

# **PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: ENGLISH CARNIVAL IN UNIVERSITI KUALA LUMPUR-MALAYSIA FRANCE INSTITUTE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Project-based learning (PBL) is one of the many strategies offered by language practitioners to their learners. The use of projects in teaching English is said to foster student autonomy and encourage active, student-centered language practice. Cognitive psychologists in education concluded that learning from examples and learning by doing tend to expedite learning and achieve a deeper level of understanding. The collaborative nature of PBL promotes a greater appreciation for social responsibility (Scott, 1994). Obviously PBL has many adult world characteristics that can bring concrete purposes and meaning to a wide range of subjects, not only English. Students can see the interdisciplinary nature of the tasks, and see that each task may have more than one solution. Moreover, PBL is an important and effective part of the teaching and learning process because students are given full freedom to choose their own strategies and approaches for their projects. This paper describes the learning and teaching processes involved in organizing the English Carnival in Universiti Kuala Lumpur-Malaysia France Institute (UniKL-MFI). The project was applied and carried out as a class assignment to encourage and motivate students to develop confidence and self-direction as they move through both team-based and independent work.

## **Introduction**

There is a need to use multi-faceted approaches to deliver content and develop soft skills among students. To fulfill this need, UniKL-MFI English Unit prepared a project to be implemented to achieve the desired language skills and proficiency. This project called for innovation in teaching and learning by integrating technology and at the same time helped students used their minds by applying the higher order thinking and problem-solving skills. The new approach

namely Project-based Learning was introduced to achieve 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and activity-based learning to encourage self-directed, self-paced and self-accessed learning among students. PBL was also used for students to learn in an authentic, challenging and multidisciplinary environment. The project was designed by the students and carried out in real situation, and evaluated by their lecturers.

Motivating and engaging students in active learning is challenging even for the most experienced teachers. Due to students' different learning styles, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, prescriptions of either a "one-size-fits-all" approach or the lack of originality does not gear them towards achieving high standards. The suggested PBL is important in the learning process. Moving away from rote learning and memorization, PBL builds on individual strengths, and allows individuals to explore their interests in the framework of a defined curriculum.

PBL is holistic in nature, interdisciplinary and encourages cooperative learning. It also lends authenticity to learning. While in practice, practitioners plan, implement and evaluate projects in real-world situations beyond the classrooms. Besides, PBL helps students develop skills for living in a knowledge-based and highly technological society. Solving highly complex problems requires students to have both fundamental skills and digital-age skills. With this combination of skills, students become directors and managers of their own learning, guided and mentored by a skilled lecturer.

## **Problem Statement**

### ***English Instruction at UniKL-MFI***

UniKL-MFI is an advanced technical training centre in the field of engineering technology specializing in automation, electrical, mechanical and maintenance. It offers courses at Diploma and Bachelor levels. UniKL-MFI is a collaborative project between Malaysia and France. The mission of the university is to produce enterprising global technopreneurs, and its graduates are geared towards becoming professionals, highly equipped with the required skills and competence in both the technical and non- technical fields. Thus, English plays an important role in assuring that these students are able to compete with graduates from other universities upon graduation. UniKL believes that the function of English in the employment domain is both obvious and prevalent locally and globally. People with high academic qualifications, computer and technical skills and have good proficiency in English can expect to be employed faster. There is also the general knowledge that job interviews for professional vacancies in critical fields such as Law, Accountancy and Engineering are expected to be conducted in English. Thus, to achieve this goal, UniKL-MFI students undergo 3-4 semesters of learning English throughout their studies, and

during these semesters, they are introduced to almost every aspect of language and communication, and this is where PBL plays its role.

In the traditional classroom of higher institutions of learning, students are generally regarded as passive learners and recipients of the educational content. Assessments of student learning are generally based on their individual work such as quizzes, examinations and tests. Each student competes with his/her peers to obtain the highest score that can be achieved individually. There is very little interaction among the students, and they rarely have any opportunity to work together as a team and cooperate in their learning processes. Thus, in this traditional method of teaching and learning, educational content is teacher-directed, and learning is individualistic. In this context, the content is delivered to the learners by the teachers, and the students rely mainly on the teachers, the knowledge experts, for their knowledge and information.

In the case of UniKL MFI, only 40% of the classes used for English are pre-installed with a projector, while other classrooms are only with chairs and tables. The chairs and tables are fixed to the floor in two of the classrooms which makes it quite difficult for students to have group discussions. The nature of these classrooms is affecting the quality of teaching the language and at the same time minimizing the chances of peer interaction among the students. The physical appearance of the classrooms can give great impact to the nature of the teaching. According to Kounin (1970), well-managed classrooms are related to the abilities of teachers to mark clear transitions between activities among students. He further clarifies that this is very important as it suggests that teaching spaces need to have transitional space – space that may not appear to have a direct function but which is space that teachers can use to shift between one way of teaching to another. As mentioned by Jariah Mohd Jan and Rosli Talif (2005), students need to utilize the language they possess in expressing their thoughts while interacting. They need to learn the art of conveying and receiving messages that contain information that is of interest to them.

The students at UniKL-MFI pursue either a Bachelor or Diploma qualification. The requirement entry for English for students to enroll at the institution is at least a Pass in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination. Meanwhile, students who come from other vocational institutions usually hold a certificate generally in engineering field and they often have undergone several English courses at the certificate level. For the Diploma students, the intakes are from Institut Kemahiran Mara (IKM), local Polytechnics, Institut Kemahiran Belia Negara (IKBN), and other local learning institutions. Meanwhile, students doing their Bachelor degrees are from Matriculation centres, students who went through Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) examination, and students with

a diploma from other higher learning institutions. In terms of their language proficiency, everyone has some basic background and knowledge of English language.

In UniKL-MFI, Diploma students need to undergo two levels of English before proceeding to the last level of English that requires them to do the Project. The first level, Technical and Communication English I, requires them to learn basic grammar and introduces them to Dictionary Skills. They are also required to do a mini project in which they need to write an essay on a process such as “How to change a flat tire” and later present it in class. Before starting their writing, they are required to mind map on the possible processes and later translate the map into paragraphs. In this short essay, they need to describe the processes involved using sequence connectors.

In the second level, Technical and Communication English II, students are exposed to discussion skills and also research writing. A section in grammar is also taught at this level. The students are required to write a cause-and-effect report and among the titles are such as “The Effects of Gaza War in Palestine” and “The Typical Causes of Poor Behaviour in Classrooms”. During this period, they do library research to produce a mini report on their findings. After producing their final mini report, students are asked to present their major findings in class to share with their classmates.

At the final level, Technical and Communication English III, students are exposed to PBL in which they organize a language project and the project is assessed by their lecturers to determine the final grade for their English course. During the first half of this period, students are exposed mainly to business correspondence and later taught job hunting and application procedures. This final level of English is designed to prepare students for the job market by giving them real hands-on projects in response to actual job advertisements.

### ***Low proficiency in English***

According to The Star (2007), one-third of students who graduated from public universities last year had very low English language proficiency. In fact, 29.2% of the 120,000 graduates scored Bands One and Two in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), which identified them as “Extremely Limited User” and “Limited User” respectively. This scenario is affecting UniKL-MFI as well. UniKL-MFI students can generally be categorized as those with low to medium English proficiency. This is because most of its students obtained minimum credit for their English language subject during their previous studies at other institutions. Due to such students’ background, UniKL-MFI believes that

language is acquired most effectively when it is learned in a meaningful social context, offering students the opportunity to communicate about what they know as well as about their feelings and attitudes.

### ***Reluctant to work as a group***

Group assignments are inherently problematic because they involve merging diverse skills and personalities with the hope that the students are able to collaborate towards achieving a common goal. Seen as the biggest problem in any group work, some students are not interested to work on the project in language classes. Rather than being active contributor and participant they would rather be the “free riders” or “passengers”. This is shown in group meetings, where these “passengers” would rather keep quiet and listen to the discussion than giving constructive comments and suggestions. A survey by the Department of English at Hong Kong Polytechnic University indicates that most students had inadequate speaking opportunity at school, where “listening to teacher” had been their most frequent classroom experience.

### ***The need to acquire extra communication skills***

As mentioned by Kornwipa Poonpon (2011), in reality, however, studying English does not necessarily focus on synthetic accuracy or competence in grammar. Instead, giving the opportunities to students to use as much English as they can in real life contexts should be critically considered. This was also another reason for introducing the English Carnival project due to the lack of communication among the students. Students need extra communication skills for them to survive in a knowledge-based and highly technological society. In the future, they will be required to solve highly complex problems which make it mandatory for them to have both fundamental skills and digital-age skills. These extra skills are also required so that the young people will succeed in the work environment. High-performance workplace requires workers to have solid foundation in basic literacy and computational skills as well as thinking skills. It is hoped that the projects will benefit them in terms of building their self-esteem and also developing their critical and creative thinking.

### **Literature Review**

PBL functions as a bridge between using English in class and using English in real life outside class (Fried-Booth, 1997). It does this by placing learners in situations that require authentic use of language to communicate (e.g., being part of a team, participating in meetings or interviewing others). For over 100 years, educators such as John Dewey have reported on the benefits of experiential, hands-on and student-directed learning. Most lecturers, knowing the value of engaging, challenging projects for students, have planned field trips, laboratory

investigations and interdisciplinary activities that enrich and extend the curriculum.

PBL is widely recognized as an effective methodology. Its advantages are well-documented: students are known to develop greater communicative, thinking and problem-solving skills with project-based learning than with regular, traditional lecture-based education. It is evident that the use of PBL in the science disciplines has been successful in producing learners who are responsible for their own learning, and equipping them with the relevant generic skills for life outside the classroom (Wood, 2003; Oliver & McLoughlin, 2001). This method of learning can be adopted by the English language classrooms. PBL also excels in making the relationship between various concepts within a subject more clear, and has been successfully used in interdisciplinary courses. When learners work in pairs or in teams, they need skills to plan, organize, negotiate, make their points, and arrive at a consensus about issues such as what tasks to perform, who will be responsible for each task, and how information will be researched and presented. It only makes sense that the more interesting the project given to the students to work on, the more likely the students will complete their tasks. Unlike PBL, an average lecture-based classroom and in-class activities do not require these students to meet people, arrange their time and plan thoroughly as everything is made ready for them.

The need for this new learning and teaching approach is important as it can motivate them to think creatively and critically and at the same time expose them to real word of communication. In general, students need activities that can develop their connections with others, give them some degree of decision making, and provide opportunities for originality and self-expression (Anderman & Midgely, 1998; Strong et al., 1995).

PBL is a strategy that promotes life-long habits of learning. To further improve the quality of graduates produced by institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, PBL is being seriously considered. Citing Zaitun and Kasturi Devi (2004), the adoption of PBL in Malaysian Universities is still in its infancy stage. However following its success in the Medical and Dental Faculties at Universiti Malaya, other local universities are beginning to use PBL. Universiti Putra Malaysia has already started using PBL in their Medical degree programmes, and other public universities like the National University and the National Technical University are considering its adoption. PBL is gradually being introduced to academics in the country through workshops. UniKL-MFI for example, has included PBL as one of its pedagogical courses for new lecturers. The skills could only be required through practice with content as the context for learning. With Project-

based Learning, students use collaborative and co-operative approaches to generate knowledge and this is the key to facilitate meaningful and real-life learning.

A study by Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) in 2006 indicated that the skills acquired through Project Based Learning are:

1. Problem-solving
2. Communication
3. Collaboration
4. Planning
5. Personal skills
6. Social skills
7. Knowledge acquisition skills
8. Thinking skills
9. Scientific skills
10. Generic skills
11. Environmental skills
12. Creative skills
13. Information technology skills

In another study conducted in 1992 by the Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt (1992), the researchers claimed that the study demonstrated significant experience produced by PBL. The researchers termed PBL as "anchored instruction", and provided evidence that this type of instruction had a significant impact on students' problem-solving skills, metacognitive strategies, and attitudes towards learning. Moreover, a report by Boaler (1997) mentioned that the comparison to the gains made by untreated control students, experience with a project approach to mathematics was associated with a reduction in anxiety toward mathematics, greater willingness to see mathematics as relevant to everyday life, and increased willingness to approach mathematical challenges with a positive attitude.

Tretten and Zachariou (1995) stated that the teachers' self-reports showed that experience with PBL activities had a variety of positive benefits for students including attitudes towards learning, work habits, problem-solving capabilities, and self esteem. One of the interviewees claimed that "students, working both individually and cooperatively, feel empowered when they use effective work habits and apply critical thinking to solve problems by finding or creating solutions in relevant projects. In this productive work, students learn and/or strengthen their work habits, their critical thinking skills, and their productivity. Throughout this process, students are learning new knowledge, skills and positive attitudes." (p.8)

Needless to say, numerous studies have proved that PBL is an approach that is relevant to the present teaching style. Not only it will involve students directly, it will also give the opportunity for the students to explore new skills and boundaries. With PBL, they are not confined in the classroom only. They have the reasons to meet real people with real problems and offer real solutions.

Furthermore, education experts from developed countries such as Europe are paying a special attention to creating more language-friendly environments in European higher education institutions. The strategic goals for the European Union were set out at the Lisbon European Council on 23 and 24 March 2000, and opening education and training to the world being one of them. This goal involves building the European education and training area through mobility and foreign language teaching on the one hand, and strengthening the links with the world of work, research and civil society as a whole on the other. In other words, multidisciplinary approach is intended to satisfy the demand for a broad education that will meet the needs of modern Europe of knowledge. This is where PBL plays its part and role.

### **Methodology**

A careful study was conducted to identify the processes involved when applying the project-based learning approach in language classrooms. During this study, the researchers observed closely the project produced by the selected group of students. The students were monitored to observe their interactions to see (1) whether they worked alone or in groups to come up with solutions to the problem, (2) their patterns of working in teams when they tried to identify a problem, and finally (3) how they applied English to real world problems. The students were given 9 weeks to plan and organize English language games for the English Carnival. During these weeks, students held group meetings and consultations with the lecturers, and did their own research to make sure that their plan would run smoothly. For every meeting and consultation, and before proceeding to their plans, they must consult the lecturers for approval to avoid any blunder that might happen during the events. They started by designing the flow of the language game and the layout of the booth, identifying each component of the event including the equipment, items, prizes and also the tasks of each group member.

### **English Carnival**

The English Carnival started off as the English Week. It started in 2006, and during this time, the lecturers were the ones who planned, scheduled, monitored, and later on evaluated the event. As time passed by, the lecturers began to slowly

gave group assignments to their students to organize small scale events such as movie shows, singing competitions and games for in-class activities only. After a year, in 2007, the lecturers agreed to design an assessment to focus on the students' ability to plan and conduct their own events. The English Carnival was then introduced where students created and organised their own language games. Furthermore, most lecturers agreed that the limited proficiency ESL learners lacked confidence and were in need of such confidence-boosting activities.

### ***Phase 1- Team selection and brainstorming***

This activity was done in the second week of the semester. After briefing the students a week earlier, they chose their own group members and they worked together for nine weeks. The rationale of giving them the freedom was because they knew the knowledge, skill, and ability their colleagues possessed about how to function in a team. By choosing their group members, the students also had the liberty to discuss and communicate with the group members. After the selection process, they proceeded by choosing the team leader and the team secretary. The team leader was responsible for the whole group and also the game they planned, while the secretary was in-charge of the group's documentations. The other group members took up responsibilities such as promotion, registration, bursary and also project management. Then they started the brainstorming session. This session was to encourage creative thinking and generate enthusiasm and also to build on the ideas of others. The team members discussed the overall project among themselves, sharing their knowledge about the topic and suggesting possible team language games. During these periods, students were constantly reminded to use English language and to always refered to their lecturers when they faced any problem in the discussion. By the end of the three-hour period, students were asked to provide the three best language games. If they were unable to decide, they would then be given the whole week to continue their discussion and did further research to increase their knowledge about the potential components of the project. Although they were not in class, they were required to interact with their lecturers. Throughout the week, the lecturer provided feedback to the proposed team project, team organization, assignment of individual and group responsibilities. It was a very important process as giving quality feedback is a key factor in improving achievement in language learning. As claimed by Hattie (2002), the only difference the school can do to make students learn is by giving them feedback. Students used the teacher feedback to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of their performances, so that aspects associated with success or high quality could be recognized and reinforced, and unsatisfactory aspects modified or improved (Sadler, 1989).

### ***Phase 2- Project planning***

Since a project could be viewed as a problem to be solved or a task to be accomplished, the students were given 9 weeks to plan, and later on to execute the plan. In order to achieve their goal, careful thinking and planning at the beginning was therefore essential. Lecturers also played an important role during the planning stage as they monitored the students' work and progress. These students were also strictly supervised by their lecturers to ensure that they were always on the right track. Teachers were encouraged to help learners identify skills that facilitated their learning. Students were asked to write down the planning process such as how they estimated their time or scheduling their project, and also how they worked with other students.

By the third week, they should already know or at least had an idea the games they would organize for the English Carnival. To determine this, students consulted their class teachers on the aspects of the language game, the role of each committee members, the questions, and the game flow. For the couple of weeks, they had 2-3 pre-meetings with their group members, and again closely monitored by the class lecturers to decide how the game was to be conducted. During the pre-meetings, the selected team leader and secretary decided on the agenda of their formal meeting, and they came up with a memo to call their members for a meeting. Before the formal meeting was conducted, students attended a 3-hour class on business correspondences such as writing memoranda, formal letters and meeting minutes. Lecturers enlightened the students with other topics such as the importance of group meetings and how to handle them. Students need to know about the importance of meetings as this is a very important element of project planning. In Week 5, students had to attend a group meeting monitored and assessed by the language lecturer. In this formal meeting, students were graded based on their meeting skills that covered language proficiency and the effectiveness of the meeting. After the formal meeting, they must organize small, informal meetings among themselves to discuss further about their plans. They were fully responsible for everything including planning, creating or improvising the language game, buying prizes, setting up the game booth, monitoring participants' registration, promoting their game and also implementing the game as agreed in their group meeting and discussions. During the carnival, the students handled the game on their own, but they were closely observed and again assessed by the language lecturer.

Students were allowed to adapt from any existing language games, but they must improvise the methods and questions to suit the language elements they learned in previous English subjects such as dictionary skill, vocabulary, grammar, idioms, spelling, pronunciation and general knowledge. The main objectives of the language game were for students to have fun and at the same time learned

and applied the language elements. What interested the lecturers was the fact that they were able to come out with creative and catchy names for their games and also interesting methods of playing the game.

Table 1: Language Games planned by the students

Smash My Word	Word Power
Literati	Let Him Talk
The Busy Buzzer	Can I Help You?
Vocab Vocal	Spell It Out
Mission Possible	Word Hunter
Pardon Please	Catch the Bugs
It's The Phrase	How Do You Spell...
Is The Treasure Here?	Sizzling Dart

The next step was for them to prepare a set of questions related to language elements mentioned above. The students were allowed to refer to any reference books and websites to get ideas when in formulating the questions. Their lecturer would check the language use, spelling, format and suitability of the questions to the time given to them (3 hours) to complete all the games at the English Carnival. Some examples of the questions are:

Table 2: Sample questions for the language games

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The superlative adjective of the word '<i>beautiful</i>'</li> <li>2. Past tense of the word '<i>put</i>'</li> <li>3. Spell the word '<i>acknowledgement</i>'</li> <li>4. Fill in the blank – '<i>I _____ be reading the book tomorrow</i>'</li> <li>5. Choose the correct answer.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Ali and Ahmad _____ to the market together                   <table style="margin-left: 40px;"> <tbody> <tr> <td><i>a. went</i></td> <td><i>c. gone</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>b. go</i></td> <td><i>d. goes</i></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> </li> </ol> </li> <li>6. Who hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2006?</li> <li>7. "A blessing in disguise" means?</li> <li>8. Where will you find the word "Scrooge" in the dictionary?</li> <li>9. What does the abbreviation NATO stand for?</li> </ol>	<i>a. went</i>	<i>c. gone</i>	<i>b. go</i>	<i>d. goes</i>
<i>a. went</i>	<i>c. gone</i>			
<i>b. go</i>	<i>d. goes</i>			

The questions were designed to cater to the knowledge and proficiency of all the students in UniKL MFI. As for the preparation before the implementation of the language games, the groups were given a sum of money to help them set up the language games, for example, to buy cardboard and coloured papers, and prizes or souvenirs for participants. The amount they received was usually based on the

budget approved by the institution usually around RM50-150 per group. They had to use their own money first and later claimed it from the organizer (language lecturers) by providing all the receipts as evidence of purchase for their project. This was another important aspect of the project as it trained them to budget and organize their game according to the total amount given to them.

### ***Phase 3- Project implementation***

Since some tasks might involve a substantial amount of research by individual team members, whole-team meetings in which the findings and progress were shared were an important part of the project. The team continually refined the project's definition and goals. They revised all the aspects of the event, not just only the language game, but also the booth layout, prizes and souvenirs, promotion and registration. The revisions required feedback from the lecturers, and as the event drew closer, more monitoring was needed. Throughout the refining process, students shared what they learned from the others. They worked as a team to solve problems during the implementation process. The team started a day earlier to refine their design and decorate their booth according to their plan. On the event day, they were required to be in the hall early to polish the final product. They were allowed to continue and improve the final stage of their project before the time. Participants started to enter the hall as early as 12 noon, and this was the time they executed whatever they had planned in their previous in-class meetings. During the event, they had to think quickly and critically to resolve any problems they faced and decided on the best resolution on any matters that might arise on the day of the Carnival. The event ran for 4 hours, and even if the booths ran out of souvenirs for participants, their language games continued until 4pm.

### **Conclusion: Future of PBL in UniKL-MFI**

Learning language through projects is an active and engaged way of learning as it inspires students to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they study. Research also indicates that students are more likely to retain the knowledge gained through this hands-on approach far more readily than through traditional textbook-centered learning. In addition, students develop confidence and self-direction as they move through both team-based and independent work.

In the process of completing their projects, students are also exposed to organizational and research skills, develop better communication with peers and adults, and often work within their community while seeing the positive effects of their work. They quickly see how academic work can connect to real-life issues and may even be inspired to pursue a career or engage in the project they developed.

After implementing the project, students have shown tremendous positive attitude towards their learning processes. In terms of the motivation to use English Language, students began showing their interest in the learning process when they get the chance to organize a game for the English Carnival. It was shown clearly that during the brainstorming session, students were able to propose more than 2 language games. The best part was that the games they proposed were original. Positive attitudes were also shown during the meeting sessions. Students were able to justify clearly of their functions in the team and also understood their responsibility as members of the group. For example, students came up with their own design of the banners, posters, pamphlets and also flyers to promote their games. The eagerness to participate was also proven when they produced the proposal and the end product i.e. the language game.

Adopting a project-learning approach in the language classroom can rejuvenate the learning environment, energize the curriculum with real-world relevance and spark students' desire to explore, investigate, and understand their world. Using PBL in language classrooms and introducing the English Carnival are alternative and more interesting methods than the traditional language class. PBL helps make learning relevant and useful to students by establishing connections to life outside the classroom, addressing larger concerns, and developing usable skills. These skills are extremely essential and required by the industries as students have the opportunity to practice and develop their ability to function in complex thinking environments that reflect the type of work environments they will encounter in their future.

PBL has a bright future in language teaching and learning especially in UniKL-MFI. The use of PBL modules enables students to plan their project easily, work collaboratively with peers with minimal supervision or lecturers and successfully complete their project on time. This is the kind of culture that language lecturers hope to inculcate in their teaching process. The approach has proven itself in building students' self-confidence and motivation in learning the language. Students' eagerness is clearly shown when they come to consult the lecturers regularly, asking for opinions and approvals in English, and they successfully achieve it. They are more confident speaking in English, and are friendlier towards the language. For language lecturers, nothing is more satisfying than having a group of students finding fun in learning English.

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