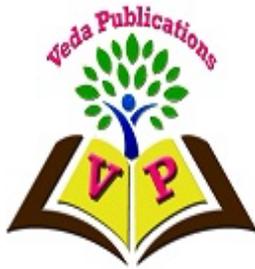




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**PRACTICE AND REFLECTION ON PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN ESP COURSES — A CASE STUDY OF THE JOURNALISM ENGLISH COURSE**

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*(School of English and Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.)**Email: summer20131212@qq.com***Doi:** <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2025.12313>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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This study implemented 16-week PBL in the Journalism English (ESP) course at a southern China foreign language university, involving 180 second grade journalism majors. It details three core PBL projects, implementation steps, and a multi-dimensional evaluation system. Data from pre-/post-tests, questionnaires, observations, and interviews showed significant improvements: 14.2-point average post-test score gains, 89% of students reporting higher engagement, and 76% of groups scoring well in teamwork. The study also reflects on challenges (e.g., uneven group contribution, time issues) and proposes optimization strategies, providing actionable insights for ESP instructors and enriching project-based learning (PBL) research in journalism English.

Keywords : *Project-Based Learning (PBL), ESP , Journalism , English, Teaching Practice, Instructional Reflection.*



1. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) serves as a critical bridge between general English learning and professional language application, with the Journalism English Course being a typical example tailored to journalism majors' career needs. In the era of global media convergence, journalism professionals are increasingly required to operate in multilingual environments. Tasks such as writing English news reports for international outlets, conducting interviews with foreign sources, and translating media content demand not only general English proficiency but also specialized linguistic competence in journalistic contexts (Hutchinson & Waters, 2010). The Journalism English Course, designed to bridge this gap, focuses on teaching genre-specific vocabulary (e.g., "byline," "editorial," "press conference"), discourse structures (e.g., the inverted pyramid for news writing), and communication strategies (e.g., interview question design).

However, traditional teaching models in this course often prioritize teacher-centered lectures and textbook exercises. Teachers typically explain journalistic English rules and analyze sample texts, while students passively absorb information and complete repetitive drills. A pre-course survey conducted in this study revealed that 78% of participants felt "unable to apply learned English knowledge to real journalistic tasks," and 65% reported "low interest in traditional lecture-style classes." This misalignment between teaching methods and learning needs highlights the urgency to reform the instructional approach.

PBL, first developed by John Dewey and later popularized in engineering and medical education, has gained traction in ESP contexts due to its focus on practical application (Thomas, 2000). By centering learning around complex, authentic projects, PBL encourages students to take ownership of their learning, collaborate with peers, and apply knowledge to solve real-world problems. For the Journalism English Course, PBL can simulate professional scenarios—such as producing an English news segment or organizing an international press briefing—thus connecting classroom learning to future career demands.

The primary objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to design and implement PBL projects tailored to the specific needs of the Journalism English Course; (2) to evaluate the impact of PBL on students' professional English skills, learning engagement, and collaborative abilities; (3) to identify challenges in PBL implementation and propose feasible optimization strategies.

Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on PBL in ESP education, particularly in the under-researched field of journalism English. Practically, it provides a concrete, replicable PBL framework for instructors, helping them transform passive learning environments into active, practice-oriented ones. For students, the findings underscore the value of PBL in enhancing employability by developing job-relevant skills.



2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Core Characteristics of PBL

Based on John Dewey's theory of "learning by doing", Project-based teaching emphasis the in-depth integration of knowledge acquisition and practical activities. Its core lies in stimulating students' exploration through driving questions and cultivating their innovative awareness and problem-solving abilities in real-life contexts. The concept of project-based teaching argues that only when learners start to apply knowledge to solve problems does it mean they have truly mastered the knowledge and begun to construct knowledge. Its purpose is to enable learners to master disciplinary knowledge by participating in a project and solving problems involved in it, allowing "students to engage in in-depth study over a sustained period around complex real-world problems and well-designed tasks, solve these problems, and thereby acquire knowledge and enhance their abilities" (Markham et al., 2003: 4). Pam Grossman, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, and her colleagues proposed that project-based teaching has five key characteristics, namely: "problem-oriented, curriculum-based, interdisciplinary, process-focused, and collaborative" (Grossman et al., 2019: 43).

Three transformations need to be achieved in the PBL teaching process: transforming disciplinary knowledge into practical tasks, shifting teachers' role from lecturers to guides, and changing learning assessment from result-oriented evaluation to process tracking. The core characteristics of PBL include: (1) Authenticity of tasks: Projects are closely

related to real professional scenarios to stimulate students' learning motivation; (2) Autonomy of learning: Students independently plan and implement the project under the guidance of teachers; (3) Collaboration of groups: Students complete tasks through division of labor and cooperation, developing teamwork skills; (4) Integration of knowledge and skills: Students integrate and apply multi-disciplinary knowledge and professional skills in the project process.

2.2 The Adaptability of PBL to ESP Courses

ESP courses focus on "learning English for professional purposes," and their core goal is to cultivate students' ability to use English to solve practical problems in specific professional fields (Hutchinson & Waters, 2010). This goal is highly compatible with the characteristics of PBL:

First, PBL's authentic project tasks can simulate the real language use scenarios of ESP courses. For example, in the English for Journalism and Communication Course, designing a "campus English news interview and reporting project" can enable students to experience the entire process of news production in English, which is more effective than traditional textbook exercises in improving their practical language skills.

Second, PBL's student-centered approach is in line with the individualized learning needs of ESP courses. Different students have different levels of English proficiency and professional knowledge. In PBL, students can choose project content and division of labor according to their own strengths, realizing



personalized learning and improving learning efficiency.

Third, PBL's emphasis on collaboration helps cultivate the teamwork ability required in professional fields. In journalism work, news production often requires the cooperation of reporters, editors, and photographers. PBL group projects can simulate this work mode, enabling students to develop communication and collaboration skills while learning English.

To sum up, project-based learning (PBL) is highly compatible with ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses. It can address the challenge that traditional teacher-centered teaching methods struggle to achieve the curriculum goal of fostering students' interdisciplinary practical abilities, and to the greatest extent, enhance students' critical thinking skills, interdisciplinary learning capabilities, and ability to solve practical problems. The following is an introduction to the application of project-based teaching in the Journalism English course.

3. PBL DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION IN THE JOURNALISM ENGLISH COURSE

3.1 Course and Participant Overview

The study was conducted in the 2025 spring semester, covering a 16-week Journalism English Course at a university in GuangDong Province, China. The 180 participants were second grade journalism majors (160 females, 20 males) with an average age of 20. All had passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), indicating a basic level of general English proficiency, but had no prior experience with PBL in ESP courses. The course met once a week, with each session lasting 80 minutes.

3.2 PBL Project Design

Three interrelated projects were designed to cover the core content of the Journalism English Course, each building on the skills developed in the previous one. The projects were aligned with both course objectives and real journalistic practices, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Projects

Project	Duration	Course Objectives	Authentic Task	Key Deliverables
1. English News Writing Project	Weeks 1–5	Master inverted pyramid structure; use journalistic vocabulary; write concise news reports	Cover a campus event (e.g., cultural festival, sports meet) as English-speaking journalists	500-word English news report; peer review forms



2. English Interview Project	Weeks 6–10	Design professional interview questions; conduct English interviews; transcribe and analyze responses	Interview a guest (e.g., foreign teacher, local journalist) on a current issue	Interview recording; 800-word transcription; reflection report
3. English News Video Project	Weeks 11–16	Script writing for news videos; video editing; dubbing in English	Produce a 3–5 minute English news segment on a social topic (e.g., environmental protection)	Final news video; script; group presentation

3.3 PBL Implementation Process

The implementation process was structured into three core stages, with reflection integrated throughout to reinforce learning outcomes.

Before the start of each project, the teacher explained the project requirements, teaching objectives, and evaluation criteria in detail. For example, in the “Campus English News Writing Project,” the teacher used sample English news reports to analyze the inverted pyramid structure, key elements (who, what, when, where, why, how), and common journalistic vocabulary (e.g., “press release,” “on-the-spot report”). At the same time, the teacher guided students to form groups reasonably, considering factors such as English proficiency, professional knowledge, and personality characteristics, to ensure the efficiency of group collaboration.

During the project implementation, the teacher adopted a “regular check-in + individualized guidance” model. Every 1-2 weeks, each group submitted a project progress report, and the teacher held a group meeting to understand the problems encountered by students. For example, some groups reported that “it is difficult to design in-depth English interview questions,” and the teacher provided guidance by analyzing excellent interview cases and demonstrating how to convert general questions into professional ones. In addition, the teacher used online platforms (e.g., WeChat Groups, YuKeTang) to answer students’ questions in a timely manner, ensuring the smooth progress of the project.

After completing each project, groups presented their deliverables in class. For the English News Video Project, presentations consisted of three parts: screening the final news video, explaining the scriptwriting and editing process, and answering questions from both peers and the teacher. Notably,



all these presentations were conducted in English, which in turn provided students with additional opportunities to practice and improve their oral communication skills.

Reflection was integrated into two levels—individual and group. For individual reflection, each student wrote a 300-word English report addressing three questions: what they learned, what challenges they faced, and how they could improve. For group reflection, teams discussed their collective performance, identified strengths (e.g., strong teamwork) and weaknesses (e.g., delayed transcription), and developed action plans for future projects. Finally, the teacher summarized key reflections and provided feedback to reinforce learning.

3.4 Evaluation System

A multi-dimensional evaluation system was used to assess student performance, combining formative and summative assessments:

Formative Assessment (60% of final grade): Included project progress, weekly check-ins, and reflection reports, focusing on process rather than just results.

Summative Assessment (40% of final grade): Evaluated the final deliverables using rubrics tailored to each project. For example, the rubric for the English News Writing Project included criteria such as content accuracy (30%), structure (25%), language proficiency (25%), and creativity (20%).

Peer evaluation was also incorporated: students rated their group members' contribution (e.g., participation, responsibility) using a 5-point scale,

with results accounting for 15% of the formative assessment score.

4. RESULTS OF PBL IMPLEMENTATION

4.1 Results of Professional English Proficiency Tests

To measure proficiency gains, a pre-test and post-test were administered. The tests included three sections: news writing (40 points), interview question design (30 points), and media vocabulary (30 points).

As shown in Table 2, the average pre-test score of the participants was 65.8 (SD = 7.3), while the average post-test score was 80.0 (SD = 6.1). A paired-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference ($t = 12.47$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that PBL significantly improved students' professional English skills.

Table 2 Pre-test/Post-test Results

Test	Mean Score	Standard Deviation (SD)	t-value	p-value
Pre-test	65.8	7.3	12.47	<0.001
Post-test	80.0	6.1	-	-

Qualitative data supported this finding. In interviews, 82% of students reported that they “now feel more confident writing English news reports,” and 75% noted that their “ability to use journalistic vocabulary has improved.” For example, one student stated: “Before the course, I didn't know how to structure a news report in English. Now, I can easily apply the



inverted pyramid and use words like 'exclusive' and 'breaking' correctly."

4.2 Results of Questionnaire and Interviews

The results of post-course questionnaires showed great enhancement of students' learning engagement and autonomy. 92.3% of students "were more active in participating in English class activities" compared with before, and 86.5% of students "took the initiative to search for English news materials and learning resources outside class." During classroom observations, it was found that students in PBL classes participated more actively in group discussions, with an average speaking time per student increasing from 1.2 minutes to 3.5 minutes per class. Student B said in the interview: "The project of interviewing foreign teachers is very interesting. In order to complete the interview well, I took the initiative to learn English interview skills from online courses and practiced with my classmates after class. This kind of learning is more meaningful than memorizing words and grammar."

The questionnaire of group collaboration evaluation showed that 90.4% of students "improved their teamwork skills through group projects," and 84.6% of students "had a deeper understanding of the work content of journalists." Student C, the leader of a project group, said: "In the news video editing project, our group had different opinions on the video style. Through communication and negotiation, we finally reached an agreement. This process made me realize that teamwork is very important in news work. At the same time, editing

the video by ourselves let me experience the hard work and fun of being a journalist."

5. CHALLENGES AND OPTIMIZATION STRATEGIES

While PBL has achieved positive practice effects, there are still some problems and challenges in the implementation process.

In some groups, there was a phenomenon of "free-riding"—some students did not actively participate in project tasks, relying on other group members to complete the work. The questionnaire showed that 34.6% of students reported that "there are members in the group who do not contribute to the project." The three PBL projects covered most of the course content, and the time for each project was relatively tight. Some students reported that "they had to spend 3-4 hours outside class every week to complete the project tasks," and when there were overlapping deadlines with other courses, they felt great pressure. For example, during the "English News Video Editing Project," 23.1% of students said that "they did not have enough time to carefully edit the video, resulting in insufficient quality of the work." There was also a significant gap in the quality of deliverables between groups. For example, in the English News Video Project, 30% of groups produced high-quality videos with clear scripts and professional editing, while 15% produced videos with poor audio, grammatical errors, and disorganized content. This discrepancy was linked to differences in group skills (e.g., some groups had members with video editing experience); uneven access to resources (e.g., cameras, editing software); and varying levels of effort.



Based on the reflections on the challenges encountered in PBL implementation, three targeted strategies are proposed to improve the effectiveness of future PBL practices in the Journalism English Course.

5.1 Strengthen Group Management

To strengthen group management, teacher adopted several concrete measures: groups were required to submit a “group contract” that clearly outlines each member’s roles, specific responsibilities, and scheduled meeting times to avoid ambiguity in task division; bi-weekly individual meetings with students were held to assess each student’s actual contribution to the group project and promptly address any concerns or conflicts that arise during collaboration; additionally, peer evaluation scores would be more closely linked to the final course grade—for example, increasing the weight of peer evaluation from the original 15% to 25%—to further incentivize active participation and reduce the phenomenon of “free-riding.”

5.2 Streamline Time and Resource Allocation

Both students and teachers should make efforts to streamline time and resource allocation to alleviate the time pressure. For complex projects like the English News Video Project, their duration can be extended by 1–2 weeks to allow sufficient time for careful planning, execution, and revision; meanwhile, project deadlines should be scheduled to avoid overlapping with exam periods of other courses, reducing students’ academic burden. To support students’ work efficiency, a dedicated PBL resource library could be created, containing pre-designed

templates (such as news writing outlines), step-by-step tutorials (including video editing guides), and high-quality sample deliverables (like exemplary news reports or interview transcripts), which can help students save time on formatting and task clarification. For teachers, assigning a teaching assistant to assist with PBL-related tasks—such as monitoring group progress, organizing in-class presentations, and preliminary grading of draft deliverables—can effectively reduce the teacher’s workload and allow more time for targeted guidance.

5.3 Enhance Quality Consistency

To enhance the consistency of project quality across different groups, targeted interventions are necessary. Pre-project workshops focusing on key skills should be offered, covering essential competencies like English news writing techniques and basic video editing operations, to ensure that all students have a foundational grasp of the required skills before starting the project. The university can provide students with free access to professional media tools, such as efficient video editing tools, and to open a campus media lab equipped with cameras, microphones, and other equipment, ensuring that all groups have equal access to necessary resources regardless of their personal conditions. Moreover, a peer mentorship system can be established, pairing groups with relatively weak skills or less experience with more proficient and experienced groups; this way, the less skilled groups can learn practical tips and problem-solving methods from their peers, gradually improving the overall quality of their projects.



7. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that PBL is a highly effective instructional approach for the Journalism English Course. By integrating authentic, collaborative projects into the curriculum, PBL significantly improved students' professional English proficiency, learning engagement, and collaborative skills—key outcomes for ESP education. Nevertheless, the study identified three key challenges in PBL implementation: uneven group contribution (with 28% of students receiving low peer evaluation scores for participation), time management pressures (both students and teachers facing heavy workloads), and variability in project quality (a 15% gap between high and low-quality deliverables). To address these issues, targeted optimization strategies were proposed, including strengthening group management through “group contracts” and bi-weekly check-ins, streamlining time and resource allocation via extended project timelines and a dedicated PBL resource library, and enhancing quality consistency through pre-project skill workshops and peer mentorship.

Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on PBL application in ESP education, particularly filling gaps in the under-researched field of journalism English. Practically, it provides a replicable PBL framework for ESP instructors, offering actionable steps to transform passive lecture-based classrooms into active, practice-oriented learning environments. For journalism students, the findings underscore PBL's role in fostering job-relevant skills, ultimately enhancing their employability in global

media contexts. Future research could expand on this study by increasing sample sizes (e.g., including multi-university participants) or extending the intervention period to assess the long-term impact of PBL on students' professional development.

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