Original Paper

Project Based Learning for Globalisation during the Pandemic in One Junior High School: A Case Study

Kate J. M. Sato[1*]

[1] Center of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Hokkaido University of Science, Sapporo, Japan

[*] E-mail: sato-ka@hus.ac.jp

Abstract

In 2002, MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan) announced an action plan for the improvement of English language education with the aim of developing "Japanese who can use English" (Hashimoto, 2009). Furthermore, with globalisation impacting our classrooms "young people need to have the ability to communicate exchange, criticise, and present information and ideas" (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). However, teachers need to follow prescribed curricular. Therefore, teachers in Japan need to take action to offer opportunities for their students to use English as a tool for communication. This paper details a case study of a project-based communication task for 8 junior high school students ranging from 1st to 3rd grades, in one school. The project was adapted from an out-of-class oral research project to an in-class collaborative written communication project in response to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While goals of the project were achieved, results indicate that students were not aware of what they were learning and additionally their motivation declined. This paper will be of interest to teachers who desire to equip students with global skills through project-based learning in junior high schools.

Keywords

younger learner, EFL, project-based learning, globalisation, pandemic

1. Introduction

The English teaching classroom in Japan has been undergoing changes in recent years and there are several factors that influence the context junior high school teachers find themselves in today. MEXT has introduced goals aligned to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) in the English curriculum (Fennelly, 2016). Along with this is an increased effort to align textbooks for junior high school English studies with Can-do descriptors, although these descriptors do not clearly

align with the CEFR (Sato & Oki, 2020). In addition, the age at which English education now starts in state schools in Japan has been lowered to enable formal English education to start from the third year of primary school (Sato et al., 2019).

As researcher/teacher in this study I was invited to "do something" with the junior high school students in a small, rural school located near a city and approximately twenty minutes from an international airport. The school is in the countryside in northern Japan, with a total of only 8 students in the three years of the junior high school which is housed in the same building as the primary school. The atmosphere is relaxed and due to the small student body, the curriculum is usually covered well ahead of time thus leaving potential for teachers to explore alternative activities with the students. After exploring ideas in March 2020, the Local English Teacher (LET) and I decided on a one-year project.

There were 7 students who participated in the project in the classroom, and one that worked on their own. There were two students who were in the third grade, one second-year student, and the rest were in the first year of junior high school. The sessions took place in one of the junior high school classrooms and the school's computer room. The computer room has computers connected to LAN cables which facilitates researching on the Internet. Also, the students learn how to use software such as PowerPoint and Word, and the use of these skills is evident at the school festival when students give presentations, sometimes even in English. We used the computer room and Internet as needed.

"As globalization increases in the 21st century, children in Japan are expected to be motivated to use English, to communicate and work collaboratively with people from different cultural backgrounds as well as to deepen their understanding of people from different countries" (Nishida, 2013, p. 93). However, what exactly is globalisation? How does it influence the classroom, and what should teachers be aware of?

Three forces that have driven globalisation are: the global economy, climate change, and migration which has resulted in a more linguistically diverse labour force (Mansilla et al., 2013). However, there is now a shift away by greater forces; those of common shared values and globotics (Baldwin, 2018). Both the pre- and post-shift forces require an understanding and mutual respect of one another's cultures. In other words, as the framework for global competence stipulates, "globally competent individuals can examine and explain their own worldviews and cultural traditions, recognizing how these influence their choices and interactions in everyday life" (Mansilla et al., 2013, p. 5). Also, Hadley states, "becoming aware of our own biases and helping students to recognize theirs are thus important first steps in teaching for cultural understanding in our classrooms" (2001, p. 354 as cited in Catana, 2014).

It is generally accepted that students attain competency for real-world communication when language learning is conducted in meaningful contexts with activities connected to learner's lives (Brown, 2007; Castañeda, 2013; Hadley, 2001 as cited in Ono, 2018). Therefore, for any teacher in the classroom in Japan wishing to follow the direction of MEXT, from the literature, it is evident the first step to guiding students is an awareness of these shifts towards values and AI; thus, understanding one's own values is

2

fundamental. Giving students the space to think about what likes they have and what is important to them, and the place to voice that opinion is the foundation for the project outlined in this paper which I describe next.

Bell defines Project-Based Learning (PBL) as "an innovative approach to learning that teaches a multitude of strategies critical for success in the twenty-first century" (2010, p. 39). It is attractive to implement in the classroom for several reasons: it increases learner motivation, it opens avenues for agency, it offers student-lead inquiry, it improves reading skills, and a deeper understanding of a topic, furthermore, it can include real-world problems (ibid).

Nevertheless, with set curricula in English teaching in primary and junior high schools in Japan, while PBL may appear attractive, it may not be straightforward to implement. Teachers may not have a full understanding of PBL or how to implement a project, nor may they have the support of the institutions in which they teach. Another possible hindrance to PBL is the students. The Japanese culture and classroom management is based on Confucian teachings where those in authority are respected (Sato & Sakabe, 2018). Being used to a teacher-centred learning environment, students may feel uncomfortable being in an environment that is student lead. Also, they may not be aware of the skills they are attaining and may not see the value of the project unless there are explicit explanations.

Dispersing the results of their project is another factor that needs consideration. In the project outlined here, the students' final presentation of their project was a PowerPoint presentation. Given that "some less motivated EFL learners hesitate to use English for authentic communication due to foreign language anxiety" (Ono, 2018), sharing findings through a presentation may not be motivational to the students. Sheets and Tillson (2007) also point out that some research in the US elucidated giving oral presentations may elicit negative emotions. One possible alternative would be to talk about the project in the form of a story. Kasami (2018) found that students were more motivated for learning with digital storytelling, compared to traditional story telling. Therefore, there are external pressures and potential hindrances to implementing PBL in the English classroom in junior high school in Japan.

2. Method

2.1 The Initial Plan

Both the LET and I agreed we wanted to give the students an opportunity to use English in an authentic situation. As far as possible we wanted the students to have agency. Earlier in 2019 one of the junior high school students had implemented an idea I had given her for her summer holiday project *(jiyuu kenkyu)* and visited the airport where she interviewed two foreigners visiting the area. Based on the success of this project, we decided to focus on inbound tourism, and let the students collect data in the same way. However, this time, the students would work in groups to prepare: deciding the topics for interviews and planning the questions. Then they were to go and collect data after which they were to analyse it and give a presentation about the project. Thus, the procedure was: prepare, investigate, analyse, assess, and report. With the project planned, informed consent was given by the parents,

3

teacher and head teacher of the school. By April 2020 we were ready to start. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic the project was initially postponed, and by June it was reformulated as shown in Table 1 below.

2.2 The Revised Plan

By June 2020 different ideas had been discussed and the plan was realigned. Keeping with the theme of inbound tourism, drawing on the students' knowledge of the area, they were to think, discuss and decide what places they would recommend visiting in the area. The goal was to create a pamphlet that could be put in local hotels.

The students were initially divided into two groups for brainstorming. The first step was to decide the places to introduce and then decide what information would be useful for visitors to have before visiting the places. Letting the students chose the places opens opportunity for students to show knowledge about their own area, what they like, and potentially reflect on their own culture. Students providing the information creates an avenue for the use of linguistic elements. Later, a presentation was added to conclude the project. Once the students had decided the place they wanted to introduce, there were two places more than one student had chosen. For these two locations the students worked together to introduce these places, while the other students stayed with their original, but now smaller groups.

After the framework was set, the students researched their chosen places online using the computers in the computer room. They found and wrote up all the information in English. Photos without copyright, or that had been taken by one of the students or teachers, would be used. The LET contacted each place chosen to inform them of the project, and to ask for permission to photograph the locations. After making drafts of the information, students brought them for checking after which the students revised their work. Table 1, below, outlines the flow of the project over the academic year which commenced in April 2020.

Table 1. The Project Schedule

Session	Date yy/mm/dd	Lesson Aim	Class Activities	Tools	Project Timeline
1	2020/04/10	Project Introduction	Discuss project ideas	Paper, pencils, blackboard	Project Orientation
2	2020/06/05	Cancelled			
3	2020/07/17	Decide: 1. Places 2. Groups: who writes about	Brainstorming, discussions	Paper, pencils, blackboard	Brainstorming, discussing locations,

		which place			
4	2020/09/04	Gather information, write about the place chosen	Researching, finding information, writing, checking language, reading aloud	Computers, Internet, Word documents	Deciding locations, researching information.
5	2020/09/18	Complete researching contents (review of the points to cover), and writing	Writing contents, checking language, reading aloud practice.	Internet, Word documents, USB, digital whiteboard, my computer and cables	Writing.
6	2020/10/02	Polishing drafts, collecting photos	Searching the Internet, writing contents, checking language.	Internet, Word documents, USB, digital whiteboard, PC and cables	Pamphlet: 1st draft
7	2020/11/13	Finish the pamphlet draft for the printer. Discuss giving presentations.	Discussions: 1. changes to drafts Discuss lay out & check photos, 2. number of pamphlets to print, and where to distribute, 3. checking with the locations about photos, and publicity, 3. making a video? Reading practice.	Computers (Word, PowerPoint), USB, whiteboard, PC and cables.	Pamphlet 2nd draft
8	2020/12/4	Pamphlet: final	Writing, checking,	Computers,	1st pamphlet

		check. Reading reading practice		Internet, draft pamphlet.	galley proof check.
9	2020/01/22	Reading practice, with focus on pronunciation. Making PowerPoints	Reading, discussions, making PowerPoints	Computers (Word, PowerPoint)	Pamphlet printed. Decisions: number of pamphlets, DVDs, and DVD cover.
10	2021/02/12	Presentation: preparation	checking slides, practice	PowerPoint	Check the DVD cover & contents
11	2021/03/08	Presentation	Last practice DVD recording	PowerPoint	DVD recording Project completion.

2.3 Data Collection and Preparation

Data was collected throughout the project in the form of lesson plans, notes and photographs from each visit, and email correspondence with the LET. After the project was complete and the following academic year had started, two of the students who had been in the third grade had graduated. Thus, feedback was collected from remaining students. I asked what they had done with the pamphlets and whether they had watched the DVD at home with their families. Six months later, the LET and I asked the students to reflect on the project the previous academic year and write a few lines about the experience. Thus, the data analysed was from what I gathered during and after the project, as well as the feedback from the students. As the data was prepared for analysis all the students were given pseudonyms for ethical reasons.

3. Results

The outcomes are viewed from the following perspectives, mine as co-teacher/researcher based on the data as mentioned above along with the tangible products (the pamphlet and DVD), and those of the students. The tangible materials are evidence of the students' work during the project and their accomplishments. They evidence the language and information the students used and found during the project. My perspective is given first, followed by that of the students.

During the first session of the project the students worked happily showing excitement at going to the airport to interview visitors from overseas. The excitement continued when the project changed to making a pamphlet. In November 2020, when it was evident distributing the pamphlets through local hotels would not be possible, motivation started to wane. However, once the pamphlet was printed and the students could see the result of their efforts interest momentarily rose, but then declined. At the

6

time of writing, it is now evident that after the project was complete and during the second year of the pandemic motivation is impacting the pace of studying the curriculum as the students are struggling to keep up. Compared to the fact they are usually ahead in the curriculum this lag is significant.

After the project was over, and the new academic year had begun the remaining students spent a few minutes, with me and the LET, sharing about the project detailed here. In response to being asked if they had watched the DVD at home with their family, only one student indicated they had. One student had given out pamphlets to friends, and some students had given them to family members. However, some students had not given any out to anyone. In looking ahead to start another project the students clearly expressed not wanting to do another presentation.

The written feedback from the students was varied. They were invited to comment on areas Bell (2010) stipulates are evident in PBL: teamwork, knowledge gained, communication skills, problems/solutions encountered, creativity, motivation, planning/organisation, and other comments were invited. The main points are shown in Table 2, below.

For knowledge all the students said they did not gain any knowledge from the study, and some said they knew all the information before the project. Three students mentioned planning: one said there was no planning, one said it was normal, and the third said it was necessary when using the Internet.

Table 2. Feedback from the Students

Pseudonym	Gender	Academic Year	Team-work	Motivation	Linguistic development
Naoki	**M**	1	Yes	Not much	-
Hiro	**M**	1	No	Did not increase at all	Reading for the presentation
Miki	**F**	1	-	I had some motivation	My reading skill increased a little
Rika	**F**	1	Good	The place I was introducing was not helpful so I did not have much motivation	I learned a few new words
Ami	**F**	1	Normal	It was normal	I don't remember
Yuta	**M**	2	Normal	Decreased due to Corona	I was able to learn some words as I came across them.

4. Discussion

Project-based learning can open ways for students to have agency, be creative, and improve in areas such as teamwork, communication and organisational skills (Bell, 2010). In a small school where the lines between academic years are blurred, and teamwork is a part of regular school, it may be harder for students to be aware of improvement in such areas. The feedback from the students indicates that awareness of growth in some areas is lacking as detailed below.

Language: All the students practiced their presentations 1:1 with me, Hiro and Miki indicated improved reading skills while Yuta and Miki commented on learning new words during the process of the project. Initially, when the project was being discussed, and deciding what information to add into the pamphlet, it was evident that there were some vocabulary students were unfamiliar with; one example of this was how to give directions. Possibly, introducing new language in a natural way, without raising awareness it is possible some students were not conscious of their learning. If this is the case, it would also explain why two students lacked awareness about acquiring new language and vocabulary.

Knowledge: The students had to look up information on the Internet to use in the project, evidencing that the students did not have all the knowledge before the project, contrary to what they stated. Searching for facts about the place they chose to introduce increased their knowledge about times, locations and prices. When finding out about places overseas they will be able to draw on this knowledge and compare. Hopefully, this will eventually deepen their understanding of Japanese culture, and lead to greater cultural understanding (Hadley, 2001) in the future. In addition, this project could be a starting point for a comparison for places to visit in another country.

Planning: Although three students mentioned planning, there were three different responses to planning in the feedback. Again, in a school where the student numbers are small, perhaps the students are used to planning, so any that took place was not out of the ordinary. Furthermore, it is possible that the younger students were doing less planning while older students were doing more, and the younger students followed the planning and leadership of the older students.

Teamwork: In the area of teamwork comments were mixed. Of the six students Miki did not comment on teamwork, while Hiro wrote there was no teamwork. However, the remaining four students indicated there was teamwork, with Rika saying it was good. Variations in the responses are partially due to the grouping and possibly due to personal interpretations of what teamwork is. Certainly, the depth of teamwork in this project was not as integrated as it would have been if students had been in smaller groups with each group focusing on one location.

Over the course of the pandemic to the time of writing this paper, in general students' motivation has been dwindling, to the extent that the pace of learning in other academic studies has declined. In the feedback, Yuta, a second-year student, voiced that the pandemic was having a negative influence on motivation, and it is feasible this was the case for other students too, but being younger were less aware.

No student expressed a desire to make another presentation. When giving the presentations the audience was limited to teachers in the school, and themselves, which possibly affected the students. Whether the lack of interest in watching their presentation was related to the setting in which the presentations were given was also unclear. Nevertheless, this outcome aligns with the literature from Sheets and Tillson (2007) that oral presentations can elicit negative feelings. This coupled with any anxiety to speak in English, as noted in the literature, would explain the students' response. Other ways for students to disseminate their findings may have produced different outcomes. Making a poster about the project to share with others is another practical avenue. Sharing through digital stories is another (Kasami, 2018), however in this project time constraints needed to be considered.

5. Conclusion

English education in Japan is undergoing change. MEXT has expressed a need to raise up global citizens through communicating and working collaboratively with people in other countries. Project-based learning is an attractive way to do this as it can develop students in the areas of teamwork, knowledge, communication, problem solving, creativity, motivation, and planning and organisation, but logistical and practical hindrances may reduce the potential to implement it.

This is a small case study and therefore generalisations cannot be made. However, it might be of interest to teachers in similar situations. The school in this study had 8 students in the junior high school, which was attached to a primary school. It is located on the outskirts of a large city in northern Japan. Due to the small student numbers, progress through the curriculum is usually ahead of schedule, opening ways for the students to do activities around the curriculum.

After being invited to do a project with the students a plan based on inbound tourism was drawn up. Ethical procedures were followed, and consent given. Data was collected in the form of notes, lesson plans, emails with the LET, and photos at each visit throughout the year. Initially, the students were to go to the nearest airport and collect data through interviews with willing visitors from overseas to the area. By June 2020 this plan changed due to the pandemic to giving information to tourists about local places of interest in the form of a pamphlet.

While the students were working on the project, they had to think about what information should be included. Students had to be creative, and linguistic features arose. From a teacher's perspective seeing the students learn new language in a practical and authentic setting, as well as seeing the students stimulated to seek new knowledge was refreshing.

Motivation was evident but did not endure throughout the academic year. The students were able to complete the project with tangible outcomes; a professionally printed colour pamphlet and a professionally recorded presentation were produced. Nevertheless, feedback from the students revealed the students did not enjoy giving the presentation. While the pamphlet could not be distributed in local hotels as originally planned due to the pandemic, some students gave them to family or friends, while others did not give them out.

9

Although the project was completed, the impact of pandemic is undeniable as evidenced in the responses by the students. Also, even though external forces could not be controlled, a different activity to the recorded presentation may have helped bring a more positive closure the project. In conducting PBL in the classroom for younger learners careful thought to the dissemination of the project is recommended.

References

Ananiadou, K., & Claro, M. (2009). *21st century skills and competences for new millennium learners in OECD countries*, *41*. OECD.

Baldwin, R. (2018, December 22). If this is Globalization 4.0, what were the other three? In *World Economic Forum*. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/12/if-this-is-globalization-4-0-what-were-the-other-three/

Bell, S. (2010). Project-based learning for the 21st century: Skills for the future. *The clearing house*, *83*(2), 39-43. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098650903505415

Brown, H. D. (2007). Principles of language learning and teaching fifth edition. In *White Plains*. NY: Pearson Education.

Castañeda, M. E. (2013). I am proud that I did it and it's a piece of me: Digital storytelling in the foreign language classroom. *Calico Journal*, *30*(1), 44-62. https://doi.org/10.11139/cj.30.1.44-62

Catana, S. E. (2014). Teaching cross-cultural communication issues—A way of successfully integrating into the multicultural knowledge society. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *128*, 343-348. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.168

Fennelly, M. G. (2016). The influence of CEFR on English language education in Japan. *Bull Shikoku University Online Repository*, *46*, 109-122.

Hadley, A. O. (2001). *Teaching language in context* (pp. 116-118).

Hashimoto, K. (2009). Cultivating "Japanese who can use English": Problems and contradictions in government policy. *Asian Studies Review*, *33*(1), 21-42. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820802716166

Kasami, N. (2018). Advantages and disadvantages of digital storytelling assignments in EFL education in terms of learning motivation. *Future-proof CALL: Language learning as exploration and encounters–short papers from EUROCALL*, *2018*, 130-136. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.26.825

Mansilla, V. B., Jackson, A., & Jacobs, I. H. (2013). Educating for global competence: Learning redefined for an interconnected world. *Mastering global literacy*, 5-27.

Nishida, R. (2013). 6. A Comprehensive Summary of Empirical Studies of Motivation Among Japanese Elementary School EFL Learners. In *Language learning motivation in Japan* (pp. 93-109). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783090518-008

Ono, Y. (2018). 14. Effects of digital storytelling on Japanese EFL learners: Focus on anxiety and PBL skills. In *New Perspectives on the Development of Communicative and Related Competence in Foreign Language Education* (pp. 339-362). De Gruyter Mouton. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501505034-014

Sato, K., Kawashima, K., Tanaka, M., & Yamaoto, Y. (2019). A preliminary investigation into Elementary School English Education. *Bulletin of Hokkaido University*, *47*, 1-9.

Sato, K., & Oki, N. (2020, October 23-25). To what extent are the "Can Do" descriptors in "Sunshine" aligned to the CEFR through the GSE? [Conference session] Symposium & Workshop: The praxis of teaching, learning, and assessment with CEFR and CLIL, Online. Retrieved from https://cefrjapan.net/images/PDF/Newsletter/CEFR_CLIL_symposium_Oct2020.pdf

Sato, K., & Sakabe, T. (2018). To what extent is the Course Experience Questionnaire applicable to Japanese Education? In *Proceedings of International Academic Conferences* (No. 7008494). International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences. https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2018.042.043

Sheets, B. H., & Tillson, L. (2007). Strategies to Improve Students' Presentation Skills.