoints with regards to PBL methodology. Additionally, the levels of learning of the model enable evaluation of the ability of the students in communication, the proficiency in a language, and the comprehension how PBL activities relate

in the real world scenarios. Observing changes in these factors will give one an opportunity to know how well he/she has used communication skills in different situations.

Methodology

The main study question is ‘what is the effectiveness of PBL on the practical communication skills improvement in vocational English courses in higher vocational education?’ Thus, the inclusion criteria were developed, in order to ensure the selection of high-quality and relevant materials. There is a consideration of the last six years (2018–2023) peer reviewed literature. The study on the impact of PBL on practical communication skills in a higher vocational educational setting was the topic for this paper. This led the author on a rigorous quest for scholarly materials such as Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, PubMed and ERIC. In the searches, the queries comprised of a variety of combinations for “English courses,” “Project-Based Learning,” “higher vocational education” as well as “communication skills”. With the use of Boolean operators, specific literature in line with the research issue was identified. Using the inclusion criteria, a pool of relevant studies was selected out of the pool of publications that came up during the initial search. The selection process involved screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts. The selected articles were screened using a systematic literature review methodology. Among the vital information extracted during the data extraction process from selected articles were the findings, the methodology, and the participant demographics. These data combined and created recurrent themes that helped determine the effectiveness of PBL in promoting beneficial communication skills. This synthesis became the basis for the results and discussion sections of the study.

Discussions

A systematic literature study is used to bring forth crucial aspects that explain how PBL assists Chinese higher vocational college students in vocationally oriented English programs improve their communicative competency. The involvement of real-world contexts becomes evident whereby projects are required to be developed as a reflection of real-world professional settings (Ningsih et al., 2020; Puangpunsi, 2021). Models of PBL are illustrative of learner-centred principles which enhance the role of enquiry and self-directedness. These methods comply with the transformation needs of Chinese vocational higher education (Liu, 2019; Wang, 2023). Interdisciplinary collaboration of PBL allows Chinese higher vocational college students to learn cross-discipline communication skills that are needed under fast-changing environment in China.. Effective PBL models must include authentic evaluation methods as they reflect the real context in which knowledge is utilized and prepare students for workforce requirements (Bessa et al., 2019). The presence of built-in mechanisms such as continuous reflection and feedback make PBL a good model to help learners develop metacognitive abilities and self-awareness, all of which form part of effective communication (Krajcik et al., 2017).

Using PBL in higher vocational English classes in China is among the learner centered approach way to improve real-life communication skills (Wang, 2023). In the stage of reactions of Kirkpatrick's Model, incorporating real-life experiences directly into projects is profoundly resonant with students. This integration gives their learning a feeling of significance and practical application. This leads to a greater understanding and connection between the emerging theoretical concepts and their real-world applicability. Therefore, students are more engaged, aware that what they are learning has deep meaning, that it is applicable to their lives, or to work that they will be doing later on.(Boland et al., 2020). When considering the learning level, PBL prioritizes the learner's active engagement by fostering an environment that encourages self-directed research. This approach aims to facilitate cognitive shifts, thereby significantly enhancing the learner's communication skills. Moving on to the behavior level, PBL's cross-disciplinary collaboration gives students cross-disciplinary communication skills that are directly relevant to the changing needs of China's professional environment (Swuste et al., 2021). Lastly, at the results level, using real assessment methods, ongoing reflection, and feedback tools in PBL builds metacognitive skills and self-awareness, which leads to the real development of communication skills that are necessary for professional success.

The selected English practical communication skills in oral communication show its significance for PBL in Chinese higher vocational education. The team meetings and group projects provide students with a chance of expressing ideas and discussing frequently. This mimics the collaborative dynamics important to Chinese professional environment (Putri Iriani et al., 2019; Klinhom & Wynne, 2022). The PBL approach places heavy stress on writing skills and typically involves lengthy reports and documentation in assignments. This enhances students' capacity to write complex thoughts and is a necessary skill in Chinese professional communication context (Wang, 2023; Bazerman & Russell, 2020).

The ability to think critically, necessary for PBL's inquiry-based methodology is relevant in China's rapidly changing labor economy. Through demanding problem-solving activities students develop critical thinking necessary for professional communication (Liu, 2019; Nawangsari et al., 2022). Collaborative project in PBL promotes skills of active listening that are particularly relevant in the cultural aspect of China which places a high degree of importance on courteous communication. PBL interventions that involve working with multicultural groups enhance adaptation through increasing the cross-cultural communication competence (Macaro & Han, 2020); (Lin et al., 2023). PBL's immersive environment fosters cultural sensitivity and awareness in regards to cross-cultural communication competency. Chinese higher vocational college students are assisted into learning to navigate various cultures to understanding cultural sensitivity as a tool for effective communication. Integrating PBL with digital platforms widens students' understanding across cultures, exposing them to global communication and increasing their ability to assimilate with the interconnectedness of their career environments (Owens & Hite, 2022; Nam & Kannan, 2020).

Conclusions

Project-Based Learning (PBL), according to the study, could change how higher vocational English education is taught in China. It can also improve Chinese higher vocational college students' actual communication skills. Real-world integration, learner-centered approaches, cross-disciplinary cooperation, authentic assessment, and ongoing feedback are a few of the important things that make PBL work. It is in line with the changing needs of the Chinese higher vocational education to stress critical thoughts, active listening, and both spoken and written communication. Chinese higher vocational college students can be more adaptable to globalized workplace by learning how to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds and by being conscious of different culture connotations.

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