

# **Integrating Project-based learning into a traditional skills-based curriculum to foster learner autonomy: An action research**

Tanya McCarthy

## **ABSTRACT**

This article reports on the findings of teacher-initiated classroom research that investigated if Project-Based Learning (PBL) could foster autonomous learning in an EFL classroom. The research promoted the teaching of language and subject matter content simultaneously through a PBL-integrated curriculum. In order to evaluate the benefits and challenges of promoting autonomy in a PBL environment, qualitative research methods were employed to facilitate discussion on attitude change. Data collected through pre- and post-PBL questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and observations showed changes in learners' perception of autonomy, learners' self-efficacy, and the teacher's role. Results showed some success in the practice of autonomy, but overall, learners showed minimal effort and were more apt to study for the sake of obtaining credit rather than for the development of their L2. The study concluded that despite minimal change in attitude, teachers and administrators would benefit from implementing a PBL approach to mainstream curriculum by helping learners become aware of their ability to learn independently and to grow as successful language learners.

## Introduction

This is a teacher-initiated classroom research project that investigated if integrating a Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach into mainstream curriculum could foster autonomous learning of EFL in a Japanese university classroom. For the researcher, promoting an autonomous approach to language learning was especially pertinent at this time, as it reflected the goals of the Ministry of Education for university students. That is, ‘fostering personnel who can use English in their work’ (MEXT<sup>1</sup>, 2003). In practical terms, promoting autonomy in the classroom was seen as vital to students’ language learning, as it aimed to teach them how to operate efficiently on their own rather than wait for the teacher’s attention. The intention of this study was to promote the ‘strong’ version of autonomy, where the role of the teacher was to shift the initiative in decision-making to the learners through ‘dialogue about learning’ (Cotterall, 1995a: 220) as well as through ‘critical reflection’ and ‘independent action’ (Little, 1991: 4). This research attempted to show that PBL with its ‘multi-skill’ (Lee, Li & Lee, 1999) and ‘process-oriented’ (Stoller, 2006) learning approach had the potential to change the passive learner into a ‘problem-solving’ and ‘critical-thinking’ (Beckett, 2005) autonomous learner.

## Background

During the six years of compulsory English education in Japanese junior and senior high schools, students are generally taught from a strict curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Education, with great importance placed on highly competitive entrance examinations, which must be passed to advance to the next level. This resulted in teachers working hard to prepare students for these tests, and students

---

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

spending time in *jukus* (cram schools) trying to achieve high grades that would allow them to enter into the top schools. In some cases, this produced a negative backwash effect in students' attitudes to language learning, as students tended to equate learning to passing tests. After these six years of English study, communicative language skills remained somewhat basic with many students incapable of studying independently.

At this public university, students were required to attain a passing grade at the level required by the university in each of the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. However, as English was a mandatory course for students majoring in other areas of study, motivation in many classes was low, leading to frustration for teachers. In addition, teachers were required to teach from a set curriculum, which used a textbook above the level of most of the students. This resulted in disruptive students in lower and intermediate level classes, which made up the majority of students. After one semester of trying to adapt the textbook to suit the different levels of students, the researcher sought to find another means of teaching that the students would find interesting; a method that would challenge each student at their own level; and a method that would encourage more autonomy in the classroom, without straying from the curriculum guidelines set by the institution. The researcher therefore sought to answer the following questions:

- (a) Would PBL motivate learners to become more proactive in their learning?
- (b) How could PBL be employed to facilitate autonomous learning?
- (c) How would learners react to a system that challenged the traditional view of learning?

## Participants

The participants in this study comprised 192 non-English majoring freshmen students from different parts of Japan and from various learning backgrounds. For these students, this was the second semester of their first year of tertiary education, and also their final semester of institutionalized English, unless they chose to take an elective English course in their sophomore year. Each class consisted of approximately 25 students, placed according to their language proficiency level. Through these students, the aforementioned questions were addressed. The researcher found that many of these students carried with them the learning experiences of being passive learners within a *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) system, where they were dependent on the teacher to impart knowledge. This dependency created a few problems, due to differences in perception of teacher-student roles in the classroom. Table 1 gives insight into the changing environment the researcher intended to expose the learners to.

<b>Traditional classroom</b>	<b>PBL-integrated classroom</b>
Structured learning situations.	Students have more 'freedom'.
Teachers expected to have all the answers.	Students seek, gather and check information.
The teacher uses academic language.	Students engage in authentic interaction with the teacher.
Teachers are respected and seen as authority figures inside and outside the classroom.	Teachers help students to seek information and share opinions with them.
Students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving.	Students are encouraged to learn by doing.
Repetition and memorization techniques used.	Students use a self-discovery approach to solve problems.
Examination content pre-decided by the Ministry of education a crucial part of education.	Students choose from a variety of alternatives or decide on their own theme as a complement to set curriculum.
Extrinsically motivated due to fear of failure.	Students intrinsically motivated.
Students are dependent on the teacher for learning.	Students are held accountable to each other and to the teacher.

Table 1: Traditional Japanese Classroom compared to the PBL classroom.

This new and unfamiliar environment emphasized important learner capabilities such as ‘detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action’ (Little, 1991: 49). For the students in this study, English had suddenly become a subject where they could no longer just passively sit by and gain credits, but a functional language they had to use for communicative purposes. For the researcher, the project-based approach became a powerful learning tool that could positively change learner attitudes through self-reflection (Benson, 2001); improve critical thinking skills through problem solving (Kobayashi, 2004; Beckett, 2005); and create a collaborative environment that fostered autonomous learning (Skehan, 1998; Hedge, 2000; Fried-Booth, 2002). Given the possible benefits of PBL in bringing about a positive change in attitude to language learning and in promoting lifelong learning, it was hoped that throughout the course, students would understand that learning did not have to come from only a textbook, but also from independent research beyond the classroom.

## **PBL in Research Literature**

### ***Underlying theory of SLA and its relation to PBL and Learner Autonomy***

The theoretical foundations of PBL derive from both first and second language acquisition theory. In particular, Vygotsky’s studies in the acquisition of the first language (L1) among young children had a significant impact on second language (L2) acquisition theories. One of Vygotsky's theories, which greatly interested and influenced educators in second language acquisition is what he referred to as the zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined as “the difference between the child's capacity to solve problems on his own, and his capacity to solve them with assistance” (Dahms et al., 2007). For Vygotsky, skills important to language development included problem-solving skills, internalization of language, and, most

importantly, interaction with the people in the surrounding environment.

This theory impacted second language learning in two areas important to PBL and this study: Curriculum and Instruction. With regard to the curriculum, it was felt that since interaction and negotiation were important to language acquisition, the curriculum should be designed to emphasize significant interaction between learners and the learning tasks. In addition, activities should be made to promote problem solving. Concerning instruction, it was important to encourage skills of collaboration and decision-making within groups to instill skills necessary for independent problem solving in the future. Even though Vygotsky's and Krashen's theories were heavily criticized, their basic assumptions of interaction, negotiation and the ability to be engaged in self-determined action (or learner autonomy) can be mirrored in the principles of PBL.

### ***Defining PBL***

In an educational context, it is hard to give only one definition to project-based learning as it embodies many teaching styles. In its most basic form, PBL has been described as a model that organizes learning around projects. However, it is generally presented as an approach involving complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems and involving students in problem-solving, decision-making or investigative activities. More specific to this research, PBL was viewed as giving students the opportunity to work on a specific task relatively autonomously over an extended period of time.

### ***Rationale for selecting a PBL curriculum***

Shortcomings in fostering autonomy in the existing curriculum and an inability to

motivate lower-end students using the existing materials were the main reasons for implementing a PBL approach to learning. The rationale for using a PBL approach was as follows:

1. It was largely learner-centered.
2. It focused on form (knowledge-based) as well as meaning (communication-based).
3. It followed a process approach (How do I reach my goals?) as well as a product approach (What have I achieved?)
4. It helped students set a learning goal and plot their progress towards it.
5. It was a system that could help examine changes in learner attitudes.
6. It motivated learners to engage in language use for genuine communication.
7. It encouraged learners to be responsible for their own learning and to work independently outside of class hours.
8. It emphasized collaboration, negotiation, interaction and reflection.
9. It was founded in theory as well as in practice.

## **The Project Framework**

There were several project frameworks available (Fried-Booth, 1986; Katz, 1994), but it was important to select a framework which reflected the needs of the learner and the goals of the institution. Based on feedback from a previous survey, students showed a desire for a more communicative teaching method, but wished to continue doing worksheets that focused on accuracy. Projects were therefore designed using the textbook topics, which were required to be taught as part of the institution's syllabus. The researcher adapted Beckett and Slater's (2005) project framework for the study, as it was found most useful in promoting "the simultaneous acquisition of language, content, and skills" (Beckett and Slater, 2005: 108). The framework consisted of two components: The planning graphic (focusing on the target language,

content and skills) and the project diary (for summarization and reflection tasks).

Figure 1 is an adaptation of Beckett and Slater's design (2005: 110), which captures the key components important to the PBL-integrated curriculum, as well as the students' educational goals. A fourth sub-heading 'Attitude' was added to the framework, as participation was a key factor in the class, being 30% of the final grade. Responsibility, highlighted as a measure of autonomy, included students preparing for class, doing research in time to meet deadlines, and checking their work using learning techniques and strategies taught in class. 'Communication' was emphasized under skills as an indication that language is functional, and students were encouraged to communicate ideas or opinions. The double-headed arrow linking writing ability and skills emphasized the focus on writing skills, and was an indicator of what the students should have been able to achieve by the end of the program. Slater's project diary was not used, as self-reflective tools were employed at intervals within the program to allow both teacher and learner to chart learning progress.



Integrating Project-based learning into a traditional skills-based curriculum to foster learner autonomy: An action research

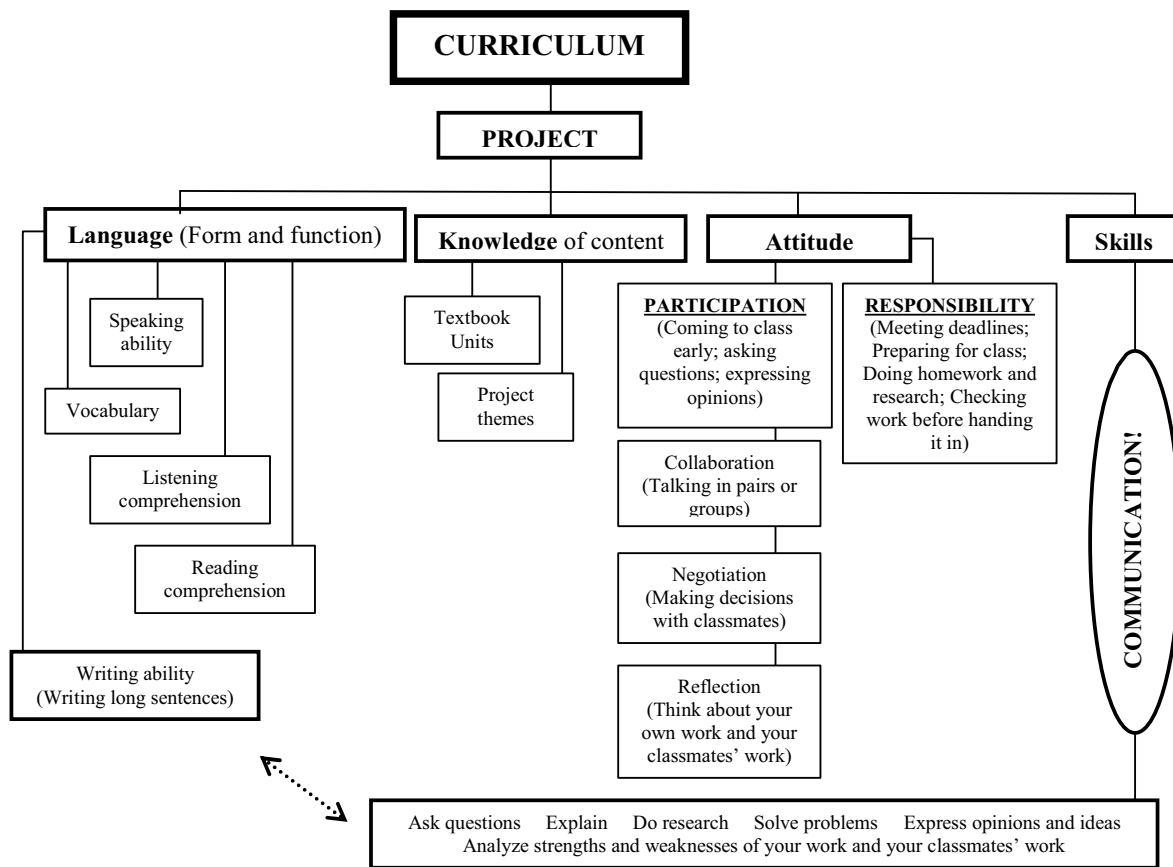


Figure 1: An adaptation of Beckett and Slater’s Planning Graphic

## Methodology

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of fostering autonomy through PBL, the researcher employed qualitative research methods to facilitate discussion of attitude change. It was decided that a qualitative method was most appropriate, as it gave a detailed description of the unfolding events and it allowed the researcher to develop a theory from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down. This allowed a more flexible approach to the study. Data were collected mainly through pre- and post-PBL questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and observations through a teaching journal. The researcher, in the role of ‘teacher-researcher,’ was directly involved in all aspects of the research, from planning, design, implementation and evaluation.

This may have caused some subjectivity, which the researcher tried to minimize by employing various methods of data collection. Success in the exercise of autonomy was measured through observations made in the teaching journal as well as through informal interviews. Questionnaire data measured changes in learners' perception of language learning strategies, learners' own efficacy and the learners' view of the changing role of the teacher. Implicit in the course objectives was a focus on change in attitude on the part of the students.

### ***Pre- and Post-PBL Questionnaire***

As research has identified that learner beliefs and preferences are central to successful language learning and influence learner attitude, as well as their approach to language learning tasks (Tumposky, 1991, cited in Richards and Lockhart, 1996), much of the program was based upon monitoring these beliefs in preparation for learners to exercise autonomy. The questionnaire therefore became important to understand learners' changing beliefs over the course of the study. It was also seen as beneficial in maintaining a tight and direct link between the students' needs, course aims and materials, and what actually occurred in the classroom.

For this study, a five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) and questions were written to complement the course objectives. This questionnaire, based on Cotterall's 1995 and 1999 research papers on learner readiness for autonomy, was divided into five areas: (1) Role of the student, (2) The classroom atmosphere (3) Study skills (4) Role of the teacher and (5) Assessment. The questionnaire was given in week 1, collected and analyzed, and a second, post-PBL questionnaire administered in week 14 compared findings. Codes 4 and 5 (agree/strongly agree) and codes 1 and 2 (disagree/strongly disagree) were

tallied together to show clear opinions. Of the questionnaires administered, there was a 90 percent return rate. The results were made available in the form of a report for school administrators responsible for curriculum development and for other teachers interested in making changes in their classes. Most salient observations in the five areas are listed below.

### ***Findings***

#### *1. Role of the student*

The pre-PBL questionnaire showed that students had a high dependency on teacher instruction (Question 1). Post-PBL, this high dependency remains, but there is a decrease of 12 percent (from 78% to 66%) in students feeling the need for a teacher. They were generally unsure about their ability to be autonomous (Question 4) and after being introduced to PBL, a learning style completely foreign to them, they seemed even more uncertain. This however may have been due to how the program was implemented as opposed to an adequate reflection of the ability of PBL to foster autonomy. A little more than half of the students showed a willingness to take on more responsibility for their learning (Question 6). This saw little change in week 14. It was hoped that by allowing learners more choice in the learning process, which they seemed to have a preference for (Question 8: 61%), they would embrace the new learning approach more readily and work more independently. However, for lower level students, having to make choices became difficult. This is reflected in the 4% decrease in 'agree' opinion from 61% to 57%. These learners found it easier to follow teacher direction. All in all, results revealed little change in learner beliefs about the role of the student. However, changes (particularly in Questions 1 and 4) indicate a greater awareness by the learners of their role in the learning process.

Role of the student	Week	%		
		Agree	Mid	Disagree
1. I think learning in the classroom with a teacher is best.	1	78	16	7
	14	66	28	7
4. I believe I have the ability to learn English successfully by myself.	1	35	36	29
	14	28	45	27
6. I am willing to take responsibility for my own learning.	1	55	35	11
	14	53	36	11
8. I learn best when I can choose what I would like to do.	1	61	30	9
	14	57	31	13

Table 2: Role of the student

## 2. *The classroom atmosphere*

The most significant change in this section can be seen in students' preference for group work over individual work (Questions 13 and 18). Being given the choice of selecting their own group members (Question 18) was a motivating factor in helping students to become more autonomous, as was seen in the positive change in week 14. With regard to the integration of project work and textbook worksheets geared at maintaining accuracy (Question 16), there was a minimal increase, and results are comparable with question 15. In particular, there was a significant decrease in the numbers of those who disagreed between week 1 and week 14 in both questions 15 and 16. This indicates that having been exposed to an alternative style of teaching, learners were more accepting of a PBL approach.

Integrating Project-based learning into a traditional skills-based curriculum to foster learner autonomy: An action research

The classroom atmosphere	Week	%		
		Agree	Mid	Disagree
13. I learn best alone.	1	26	44	30
	14	19	53	36
15. I learn best when doing projects.	1	30	39	31
	14	34	47	18
16. I prefer a class that uses both the textbook and projects	1	35	37	27
	14	38	44	18
18. I prefer to choose my own group.	1	37	44	19
	14	50	35	15

Table 3: The classroom atmosphere

When cross-checking these results against comments made during the interviews, lower-level students expressed a preference for work that required them to think and do less, while higher-level students enjoyed the challenge of project work. Although at first glance, the increase in students interested in project work seems minimal, it shows that after one semester, learners are more aware of how they learn best and also that they have considered a different teaching methodology. Perhaps had the research been conducted over a longer duration, there would have been more significant changes in results.

### 3. Study skills

Students showed an awareness of the need to do more work outside of class to improve their language skills (Questions 19 and 20). This was revealed by significant increases post-PBL in Questions 19 (71% to 85%) and 20 (67% to 80%). This was encouraging for the researcher and was reflected in the extra work done by students. Question 24 showed an unfavorable decrease from 28% to 7% in the number of learners who used the student support center. This result however, is inconclusive

due to the wording of the question. A student raised the point while filling out the questionnaire if the computer lab could be included. Approximately 80% of all presentations were done using PowerPoint, and learners used the computer lab to do research. This is not adequately reflected in the results. During interviews, students spoke of meeting outside of class to work on projects, and students doing PowerPoint presentations were given permission to leave class and use the computer lab to complete preparation for their project. This is a good example of learners showing increased autonomy in their learning.

Study skills	Week	%		
		Agree	Mid	Disagree
19. I think it is important to study outside of class to learn English.	1	71	21	8
	14	85	13	3
20. I believe I should find my own opportunities to use the language.	1	67	26	7
	14	80	16	4
24. I use the library/student support room to study English	1	28	15	56
	14	7	14	79

Table 4: Study Skills

#### 4. Role of the teacher

The changing role of the teacher was central to the research however results showed that students remained reliant on the teacher for direction for the duration of the course (Questions 28 and 29). There is however, a greater degree of learner autonomy seen in two instances (Questions 33 and 34) where students show more responsibility for their learning. Although the change was minimal (a 6% decrease in both cases), it shows an increased readiness for independent study. There seems to be some discrepancy between Questions 29 and Question 8 where a high percentage of students (Question 8: 61%) said they prefer to choose what they want to do yet

Integrating Project-based learning into a traditional skills-based curriculum to foster learner autonomy: An action research

in Question 29, 43% of students show that they are still reliant on the teacher to tell them what to do, even when presented with choices. However, this indicates to the researcher a *willingness* of the students to take on more responsibility for learning (See Dam, 1990) while acknowledging that they still required further assistance from the teacher. Thanasoulas (2000) reminds us, that in the promotion of autonomy in the classroom, the teacher should not become “redundant, abdicating his/her control over what is transpiring in the language learning process”.

Role of the teacher	Week	%		
		Agree	Mid	Disagree
8. I learn best when I can choose what I would like to do.	1	61	30	9
	14	57	31	13
28. I think the teacher should set my learning goals for me.	1	35	46	18
	14	36	44	20
29. I believe the teacher should tell me what to do.	1	43	43	14
	14	42	42	16
33. The teacher should tell me when and where to practice English.	1	30	42	28
	14	24	44	33
34. The teacher should decide how long I should spend on an activity.	1	31	43	26
	14	25	42	31

Table 5: Role of the teacher

### 5. Assessment

With regard to assessment, students remained doubtful about how to assess their own work. They were given instruction and practice in how to assess themselves and their peers, and feedback was given throughout the first five weeks of the program. However, although students seemed to benefit from doing self-assessment worksheets (observation noted in the teaching journal and results of Question 36), they remained anxious and shy about assessing their peers’ work and especially

in having their own work assessed by their peers. Post-PBL responses showed a significant increase where learners saw the benefits of peer-correction (Question 38: an increase from 50% to 63%), however, the majority remained anxious about having their own work assessed (Question 37: an increase from 57% to 63%). There was a better response to the self-assessment worksheets where students felt they had improved by looking for mistakes in their own work (Question 36: an increase from 75% to 86%). Again, for the students, this result indicates a greater awareness in their language learning abilities.

Assessment	Week	%		
		Agree	Mid	Disagree
36. I think it is important to learn how to check my own mistakes.	1	75	17	8
	14	86	11	3
37. I am nervous about other students checking my work.	1	57	27	16
	14	63	18	17
38. I think it is helpful to have my work checked by other students.	1	50	40	10
	14	63	26	11

Table 6: Assessment

### *Semi-structured interview*

During weeks eight to twelve, at the height of the project work, the researcher conducted informal interviews with thirteen groups of students (totaling 46 students) across levels and majors. The aims of the interview were mainly to assess learning progress and to check if/how students were exercising autonomy. The interview, lasting about 15-20 minutes each, was conducted randomly across classes, and within groups of three or four students, as it was thought that this would help students to feel more confident about giving their opinions. A semi-structured interview technique was chosen as it was felt that this would give a true indication



of students' perception of the program as well as measure changes in autonomy. It also ensured more validity in the research as results could be triangulated against questionnaire data and teacher observations.

### *Student comments*

During interviews, learners provided the researcher with information about their beliefs in autonomy and perceptions of PBL. Salient points emerging from this interview are as follows:

- Negative comments

There were comments that the language level was a little too difficult during project work, as learners did not have the English skills necessary for negotiation, planning and discussion. During project work, they found it tiresome to have to make decisions about their own learning. Learners found worksheets easier to use as they provided more guidance, and they were viewed as more helpful for improving L2 ability. In addition, worksheets were reported to be easy to work with either individually or in a group. The researcher interpreted these comments as (1) an indication of the lower-level students' non-readiness toward autonomous learning and (2) the basis for incorporating more scaffolding into future PBL projects to help guide learners through the autonomy process. That is, through giving constant and real-time feedback to students, as well as spending more time in the planning stages of the project, students would have been able to work more effectively and more efficiently, especially with regard to time-management. For purposes of future research in the area of PBL, teachers should note that constant feedback is critical in helping students become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, thereby helping them to target specific areas for improvement. This is key to become self-directed learners.

- Positive comments

Although some students expressed a wish to revert to textbook learning, there was an increase in students interested in learning only through projects. Interviews with mid- and higher-level learners revealed that they would be interested in doing a PBL elective course as they found it challenging and rewarding. They especially enjoyed being able to choose their own resources and do independent research. This was an indication that these learners were ready for independent study.

Overall results show that of the forty-six learners interviewed, 41% recommended that a PBL course be offered to freshman students. Mid-level learners generally recommended a mix of PBL and worksheets, and for the low-level learners, they commented that they learned little from either worksheets or projects, but if they had to make a choice, they would choose a 100% PBL course as it helped to keep them awake in class.

### ***Teaching Journal***

Acts of autonomy were also examined through observations made in a teaching journal. Entries monitored learners' activities and helped ascertain whether they were becoming autonomous or not. Students were considered to have developed autonomously if they showed gains in any of the following areas: understanding of subject matter, positive changes in group problem-solving, work habits, amount of L2 used, choosing own topics for presentations, setting achievable goals, finding own research resources, and finally, learners negotiating and deciding on a group leader who then had the responsibility of assigning roles and responsibilities to other group members.

Observations noted in the journal were that student-student interaction was greater

and more active in the advanced classes, but the use of L2 became surprisingly low once given complete autonomy. Even students who were capable of communicating in their L2 reported that they found it easier to speak in their L1 when it came to problem solving and negotiation. For the researcher this negated the purpose of the project work, which aimed at helping students interact in English in an authentic manner. In the lower level classes and most of the intermediate-level classes, interaction was done almost completely in L1, except where students completed tasks requiring translation. In addition, there remained a general dependence on the teacher for direction and approval. This again raised the issue of how much guidance was needed for less competent learners. For the lowest level learners, they were excited about the concept of autonomy, not for the sake of their learning but rather, it meant the teacher not checking on them as much and giving them freedom to be idle during class time. However, success was evident in certain cases, such as high-level students choosing challenging topics related to future life goals, which greatly improved research skills, vocabulary and writing ability. Another mark of success observed by the researcher, was that students across all levels and majors showed greater responsibility for their learning by selecting their own research topics without the teacher's input, deciding on their own groups and establishing daily and weekly work plans to achieve their goals.

## **Discussion**

### **Effectiveness of PBL to foster autonomy**

Although PBL literature argues the many benefits of promoting autonomy if promoted in a learner-centered environment, analysis of data from questionnaires, interviews, observation, and program evaluation showed that many students were not particularly enthusiastic about exercising autonomy and were willing to work

at only a very minimal level for the class credit, even though given the choice to do more. These students were content to follow the guidelines of the teacher and the set curriculum, and showed little interest in further independent L2 study. Moreover, the lack of use of the L2 was a main concern, as students reported it easier and faster to do their discussions in their L1. For many students, the concept of autonomy was secondary to their goal of gaining a course credit. In addition, many preferred to be told what to do by the teacher and did not understand why the student should be responsible for making decisions. However, despite this somewhat lukewarm reception to autonomy, there were positive results. From the perspective of the researcher, it encouraged self-reflective teaching, and from the perspective of students, it helped to increase motivation and develop aspects of their learning such as research and writing skills and public speaking. Finally, from the perspective of the school, it made administrative staff more aware of an alternative teaching approach (and the problems inherent in solely adopting a PBL approach) when designing the new curriculum.

### ***Limitations of the study***

Time constraint was the major hindrance in this study's attempt to understand the affect PBL had on autonomy, as to foster learner autonomy effectively there needed to be long-term and continuous effort among teachers and students. The observation period fell within only fifteen ninety-minute classes in the semester, but in order to objectively evaluate the overall effectiveness of PBL and observe a distinct improvement of the learners' attitudes and skills, more time and resources were required. Another limitation was that interviews were conducted in L2, which may have led to misinterpretations and discrepancies in meaning. Due to the researcher's basic knowledge of the students' L1 and the unavailability of ongoing help with translations, it was

impossible to check accuracy of all statements. For future studies in this area, it would be better to add external observers to examine the program, to translate where necessary and allow for more one-to-one sessions with students to permit wider comparisons of learners' readiness to exercise autonomy.

### **Practical Implications for further research**

PBL in the promotion of learner autonomy in the EFL classroom has become more widespread in Japan and although there have been clear steps in this direction, there still remains, in many cases, a disconnection between research and practice. First, there needs to be a more transparent method of identifying factors determining learner autonomy. By identifying these factors, we can better understand how to make improvements in future research. Although qualitative data was useful in understanding learners' perspectives, a method that uses more quantitative data and relies on statistics would make results more credible as the study could be easily duplicated. Another area of research worth looking into is a study on the role of autonomy in the cultural context. Many of the study participants found autonomy '*unnecessary*' and preferred relying on the teacher to provide knowledge. Autonomy, at this institution, was seen as largely a 'Western' concept, so with more training in this area, it is possible that teachers can help promote the idea of learner autonomy in the local context by gradually integrating project-based learning into English teaching curriculums or working with smaller, more advanced classes. This would provide valuable information for future research into PBL, and contribute greatly to teacher development.

### **Concluding remarks**

In its present form, traditional institutions may prevent the use of a project-based

approach and curriculum or scheduling constraints may limit wider research into learner autonomy. As the first priority for students is to satisfy the requirements of the institution to gain credit, this usually limits how much effort is put into doing independent study, since this often requires doing additional work. For teachers, the need to constantly evaluate students based on the institution's guidelines may limit what they would like to do in the classroom. In the end, this results in students being possibly deprived of a project-based method to learning as well as the promotion of learner autonomy in the classroom, both approaches believed to have significant benefits for language learning. However, as integrating a PBL approach into the curriculum showed that it could achieve a balance between the 'quest for credit' and the desire to see learners practicing autonomous behavior, I conclude that PBL should possibly be the 'new paradigm shift' in EFL with autonomy being the guiding principle.

## References

- Beckett, G.H. (2005). Academic language and literacy socialization through project-based instruction: ESL student perspectives and issues. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication, 15*(1), 191-206
- Beckett, G. H., & Slater, T. (2005). The project framework: A tool for language, content, and skills integration. *English Language Teaching Journal, 59*(2), 108-116.
- Beckett, G.H., & Miller, P. (Eds.) (2006). *Project-based Second and Foreign Language Education: Past, Present, and Future*. Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. New York: Longman.

- Cotterall, S. (1995a). Developing a course strategy for learner autonomy. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 49(3), 219-227.
- Cotterall, S. (1995b). Readiness for Autonomy: Investigating Learner Beliefs. *System*, 23(2), 195-205.
- Cotterall, S. (1999). Key variables in language learning: what do learners believe about them? *System*, 27(4), 493-513.
- Dahms, et al. (2007). The Educational Theory of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896 - 1934). Retrieved September 03, 2007 from <http://www.newfoundations.com/GALLERY/Vygotsky.html>
- Dam, L. (1990). Learner Autonomy in Practice. In Gathercole, I. (Ed.). *CILT* (pp. 16-37). Great Britain: Bourne Press.
- Fried-Booth, D.L. (2002). *Project Work* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Katz, L. G. (1994). The project approach. Retrieved August 20, 2007 from <http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/eecearchive/digests/1994/lk-pro94.html>
- Kobayashi, M. (2004). *A sociocultural study of second language tasks: Activity, agency and language socialization*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- Lee, M., Li, B., & Lee, I. (1999). *Project work: Practical guidelines*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Education.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues, and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Richards, J., & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Skehan (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stoller, F. (2006). Establishing a Theoretical Foundation for Project-Based Learning in Second and Foreign Language Contexts. In Beckett, G.H. and Miller, P. (Eds.) *Project-based Second and Foreign Language Education: Past, Present, and Future*. (pp. 19-40) Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.

Thanasoulas, D. (2000). What is learner autonomy and how can it be fostered? *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6(11). Retrieved September 4, 2007 from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Thanasoulas-Autonomy.html>