



Title of Report: Developing EFL Literacy through Project-based Learning
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1. Identify and describe the Professional Development Opportunity (PDO).

The PDO is entitled “Developing EFL Literacy through Project-based Learning (PBL),” although it is usually referred to by its abbreviated name, Project-based Learning or PBL. It was first developed as part of a Cooperative Agreement for the E-teacher Scholarship Program with the United States Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Office of English Language Programs. Course development occurred in fall of 2009, with the first section being offered during winter 2010. Up to three sections of the PBL online course are offered per term, with a maximum number of 25 participants per course and one instructor per section. Participants receive a certificate of completion indicating the number of Continuing Education Units achieved. The PBL course is administered through the University of Oregon, Linguistics Department/American English Institute (UO/AEI).

The niche characteristics of the PDO are that participants reside and teach in low-resource countries and are identified as teacher or administrator leaders who will work with others in their institutions, regions, and/or countries to disseminate the information they receive in the course. Another unique characteristic is that the course uses an online group project to reinforce the fundamental elements of project-based learning and to model and allow students to practice one of the underlying philosophical principles of the course, namely, learning by doing.

2. Describe the target audience for the PDO.

The target audience of the PDO is teachers, teacher trainees, and teacher trainers in low-resource countries and/or regions. Participants can be recent graduates of teaching programs to veteran teachers to teacher trainers. Ages can range from people in their early 20s to their 60s. Course participants have hailed from over 100 different countries from all habitable continents in which English is not the principal language. Sample countries include: Afghanistan, Brazil, Burkina Faso, China, Egypt, El Salvador, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Peru, and Vietnam. Students choose the course to develop their English language teaching skills. The number of students averages 50 students per quarter (25 students per section) per academic year, and is offered an average of three quarters per year.

3. Describe how you recruit students for your PDO.

Students are recruited via the Public Affairs Sections and Regional English Language

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Offices (RELOs) in US Embassies and Consulate Generals worldwide. The names of potential candidates are forwarded to ECA/A/L in Washington, DC for approval and then passed on to UO/AEI for registration and enrollment. The rationale for having RELOs nominate participants is in order to prescreen the pool of applicants to ensure that those chosen will meet the basic criteria for participation in the program, namely, be a proven or promising leader in the field of English language teaching, have a high intermediate to advanced proficiency in English, and have access to a reliable internet connection. If participants were allowed to self enroll, it would be more difficult to properly screen them and verify their credentials, background, language proficiency, and potential leadership qualities.

4. Describe the curriculum choices made.

Online delivery was chosen for this program because of the target audience of language teachers in low-resource countries. Were this PDO offered in a face-to-face (ftf) format as an exchange program, participants would need to be able to finance their travel to and residence in the country in which the course is offered, which would undoubtedly severely restrict the pool of eligible participants. Furthermore, the online format allows participants to simultaneously teach in their current settings and participate in the course. Were it offered exclusively in ftf format, many participants would likely be unable to secure the leave required from their jobs to travel to and participate in the ten-week course.

The PBL course was developed by teachers who had fifteen or more years of English language teaching experience, including at least three years of overseas teaching experience. Needs assessment was conducted initially during the pilot term, with the difficulty, number, and content of readings being adjusted according to the proficiency and knowledge of the participants. The course has been further developed and refined on an ongoing basis based on feedback from participants in course evaluations and discussion board self-reflection questions, and on observations by the instructors as to which course material seems most accessible and useful, and which topics are less relevant for the majority of the participants.

The teacher-student ratio was determined based on prior online course offerings at the UO/AEI. Administrators and teachers found that more than 25 participants is too heavy a workload on the PBL instructor for the allotted contract hours, and that students complained that they did not get to know one another as well in larger classes. Because the PBL course is a seminar-style, post-baccalaureate course, it was decided to make the course a similar size to a comparable ftf graduate-level seminar.

5. Explain the PDO's over-arching goals and specific objectives.

By the end of this course, participants will be able to:

- (1) identify the principles of project-based learning;
- (2) recognize ways in which projects could be incorporated into their classrooms;
- (3) create behavioral objectives for projects that match the curricular objectives of their courses;
- (4) design projects for their courses that fit with the curricular goals and objectives;
- (5) list the necessary steps to implement a project;



- (6) create or locate effective assessment instruments to evaluate student projects;
- (7) evaluate the effectiveness of their own action plan using the rubric provided;
- (8) communicate more effectively in English by having participated in course activities;
and
- (9) network with fellow English language teaching professionals and benefit from the knowledge and support they receive from them throughout the course and beyond it.

The over-arching goals of the PDO are to familiarize students with the concept and benefits of project-based learning and assist them in developing pedagogically sound projects that can be implemented in their own settings. Another goal is to help participants become familiar with or review core concepts of best practices in language teaching and learning, such as objective writing, alternative assessment, learner feedback, cooperative/collaborative learning, motivation, technology, and critical thinking, in order to expand and/or deepen their teaching toolbox. Another goal is to assist participants in building and extending their professional network. By meeting participants within their region or who teach in similar settings in other countries, they can exchange information and ideas and potentially develop life-long relationships with other professionals in their field. Often participants offer to present at the institutions of fellow participants within their region or collaborate on a presentation for a regional conference. Another outgrowth of participation in the PBL course is for the students of two or more participants to become key pals, informants, or collaborators in classroom projects or activities.

6. Describe the teaching and learning activities used in the PDO and what online applications are used to support these activities.

The three primary activities that form the backbone of the course are: participation in weekly online discussions about articles related to core language teaching concepts, participation in a group midterm project, and design of a final action plan and implementation timeline. The purpose of the weekly articles and online discussions is to familiarize students with basic concepts related to project-based learning and effective language teaching pedagogical practices, such as course goals and objectives, assessment and alternative assessment, cooperative/collaborative learning, student-centered learning, learner feedback, critical thinking, technology in language learning, multiple intelligences, learning styles, and motivation. Through online discussions, course participants deepen their knowledge and understanding of the concepts and exchange ideas with each other about how they have applied or might apply the various concepts in their courses. All of the required readings are provided in multiple formats, such as online formats, as well as PDF format to maximize the accessibility and ease of use. A number of videos about the same topics mentioned above are also provided; however, due to bandwidth and blocking issues, all videos for the class are optional, so as not to disadvantage those students who have difficulty accessing video.

The underlying philosophy of the midterm group project is learning-by-doing. Rather than participants simply talking about projects and how they can be implemented, the midterm project requires them to negotiate about and decide on a topic, divide tasks equitably, communicate clearly, and co-create content in order to come up with a final product. The vast majority of participants report that the main benefit of doing a group project is that they are able to experience the same types of challenges and successes as their students who complete group



projects. From the vantage point of a participant in a project, students in the PBL online class are able to identify key elements to bear in mind while planning and implementing a project. For example, before the project begins, participants are provided with a copy of the rubric that will be used to evaluate them. They are also given a checklist of tasks to complete and a series of deadlines by which to complete them. That type of structure helps participants recognize the necessity of providing and communicating a clear structure to students of what is expected of them and how they should proceed with the project and how they will be evaluated. Feedback for the midterm group project is provided in both on-going formative feedback in the form of regular communications with the instructor about the project and summative feedback is given in the form of a rubric with specific comments.

The purpose of the final action plan is to assist students in applying the concepts discussed throughout the term by designing and creating a timeline for implementing a specific project in their classrooms. During the assessment of the final action plan, the instructor is able to determine the degree to which participants understood and are able to effectively apply the core principles of project-based learning and best practices in language teaching. Unlike the group project, which is collaborative in nature and in which participants co-create a final product, the final action plan is completed individually and allows participants to tailor their proposed projects to the specific needs of their students and take into account the various parameters of their setting. Participants are required to describe their setting, students, and the class for which they wish to design their project; identify a project they would like to implement; articulate the goals and objectives of the project; propose a specific timeline for implementing the project; and describe and create appropriate assessments. Ongoing formative feedback is given in the form of comments from the teacher, and summative feedback is given in the form of a rubric with specific comments.

In addition to the aforementioned three main activities of the class, the following practices are woven into the course. The instructor models best practices for the students to potentially emulate and incorporate in their own classes because of the proven benefit to the students in incorporating such practices. Students receive ongoing formative feedback about their weekly discussion posts in the form of comments from the instructor about the strengths and weaknesses of their posts. Participants also receive peer feedback on at least some of their posts because, in order to get the highest point value on the rubric, a post must make specific reference to another participant's post and deepen and/or move the discussion forward in some way. Participants also receive peer feedback on their midterm group projects and final action plans. During the week the midterm projects and final action plans are due, the discussion for that week includes a requirement for participants to post their projects and final action plans and to comment substantially on at least two groups' midterm projects or two individuals' final action plans. Additionally, the week before the final action plans are due, participants are given the option of giving and receiving formative feedback on their final action plans in order to have the opportunity to revise their plans according to the peer feedback they receive. Finally, several opportunities are provided for students to engage in self-reflection. They are required to answer discussion board questions that ask them to reflect on what they learned from doing the midterm project and how it will affect how they implement projects in their classes, what challenges they faced, how they overcame them, and how dealing with the challenges will help them as teachers.

7. Describe how the PDO helps students understand the local contexts in which they are



studying so that they can work together with others in the global context of your online PDO.

The prompts about the articles, which are the basis for the weekly online discussions, ask students to analyze and describe how the concepts apply to their contexts, classroom settings, and institutions. Because they are participating in discussions with teachers in very different settings from their own, they are able to reflect further on and gain a deeper understanding of their own contexts and glean ideas from other participants about ideas that might be used directly or adapted to their settings. One issue that routinely surfaces during the course is that of class size. Students might learn that what they previously thought was a large class size is actually small compared to others' class sizes. Or they may discover that others have similar class sizes, and they compare notes and exchange tips on dealing with large classes, classroom management, etc. Another common issue of discussion is how standardized testing is similar or different from country to country and institution to institution. One of the definite, indirect yet unmistakable benefits of participants being from a range of settings and contexts is that they invariably come away from the course with a broadened perspective on their own contexts and an understanding of the unique joys and challenges of their own and each others' settings. They also have expanded their network by at least twenty-five other fellow EFL professionals across the globe and hence have opportunities beyond the end of the course to further collaborate and exchange ideas and information.

8. Describe how the PDO helps prepare students for the local contexts in which they will work.

Because the course is online and students participate in the course while residing and working in their own settings, the entire course is structured in a way to assist students in understanding their own teaching contexts and applying the principles of the course to their settings.

Because some participants come from high-resource areas and countries, while others come from low-resource settings, participants sometimes learn about technologies or opportunities that are available to others but not to them in their settings. This discovery can create some tension or dismay on the part of the participants who come from the seemingly disadvantaged settings. However, the instructors are committed to focusing on redirecting questions about what the participants can do, given their resources and circumstances. Instructors give a range of ideas for projects participants can do, from low-tech and simple to high-tech and involved.

Problems that arise due to cultural differences are rare but are addressed on a case-by-case basis in the form of communications among the individuals involved and the instructor. By and large, the overwhelming feedback is that the commonalities among the participants far outweigh the differences, and any differences can be resolved by intervention by the instructor and can be used as a learning and growth opportunity for the participants.

One of the topics in the course is motivation, during which participants discuss why their students are learning English, what opportunities they have outside of class to hear or interact in English, and how those factors influence their motivation towards studying it. This topic has



been instrumental in helping participants consider how different classroom approaches can affect motivation and how external factors such as those listed above can be taken into account when designing course materials.

9. Explain the characteristics of the teacher educator(s) working in the PDO.

All instructors in the PDO possess a minimum of a master's degree in English language teaching, linguistics, or a very closely related field. They must have been teaching ESL/EFL at least ten years (most have more) and have at least three years of overseas teaching experience. Technology training is readily available on site via teachers in the program or courses offered in the institution at large to any teacher who is in need of such assistance. Funding is also available for teachers to attend conferences and training as needed/desired to enhance their technological and professional knowledge and skills.

10. Describe the non-teaching support staff in the PDO.

The administrative staff of the distance education unit of the University of Oregon's American English institute consists of one full-time Distance Education (DE) Director and two full-time support staff members. In recent years, UO/AEI has served approximately 200-250 online participants per quarter. The DE director oversees the administration of all aspects of each course, including registration, teaching assignments, curriculum, assessment, course evaluations, issuing certificates of completion, and archiving of data related to each course. She is assisted by two full-time support staff members who carry out various functions related to these tasks.

11. Explain the learning assessments used in the PDO.

Course certificates are awarded on a pass/no pass basis. Students must have at least a 70% participation rate in the weekly discussions during the ten-week course. They must also receive a passing grade on the midterm group project and final action plan. Weekly discussion posts are graded using a rubric. Posts must, for example, make specific reference to the articles and/or another participants' post and make a statement or ask a question that moves the discussion forward or deepens it in some way. The midterm group project and final action plans are also graded with rubrics. In addition to the instructor's summative assessments, students also complete formative and peer assessments of one another's work. Before the final action plan is due, students have the option of giving formative feedback on fellow participants' final action plans and receiving feedback on their own. Also, as part of the online discussions during the week of the due date of midterm projects and final action plans, the students give summative feedback on at least two midterm projects and two final action plans other than their own (many choose to give feedback on many more). Also, during the week of the midterm projects and final action plans, students are asked to complete self-reflections on their participation in the group midterm projects and final action plans. They are asked to answer questions such as what they liked best and what they found the most challenging about the process, what they learned, what they would do differently, and why and how what they learned will help them in designing projects and activities for their own classes.

12. Explain the mechanisms used to evaluate the PDO.



In the last two weeks of the course, students are invited to complete a confidential online survey of the course and instructor. The invitations are issued by an independent party within the department, not the instructors themselves, although the instructors explain the purpose of the evaluations for those who are not familiar with course evaluations in their settings. In addition to a multi-question multiple answer survey, participants are also provided space to give open-ended comments and suggestions. They have the option of completing and signing or of completing the course evaluation anonymously. Those that are signed can be included in the teacher's professional file, while unsigned evaluations are not. In recent years, modifications have been made to the course evaluation to make it identical to the course evaluations used in ftf classes across the program and the university at large.

13. Discuss the challenges involved in offering this PDO online.

Because the target audience is people in low-resource areas, there have definitely been challenges with participants having reliable virus-free computers, adequate connectivity, and stable electrical power sources to complete the class. Text-based resources are available in multiple formats (online versions, PDFs, etc.) to maximize the chances that students with lower bandwidth can have access to all course materials. There are also challenges with students not having access to specific online sites because of blocking by government agents, which makes it difficult for students to view the video resources made available through the course. However, this does not unfairly disadvantage students because all video portions of assignments are optional. While it does cause understandable frustration on the part of participants who would like to be able to see the videos other classmates are commenting on, it does not affect their grade. There are no synchronous components to the PBL course so that participants can work at their own convenience.

14. Describe the successes of the PDO and explain how they are documented.

Each term, PDO instructors nominate the top five candidates in their courses (PBL and others in the E-Teacher Program), and from that pool of candidates up to 26 people are chosen to participate in a three-week Summer Institute in the US, with workshops and further development of projects and resources for local implementation in participants' countries. Teachers also nominate outstanding projects from the course, which are uploaded to the E-Teacher website.

Participants in the course routinely report being selected to give plenaries at local and regional conferences on the topic of their online course and/or organizing in-service training or doing other outreach and education within their institutes and regions. Hence, there is a tremendous ripple effect, with the materials and knowledge of the course being disseminated beyond just the individual who completed the course.