Project-based learning with young multilingual learners: Standards and support

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Effective project-based learning can be carried out with even the youngest multilingual learners (MLs). This paper provides an example of a weeklong collaborative writing project using Google Slides and Chromebooks.
Keywords: project-based learning, project-based language learning, technology-assisted project-based language learning, young learners, collaborative writing, Chromebooks

Introduction

Project-based learning (PBL) is a popular instructional approach in general education (Beckett, 1999; 2025). With this approach, students learn interactively by applying knowledge and gaining skills through experiential activities. Such activities encourage students to explore real-life problems and challenges, often working in collaborative groups to create presentations, products, or propose solutions that demonstrate their understanding. The goal of PBL is to foster deeper learning by connecting learning materials with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, and competence in digital literacy (Beckett, 2023). Because of the diverse uses of PBL in education, PBL has been applied in language pedagogy (Garib, 2022; Kurt & Beck, 2023; Legutke & Thomas, 1991). Consequently, the umbrella PBL term has branched out, resulting in project-based language learning (PBLL).

Guided by the principles of PBL, PBLL focuses on the learning of language, often with the assistance of technology. As technology continues to advance (Chapelle, 2024), its integration into PBLL has led to the emergence of technology-assisted project-based language learning (TAPBLL) (Beckett et al., 2020; Garib, 2022; Thomas & Yamazaki, 2021). Integrating technology into project work can enhance students' learning experiences by providing students with access to content, information, and interactive platforms, which, in turn, can facilitate their collaborations. With or without technology, PBLL can be implemented effectively to support students of different educational levels, including younger learners.

While some might think projects are only suitable for the upper elementary through high school, effective projects can be done with young learners and very young learners with the proper support. Here we borrow Slattery and Willis' (2001) definitions of young learners as children ages 7-11 and very young learners as children under seven years old. PBLL literature shows that research with younger grades is scarce; however, there are some effective examples that can be good guides for teachers' project implementation with young learners (e.g., Dooly & Sadler, 2016; Helm et al., 2023; Kimsesiz et al., 2017). No matter their grade or age, students can engage in meaningful PBLL and inquiry-based learning with the right planning and support.

In this paper, we will describe and reflect on how an elementary multilingual learner (ML) teacher, the first author, created a project for 1st- and 2nd-grade MLs in the U.S. We will explain how this project tied into the design elements of Gold Standard PBL (PBLWorks, n.d.), and

elaborate on how this project helped develop the skills students needed for their English learner (EL) summative assessment.

PBL Gold Standard

PBLWorks! describes seven gold standard facets of PBL (PBLWorks, n.d.). These gold standards are helpful for teachers designing PBL projects to ensure the project includes content knowledge and 21st century skills and thus were important to consider when designing a project for 1st- and 2nd-grade MLs. To be gold standard, a PBL must have a challenging problem or question, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, and a public product (see Figure 1).

Challenging problem or question

As educators and Ph.D. candidates, who have conducted research on PBL and PBLL, we have developed a deep understanding of the challenges fraught with project work. For example, the first author had created some PBL units for her students through her graduate coursework, but as the spring semester approached, she had not done a single one of them with her students. While good on paper, these PBL units did not pose a challenging problem that the students had and, moreover, did not seem to authentically stem from students' curiosity and needs.
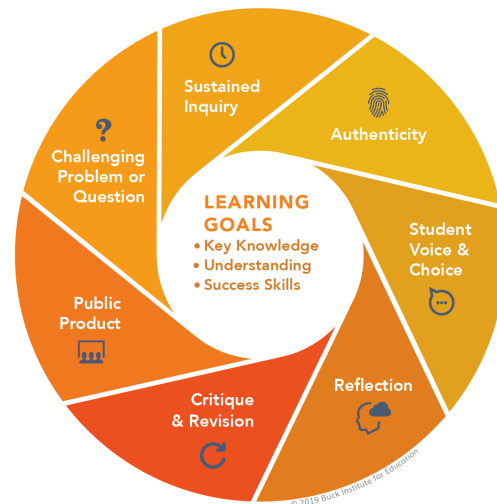

Figure 1: [Buck Institute of Education: PBLworks' Gold Standard PBL](#)

Needing to help her students practice typing full sentences before the summative EL assessment, she was looking for an opportunity to do a project that required each student to type on their Chromebooks. One day a second grader mentioned during pull-out EL service time that she wanted to get a kitten, but she did not know which kind would be best. Sensing a good question, the teacher asked what pets everyone had, which pets they wanted, and what makes a good pet. This led to a lively discussion about pets and a KWL chart of what everyone wanted to learn more about. In this context, the KWL chart refers to a graphic organizer that helps students structure their learning. The "K" stands for *what students already know*, the "W" stands for *what the students want to learn or know*, and the "L" represents *what the students have learned from at the end of the activity*.

Sustained inquiry

After the initial brainstorming session, the first author guided the students to learn more about pets. Her EL office was fortunately inside the school's library with easy access to all kinds of electronic and print-based books and materials, including some bilingual books. The students used the library to find interesting and helpful books to read individually and together. Beyond deciding which pet is better – dogs or cats – the teacher was interested to see that the students were interested in specific dog and cat breeds. With the help of their teacher, this led to finding additional books and information on the internet. In the end, everyone, including the teacher,

learned something new. A takeaway from this experience is that engaging and authentic learning environments can be created for young learners through project work. However, as the teacher reflected, creating such authenticity in a classroom setting comes with challenges.

Authenticity

Authenticity has been identified as somewhat challenging for PBL as authenticity can vary based on project and learners' ages (Larmer, 2012). The idea of sharing this information via a poster seemed to be an authentic choice. Children's schoolwork is often displayed in the hallway to show learning and posters are a common site they see in the community. The kids seemed excited about showing off their final project work via a poster project too so the teacher decided this would be an authentic method of sharing their knowledge. When the first grade MLs learned what the second graders were doing, they wanted to create posters too, only of "zoo animals" instead. The teacher reflected that this topic was less authentic because their investigation did not address a specific problem or include a realistic scenario (Larmer, 2012); however, the students were excited so the teacher let them make posters too.

For the poster project, the first author created template posters using Google Slides. Google Slides is preferred because the slide orientation and page size can be modified by the teacher, but difficult for the students to accidentally change (like in Google Drawing). Resizing these slides to standard paper size made it easy to print the posters too. Through Google Slides and with teacher support, the young learners learners how to insert pictures using the built-in feature (insert ➜ image ➜ search the web) without having to navigate between tabs. On a single blank Google Slide the teacher created textboxes for students to write and squares to indicate where to insert pictures. To help prepare the students for their summative writing test, the first author modeled the language- and technology-related skills needed for the project:

- Start with a capital letter
- Write four or more words with details
- Have a period at the end
- Click on the textboxes to type
- Delete placeholder squares before inserting their own picture

Since each pull-out class had a total of three students, this activity was relatively easy to manage for one teacher.

Figure 2 is a blank poster created initially for one student to complete. In this, the second graders could write their title, write three sentences about the pet of choice, and insert a picture. This reinforced writing and typing skills needed for the summative assessment and to help build students' typing endurance. Figure 2 was also used with first graders collaboratively, with each student writing one sentence about a zoo animal. Figure 3 was designed as a collaborative writing poster where all three students accessed the document at the same time to type two to three sentences and insert a picture. This project was based on real-world projects where one collaborates with others synchronously or asynchronously to complete a digital project with others.
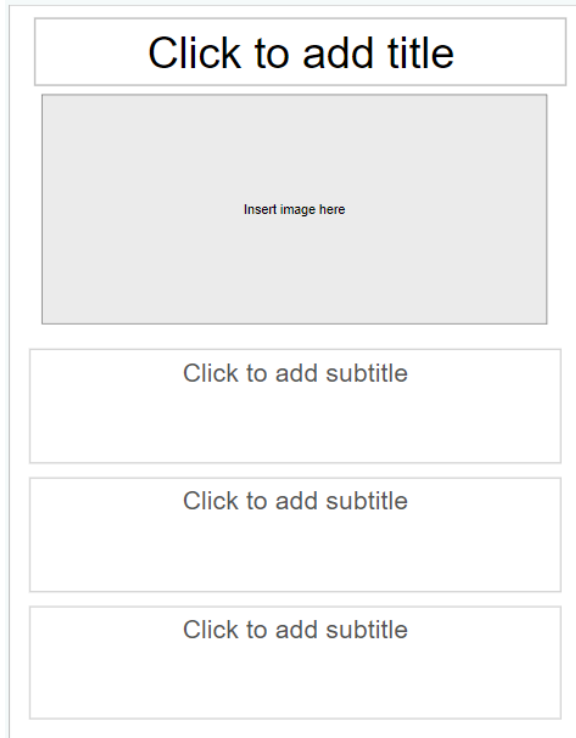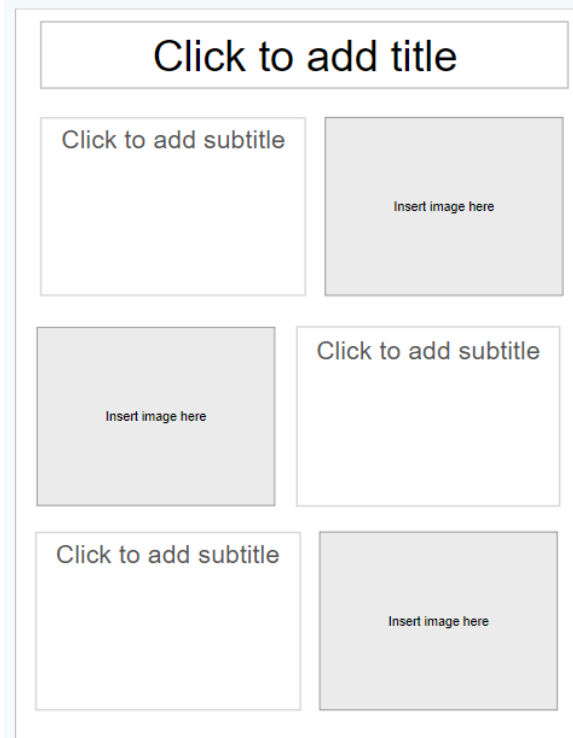
Figure 2: Poster for 1-3 students

Figure 3: Collaborative writing poster

The teacher guided the students in deciding together who would use which textboxes and who would type the title. While it was surprising at first for the students to see each other on the document, the students soon became used to this collaborative environment and were respectful of each other's workspace.

Student voice and choice

Students were able to choose whichever pet or animal they wanted to learn about. While the initial prompt was to figure out which cat breed would make a great pet, one student chose to write about a dog breed instead. Due to wanting the students to have sustained inquiry throughout the project, as well as sustained practice writing and typing before the summative assessment, the teacher found this to be fine. Throughout the project, the teacher also gave opportunities for voice and choice, by asking questions such as:

- Does this book have the information you need? Should we find another book?
- Should we read about another breed or do you want to choose this one?
- Would you like to add another image to the poster, like your pet's paw print?

Reflection

The teacher modeled reflection throughout the project by asking questions and describing her thinking to the MLs. Through these questions and through the experience of collaborative writing, students seemed to think of other information to add to their posters and other topics for future posters.

- Why did you choose this book to help you?
- What do you like about what you wrote?
- What could we do to make this even better?

Critique and revision

Once a draft of the poster was complete, the teacher helped the students edit their sentences and think about the poster design. Aside from guiding students to capitalize sentences and add punctuation, some questions asked included:

- Is this picture a better picture for your cat breed or is that one? Why do you think so?
- What did you write? What else do you think people want to know?
- What else could we add to the poster to make it helpful for others?

A public product

When the posters were complete, the teacher printed the posters in color and hung them in the hallway. Based on what the teacher heard from other teachers, the non-ML students were impressed, if not a little jealous, of the posters the MLs got to make. Parents also were able to see these posters during parent-teacher conferences which helped highlight our school's small EL program. It seemed that the combination of sustained inquiry, using the computers in engaging ways, and the public product that earned them praise from peers, teachers, and parents alike was a big motivator for the students.

Notes on project length

Since the MLs receive pull-out language services about three times a week for about 20 minutes each day, each poster project lasted about one week. This timeframe, though brief compared to more typical PBL units, seemed ideal for the young learners as it allowed for the project to be flexible yet focused.

Conclusion

As Beckett (2023) stressed, PBL can be an engaging way for MLs to learn 21st-century skills. Even young MLs can engage in PBLL when provided with supportive environments for their learning. By integration of technology, for example, the teacher in this paper was able to facilitate her students' research, collaborative work, and presentation skills in an authentic and meaningful way. Through the poster project, students were able to improve their research skills, writing, typing, computer literacy, and learn more about a topic of interest. Moreover, throughout the project, students communicated about topics of interest together. Though this article is limited due to being a teacher reflection piece, it provides an example of how teachers can engage young learners in project work.

There are several implications from this project and ideas for future work. Through this brief reflection paper, we can see that technology can facilitate collaboration, increasing students' interest by fostering by learning through real-life situations. Future studies that explore project work with young MLs over longer periods of time at different levels would certainly be helpful in this endeavor. Moreover, future studies can also examine how other teachers make use of other

technologies like videos or interactional blogs for PBLL, echoing Beckett's (2025) assertions regarding the use of technology literacy in project work as well as GenAI (Garib & Coffelt, 2024). Finally, attention is needed for exploring students' lived experiences in and through project work.

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