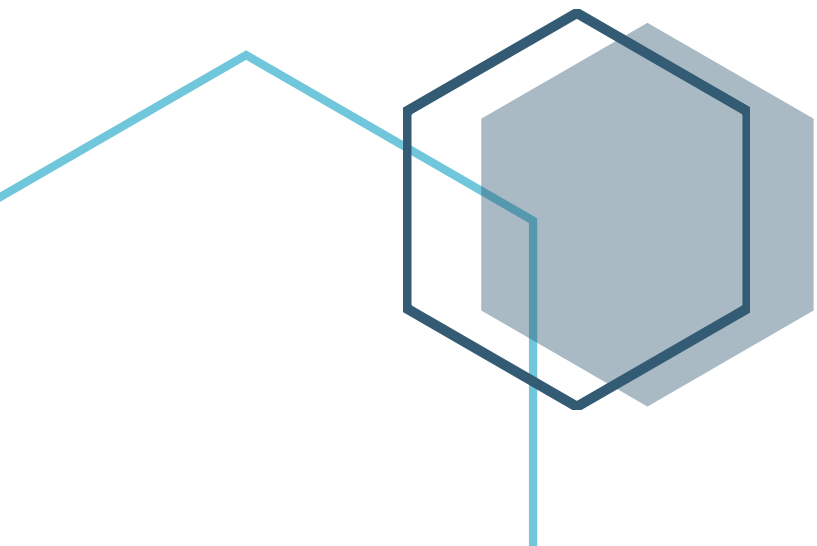




Project Based Learning

Using projects to stimulate language learning

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Introduction

The Association for Language Learning created this publication after three years working with schools on the [Language Futures initiative](#) and researching the impact of the Project Based Learning approach which is inherent in the Language Futures approach on students and teachers. Our teachers talked about how enthusiastic students became when given the opportunity to use the language they were learning in a creative context. They did this through projects which allowed them time and space to develop ideas for themselves through a loosely structured project brief.

Our research findings were revealing:

Students mentioned the importance of project work for applying their learning, using the language, giving a focus and purpose for using the language, and providing an authentic context for their learning. They also highlighted the value of projects for making the language ‘stick in their heads’.

This publication is designed to help teachers create projects which encourage learners to use the language they are taught in creative and thought provoking ways.

We began our thinking about the linguistic potential of projects by looking at the work being developed in North America and the Innovations Unit in the UK. Project Based Learning (PBL), originated in North America. Do a quick internet search and you will discover many examples of pupils’ and teachers’ work in this area. There are a small number of schools in the UK which base the whole of the curriculum on PBL. In these schools cross- disciplinary projects drive the curriculum.

The approach was introduced to increase motivation and engagement in learning and its aim is to develop critical thinking, communication and collaboration. Whilst such an approach favours discursive subjects, ALL wanted to consider how such projects could be used in languages to stimulate pupil autonomy and show teachers how to give students choice - choice in what they learnt and how they learnt it.

Learners’ comments about PBL in language learning:



“Project Based Learning means you’re actually using the language.”

“Projects are more fun than just learning stuff.”

“Projects make things stick.”

“Projects give a purpose, an end goal.”



What were the implications for a subject which requires comprehensible input from the teacher and has limited recent experience of innovation in terms of developing pupils' linguistic independence from the teacher?

With our group of teachers, we have looked closely at PBL to discover those aspects of this approach which can be generalised for languages classrooms across the UK. Our research reveals interesting reflections from students. The aspects of PBL that they enjoy include:

- the freedom to work at their own pace
- the opportunity to work in pairs or small groups
- having a purpose for using the language
- learning new cultural knowledge
- developing grammatical knowledge and writing skills.

The strong motivational effect of using new technologies was also evident in this study.

We have distilled PBL ideas to show how projects can be used in any languages classroom to give pupils the space and inspiration to use the language they are taught to communicate what **they** want to communicate within a particular context.



“Once I got my head around how to plan the project I was astonished at how my students took to it. It’s just another way of thinking about planning - more broad brush and making them think for themselves. It’s never crossed my mind to get them involved in creating the ideas for lessons. I found it kind of liberating”.

(Teacher, City of Peterborough Academy)

Developing a project

Embedding a project into the day-to-day life of the languages classroom requires a shift in thinking at the planning stage. It may mean going back to basics.

Many teacher educators, when introducing planning to their student teachers, talk about creating an 'end activity' for each unit of work; something which draws the language of the unit together and allows pupils to demonstrate what they have learnt from the unit, but crucially how they can now combine this with the language they have learnt earlier. It is in this context we suggest you begin using projects.

Projects allow students to work for an extended period of time on a key idea. They encourage students to investigate and respond to an engaging and, possibly, complex, question or problem or challenge. You need to design the project idea to make students curious; to hook their imagination; to show them that even you, the teacher, don't already know the answer. It should allow them to solve a problem or develop an idea for themselves at an appropriate level of challenge.

Some schools develop projects once a year but at Holmwood School they are planned much more frequently and are a regular part of each term's work in the Languages department.

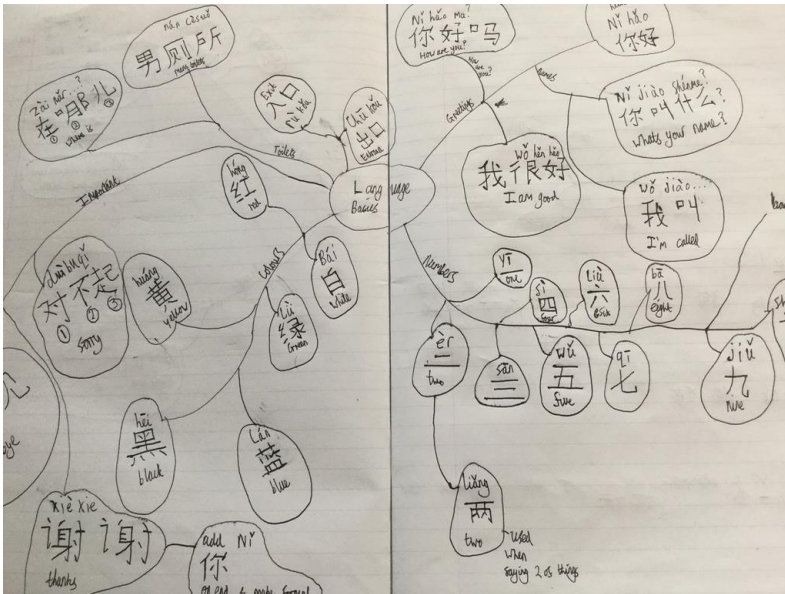
[Listen](#) to Pam Levasseur, the MFL Key Stage 3 Coordinator at Holmwood School in Kent as she explains their extensive use of PBL in languages in this webinar.

Some of the core principles of PBL fit exactly with the aim of the National Curriculum which is to create good linguists who can stand on their own two feet.

Below is an example of a Year 8 student's spidergram. The project was to create a 'Survival Guide for Japanese' - the basic language he wanted to know as he began learning Japanese.

This student made the linguistic connections and choices, he decided on what language was going to be most useful. He created the plan. This illustrates some of the core principles of PBL which we feel will chime with the aims of many languages teachers as well as the National Curriculum.

An example of a Year 8 student's spidergram:



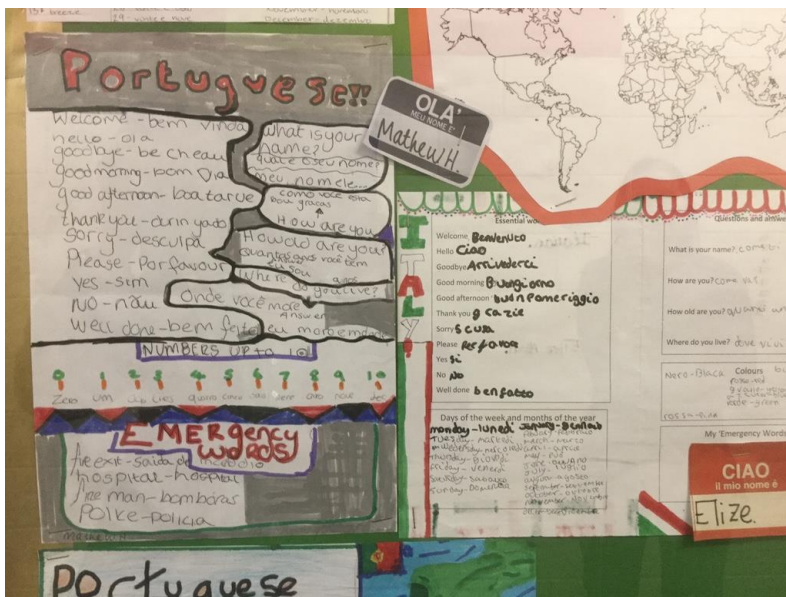
The core principles of PBL

- Pupils engage in a process of asking questions, finding resources and applying information about a key idea;
- Pupils make some decisions about the project including what they create and how they work;
- They reflect, draft and redraft their work;
- They make their work public by way of a presentation or display beyond the classroom;
- A project is built on a core idea which allows pupils some choice in how they respond;
- Pupils have some choice in the content of the project;
- You give ample class time for project development but pupils are encouraged to work on their ideas outside class time;

- You discuss a real audience with the class so that they have control over who they would like to present their work to;
- During project development you, the teacher, act as a facilitator, a linguistic and cultural guide, rather than the person who makes all of the decisions;
- The project has a clear end date and finishes with some sort of public presentation, be that a display or a performance of some sort.

ALL undertook a two-year research exercise on the Language Futures approach which considered the impact of working on projects with diverse classes. The findings were positive and indicate that such an approach can have an impact on the way pupils at all levels engage with their learning where their views are taken seriously. A link to the research report is outlined at the end of this document.

This example of a Survival Guide is similar to the Year 8 spidergram above but this is created, for display, by a low attaining pupil in a different school.





Our research report lists the reasons why our teachers and students found that projects worked well:

...they allowed students to work with the same key language for longer, allowing better mastery of it. However, this is not the only significant feature of PBL – it was clear from the research that the dual features of working towards a practical outcome and purpose, as well as having an audience, were also important for motivation.

Projects have come in and out of languages teaching practice since the 1960s. With some teachers, project have a bad press, being associated with time wasting, or being deemed not serious enough for middle to high attaining pupils and too demanding for low attaining pupils.

The Language Futures research suggests that the approach can enhance all pupils' learning and can give higher attaining pupils a complex research task through which they strive to produce their best work for their defined audience; no pupil wants to display sub-standard work to peers or the public.

What makes a good project?

Let's consider what constitutes a good language learning project. It might be useful first to state what a project is NOT:

- It is NOT a free-for-all where few students are focused on real work;
- It is NOT a process led completely by Google Translate;
- It has a concrete outcome which is usually in spoken or written target language - NOT English; it is not just ABOUT the target country.
- It is NOT just a collection of visuals with no student commentary.

A project should aim to:

- Draw the threads of recent learning together and allow pupils to find ways of including language they have learnt previously - getting pupils to re-use language they may have met at an earlier point in their language learning.
- Allow pupils to see how they can manipulate language for themselves;



- Give pupils freedom to think and be creative in the target language;
- Give pupils some choice in how they respond - video, sound file, written response;
- Allow pupils to work collaboratively;
- Give pupils an audience for their work;
- Carefully structure learning so that pupils feel supported but not constrained by the teacher and feel more in control of what they are doing than in 'normal' languages lessons.

The main resource for the students is the Project Brief. This is a key resource if you are to get students interested in your 'big idea'. It needs to be written as a document which they can refer to as their work develops.

The Project Brief

This document describes your 'big idea' in a way that:

- hooks the learners in;
- allows room for imagination;
- encourages them to use as much of the language they know as possible.

The following example is a project brief written for a Y6 class:



We Love Our School

Your task, as a class, is to create a display for visitors to your school. Your display will give them lots of interesting information about your school. The challenge is to do as much of it as you can in Spanish.

The display could include a plan of the school, for example:



It could show all sorts of things such as the classrooms and the playground. What else?

It could tell the visitor all about your class and you could take a photo.

It could tell the visitor about your teachers and other people who work in the school.

What else could you include in the display? What pictures could you have? Could you take photos?

Does anyone have a mobile phone? Could you make a little video tour for the visitor in which you tell them what there is in the school? Think about what you could say in Spanish.

This might take you a few days or weeks to do a good job. You'll include as much information as you can in Spanish so this is a **BIG CHALLENGE!**

First, brainstorm with your teacher all of the language you could include in your class display. Find out how to say and write all of this in Spanish.



Ideas for projects

In the PBL webinar mentioned above Pam Levasseur from Holmwood School talks about the projects they have developed at the school in their various taught languages. They include:

- A revision game for Year 8;
- A project about countries where the target language is spoken;
- A project based on the television programme 'Come Dine with Me';
- Students writing their own fairy tales;
- Students writing comic strips;
- Creating film trailers in the target language;
- Creating Trip Adviser-type webpages;
- Creating town brochures;
- Creating advertising for health products in the target language.

Other ideas might include:

- A 90 second drama for Valentine's Day;
- Students find a newspaper report of an incident from a target language newspaper or news webpage and create a video clip of a journalist reporting the same event online using, for example fictional interviews, visuals etc.;
- Students take a contentious issue that interests them, research it online and create a poster to attract attention in the corridor where it is displayed;
- Students make a video to teach a primary school audience how to ask for and give directions in the target language.

How to begin planning

Begin by looking for a 'big idea' which you can present to pupils. It should be something which will inspire them to think and about which they are likely to be curious.

We have included many examples of teachers' plans for a wide variety of projects which can be explored on the [Association for Language Learning website](#). They include the following 'big ideas':

- Dali and surrealism
- Going places
- Language detectives
- Come dine with me
- Multilingual digital storytelling
- I am the music man
- Playing with language
- Lights, Camera, Action: making a film in the target language.
- Exploring the local environment.
- Maths project (primary).
- My voice: a singing competition.
- The Block (see example Project Brief below)
- Wish you were here - a display about the local area for visitors.
- A project about countries where the target language is spoken.

A worked-up example – The Block

This example of project construction is inspired by a French publication from called 'L'Immeuble' (Debyser, 1986) in which French school pupils had to create a picture of life in and around a block of flats over a number of lessons. They were encouraged to imagine the design of the flats, the address and surroundings, the inhabitants, their professions and relationships, the cars in the car park, the styles of decor of the flats and many other things. You can see how this project could encompass much of the language that students routinely meet in their early years of language learning and it appeals to a wide age range and diverse levels of maturity. We therefore adapted it to develop our own project.

The idea is to present the concept to students first, using visuals, in a tone of voice which suggests you are excited by it! Brainstorm, in English, their ideas about what they might include in the project which is to create a snapshot of life in a fictional block of flats in the target country. Encourage them to include ideas for which they are already linguistically equipped but allow them to be creative if they expand beyond this.

This planning template gives you some idea of the elements you might consider when you have found your 'big idea'. The big idea here is to invent a vignette of life around a block of flats in the target country.

The Block – Scheme of Work:

High Rise Life

Project parameters
Length: One term
 One block of flats, 4 floors, 14 flats. Shop on ground floor.
 30 people: 8 men, 13 women, 9 children, 8 animals

Map of the project- 1 term

Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
Location and Inhabitants	Description of flats (x2 contrasting styles?)	Relationships - friends and enemies	10 second dramas/encounters

Language arising from Parts 1 - 4.

Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4

Language Futures Project Based Learning: planning Language World 2016

As you can see the Scheme of Work is divided into 4 parts which are built into the term's Scheme of Work. Construct a first draft of a plan to present to the class. They should then be able to make amendments but essentially agree, as a class, what the project will aim to do and what the concrete outcome for final, public presentation will be.

Then develop a Project Brief written directly to students. Here is an example:



The Block- Project Brief

This project is designed to allow you to use as much German as you possibly can. Imagine you're a blogger. You live in a flat in a German city. You know the people in your block - they're young, old, single, couples, divorced, families, groups of students; some have lots of kids, some have none, some have animals - some vicious, some sweet; some live a frantic life, some a very slow and quiet life. You're going to create a whole world which gravitates around this block of flats which you will create visually for others to read.

Do this in pairs, or a group if you prefer.

We suggest you think about the whole project first to get an overview. Decide what you will include - you might think about:

- Location - where is The Block? What's the address? Get a photo, decide how many floors and flats there are in the block, get an address etc.
- The look and feel of the flats - do a floor plan of one of them, work out what a typical flat looks like - do a mock up - colour scheme and style depending on who lives there - cool and minimal, student grungy, complete mess with kids' stuff all over? You decide.
- Who lives there? Get names for all the inhabitants – decide on family groupings and friendship groupings. You could focus on two lots of people and work out their lifestyle – someone who lives in complete chaos compared to someone else who's compulsively tidy.
- Decide on the relationships people have - who gets on with whom? Are there friends, enemies, kindnesses, vengeances? Can you create a diagram to show the relationships? What's the cause of strife if there is any? Did something trivial happen that escalated tension?

Create a 90 second drama - an encounter that takes place on the stairs, in the shop, on the ground floor, in the car park, in the lift - it could be anywhere, but the key factor is that the protagonists live in the block and there is tension within their relationship.

Your presentation could be on a web page or on a classroom wall. It is as if you are creating a fictional world with you at the centre. You are telling the reader about this world in which you live, about day to day life where you live which, maybe, sometimes isn't plain sailing.

Conclusion

We have discovered, through our work with different schools, both primary and secondary, that projects have much to offer schools in terms of motivating students to learn. The main attraction is that they provide a creative context which allows students to use their newly acquired language for their own purposes. We have posted many examples of planning documents on the Language Futures section of the Association for Language Learning website, focusing specifically on [PBL resources](#)

Our research shows that the approach is successful in allowing students to stand on their own two feet as budding linguists.

We recommend that you try it!

References and Links

[Language Futures website](#)

[Language Futures Research Report](#)

