

# An Ethnographic Exploration of Adopting Project-Based Learning in Teaching English for Academic Purposes

**Yulong Li**

([lyulong@eduhk.hk](mailto:lyulong@eduhk.hk))

The Education University of Hong Kong, PR China

**Lixun Wang**

([lixun@eduhk.hk](mailto:lixun@eduhk.hk))

The Education University of Hong Kong, PR China

---

## Abstract

Several university English teachers in Shanghai, China, have recently designed an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course that adopts the project-based learning (PBL) approach. Although there have been many studies about the adoption of PBL in EFL/ESL teaching, the integration of PBL into EAP teaching is relatively less reported, especially in the Chinese context. To fill this research gap, the present study has adopted an ethnographic approach to investigate the forms, effects, and challenges of integrating PBL into EAP teaching in the Chinese context. In particular, this paper will describe how the PBL pedagogy is integrated with the EAP course, how it helps to improve the students' academic English, how it facilitates the students' disciplinary knowledge learning and disciplinary identity formation, how it stimulates the students' autonomy, and how it is instructive to their interpersonal ability and teamwork. It is hoped that the PBL EAP course developed by the EAP teachers will serve as a useful reference to English teachers around the world who wish to adopt a similar approach. There are, however, several challenges concerning the EAP teachers' limited disciplinary knowledge and the restricted resources for conducting student-led projects, which need to be addressed carefully to ensure the success of the PBL EAP course.

---

## 1 Introduction

Since 2013, many university English-language teachers of non-English major undergraduate students in Shanghai have experienced a pedagogical transition from teaching English for General Purposes (EGP) to teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Gao & Bartlett, 2014; Cheng, 2016). This change was due to the replacement of the original EGP curriculum for non-English major university students in China, because it did not satisfy the students' increasing need for language-training for further academic study (Cai, 2017). The Shanghai local government education department issued a guideline (the Framework of Reference for EFL Teaching at Tertiary Level) which stipulated that instead of studying an EGP course, most newly enrolled non-English major students in universities who have a relatively high level of English proficiency should study an EAP course in their first year (Cai, 2017). However, this guideline did not give instructions on how teachers should teach EAP (Li & Wang, 2018). Consequently, two-thirds of Shanghai's universities (Wang, 2018) encouraged their English-language teachers to develop EAP courses for their students. Referring to this guideline, the English-language teachers in University A (UA) designed a two-year EAP course to address their

students' needs by adopting a project-based learning (PBL) approach. The first author of this paper (henceforth referred to as the fieldwork author) conducted an eight-month-long ethnographic study in UA, while the second author served as an advisor throughout the research process.

## 2 Research context

UA belongs to the top 10% of the second-tier universities in China. Based in Shanghai, UA specialises in marketing, finance, management, economics, and foreign language studies. This university has an international outlook, and it welcomes overseas students. UA is very popular among Chinese students, particularly those from Shanghai. Furthermore, UA has adopted English-Chinese bilingual education in most of its business major programmes and the textbooks adopted are all in English. In some joint programmes, UA has cooperated with a UK university. English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is predominantly adopted at UA. At the same time, the students at UA are given the opportunity to study abroad. All of these factors have contributed to the possibility of running EAP courses in UA.

The non-English major students in UA must study compulsory EGP courses in their first two academic years. As part of its procedure to replace the EGP with an EAP programme, UA specially arranged a test (using a format similar to an IELTS writing exam) to select newly enrolled students with a higher level of English proficiency (i.e. those who attained a score of 80 or above out of 100 in the test) to study an EAP course that adopted a PBL approach. The selected students studied EAP instead of EGP as their compulsory English course in the first two years. Students from the same or similar majors were grouped in the same EAP class, and each class had 45–50 students. When this study started, the first group of EAP students were in their second year of study (the first PBL EAP course commenced in 2014).

The content of the EAP course in UA was primarily based on the Key Concepts 1 & 2 book series, which is published by Heinle Cengage Learning. UA required its first-year students to finish studying “Key Concepts 1: Reading and Writing across the Disciplines” and “Key Concepts 1: Listening, Note Taking, and Speaking across the Disciplines”. The two books in Key Concepts 1 were streamlined and offered the same topics, such as psychology, international trade and marketing, biology, and philosophy (for further details, see Smith-Palinkas & Crohan-Ford, 2009; Solomon & Shelley, 2006a). These books introduced the students to skills such as how to structure paragraphs, how to write topic and conclusion sentences, how to think critically, how to construct surveys, and how to listen to mini-lectures (Smith-Palinkas & Crohan-Ford, 2009; Solomon & Shelley, 2006a). Similarly, the second-year students used the Key Concepts 2 series (for further details, see Smith-Palinkas & Crohan-Ford, 2010; Solomon & Shelley, 2006b). The teachers also supplied leaflets, journal articles, and additional book chapters to enable their students to learn specific academic writing skills and research methods. Another feature of the curriculum was that PBL was integrated as part of the primary tasks and assessments for students to complete during each academic year (for further details about how PBL was integrated and corroborated with the EAP class, see Section 5.1).

## 3 Literature review

### 3.1 *PBL and EFL/ESL: Perceived opportunities and limitations*

PBL appeared in the field of EFL/ESL in the 1970s (Hedge, 1993; Stoller, 2006). However, PBL was not as successful as had been anticipated, due to reasons such as the wash-back effects of high stake exams on teachers' and the students' choices for teaching and learning (van Lier, 2006), and logistical and cultural challenges (Guo, 2006; Tsiplakides & Fragoulis, 2009). According to Beckett (2005), even until 2005, there were no PhD dissertation level empirical studies of the use of PBL in EFL/ESL, aside from Eyring's (1989) work, and Eyring (1989) found that PBL was time-consuming and unsatisfactory to both the ESL teachers and students in her university in the United States.

In recent years, several studies have reported on the affordance of PBL in improving EFL/ESL learners' study outcomes, thinking, motivation, attitude, content knowledge, and interpersonal skills (Jaleniauskiene, 2016; Kettanun, 2015). For example, Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary recall and retention rate was improved by participating in PBL English classes (Shafaei & Rahim, 2015), Russian EFL learners' competence was enhanced (Malkova & Kiselyova, 2014), and Japanese EFL learners' communication skills were boosted, while their anxiety of speaking English decreased (Farouck, 2016). In Colombia, ninth graders' English-speaking skills, lexical level, study interests, and courage to speak English were facilitated by PBL pedagogy (Vaca Torres & Gomez Rodrigues, 2017). Indonesian EFL students' critical thinking skills were improved after their teachers adopted the PBL pedagogy (Rochmahwati, 2015). In Turkey, the academic results and study attitude of ninth-grade students in a PBL English class improved more than those of their counterparts who were taught through a traditional textbook method (Bas, 2011). Similarly, in Turkey, Bas and Beyhan (2010) found that fifth-grade students' motivation and attitude towards English lessons were enhanced after using PBL. Greek EFL learners in primary schools were taught via PBL, and it was shown that these pupils were more willing to participate in English learning activities and that their English listening and speaking skills improved (Tsiplakides & Fragoulis, 2009).

### **3.2 Project-based learning or problem-based learning in EAP**

Miller, Hafner and Fun (2012, p. 192) argued that "project work within an EAP course is not a new idea." However, PBL has seldom been mentioned in the literature of EAP. In contrast, many studies have focused on the use of problem-based learning (ProblemBL) in EAP teaching (see e.g. Anthony, 2011; Barron, 2002; Bosuwon & Woodrow, 2009; Elizabeth & Zulida, 2012; Knudsen, 2014; Wood & Head, 2004). Wood and Head (2004) designed a ProblemBL EAP course for medical college students. The course developers aimed to make it "as student-centered and motivating as possible" (Wood & Head, 2004, p. 4). They found that this course could not only replace the traditional EAP course, but it also benefited the students by involving them in problem-solving tasks. Knudsen's (2014) ProblemBL EAP programme aimed to turn the students into critical citizens with an internal motivation to learn academic knowledge for the sake of its pursuit. Elizabeth and Zulida's (2012) found that EAP students overcame the initial discomforts in using the new mode of ProblemBL, while their meta-learning and attitude towards English also improved.

To many people, project-based learning is seen as a synonym of problem-based learning (Stoller, 2006; van Lier, 2006) and, indeed, they share more similarities than differences (Krauss & Boss, 2013), because both of them are derived from Deweyan experiential learning (van Lier, 2006). However, despite their similarities, Stoller (2006, p. 20) points out that "project-based learning is a more complex instructional concept than the term suggested." Krauss and Boss (2013, pp. 11–12) add that in ProblemBL, the students deal with problems

in the way that scientists, mathematicians, economists, computer scientists, and other 'pro' do... [while] in projects (PBL), students are likely to read, research, work in teams, consult experts, use a variety of technologies, write, create media, and speak publicly in the process of the learning cycle.

They also emphasised that, in ProblemBL, the students are expected to produce a fixed answer but in PBL, the results that the students achieve may vary (Krauss & Boss, 2013). This is reflected in Wood and Head's (2004) study, who used ProblemBL to teach EAP to medical students. The problem that they used was to let one group of students emulate a diagnosis in a hospital, while the other students were required to identify the disease. Although the medical students were free to use different methods to diagnose the patients, the diseases in the activity were fixed in advance by their teachers. This is an excellent example of the use of ProblemBL in EAP, which is methodologically different from using PBL in EAP.

### **3.3 A potential theoretical concordance between PBL and EAP**

PBL provides student-centered language input and output opportunities, and it also has a functional linguistic view or “a wider sense as a semiotic-ecological endeavour that focuses on the making and using of signs that are multisensory and multimodal” (van Lier, 2006, p. xiv). In other words, PBL provides ESL/EFL learners with a contextualised environment, which enables them to handle issues that happen in their disciplines and from which the learners can use and acquire specific language for project completion. These benefits of PBL have been justified by Beckett (2006) as improving language socialisation and disciplinary expertise. Poonpon (2017) states that PBL could help to strike a balance between language learning and disciplinary expertise knowledge. In their study of EAP, scholars such as Lea and Street (2000), Hyland (2006), and Wingate (2015) have confirmed the importance of disciplinary socialisation in teaching EAP. Students can understand the epistemology and specified discourse by immersing and interacting with an expert in a field or getting involved in the business of a discipline. In this aspect, PBL may be able to contribute to the teaching of EAP. However, there is still limited research justifying the efficacy of using PBL in EAP teaching, particularly in China. To fill this gap and explore how PBL is used and considered in teaching EAP in UA in Shanghai, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How was PBL integrated into the EAP course in UA?
2. In what aspects did PBL promote the teaching and learning of EAP in UA?
3. What were the perceived challenges in the application of the PBL pedagogy in the UA EAP course?

## 4 Research design

### 4.1 Research methodology

The research questions were fine-tuned after the authors had finished the eight-month-long ethnographic fieldwork and analysis of the data. Though some ideas about the research questions emerged when the authors were reading the literature, ethnography does not expect the researchers to bring their predefined hypothesis or preconceptions into the field (O'Reilly, 2008). The authors decided to choose ethnography, because the EAP teachers of UA in Shanghai can be seen as a subcultural group, possessing their practice and goals of teaching. Furthermore, ethnography is a methodology of decoding learned behaviours through the ethnographer's prolonged immersion, observation, and interaction with the target cultural group (Wolcott, 2008). This study is part of a three-year ethnographic project that explores the pedagogical transition that is made by EAP teachers in Shanghai, China, as they move from teaching EGP to teaching EAP.

### 4.2 Sampling

The authors did not use any predesigned criterion of selection in their sample, because ethnography is a naturalistic method that requires observation in the uncontrolled natural environment and also because doing ethnography is like an adventure, where the ethnographers cannot forecast whom they will meet or the results that they may find. Consequently, the researchers instead follow the story (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2008). Their department head introduced the two participant teachers (F and W). The teachers' demographic information is included in Table 1.

The fieldwork author was permitted by F and W to observe their classes and students. Each class was composed of 50 students, and students in the classes taught by F and W came from different years of study (F's students were in the first year, and W's students were in the second year), and from different disciplines (F's students were majoring in marketing and finance, while W's students majoring in business management).

**Table 1. The participant teachers' demographic information**

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	First language	Position	Education	International experience	Length of participation in the study
F	Male	35	Chinese	Mandarin	Lecturer	PhD	Australia	8 months
W	Female	45	Chinese	Mandarin	Professor	MA	UK	8 months

### 4.3 Data collection

During the ethnographic study, the fieldwork author adopted several different methods to collect the data, including ethnographic interviews, unstructured interviews, online interviews, group interviews, unstructured classroom observations, documentary analysis of the teachers' teaching materials, and participant observations. The fieldwork author stayed in the field for two consecutive semesters (in China, there are two semesters in each academic year) and each semester was approximately four months long (the first semester lasted from September to December and the second semester lasted from March to June). The fieldwork author usually visited F's and W's classes twice a week, and each visit lasted two hours.

Ethnographic interviews require ethnographers to start short and seemingly casual conversations with research participants by showing an interest in their behavior (Ogden & Roulon, 2009). Consequently, whenever a new teaching/learning practice from the EAP teachers and students was identified, an explanation was then sought from them. However, these interviews only focused on things that happened in a particular space and time (Maggs-Rapport, 2000). Unstructured interviews were also employed to repeatedly and insightfully enquire about the participant teachers' and students' experiences during their PBL EAP teaching and learning. The unstructured interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 2 hours in length, and they were generally held during weekday lunch breaks.

Online interviews were employed to follow-up the teachers after the authors had left the field. The online interviews were mostly conducted via social media (WeChat), where the participants answered questions posted by the authors. After attaining the teachers' permissions, group interviews were conducted with students from both classes. Six students from F's class and four from W's class were interviewed, as around 12% of the total number of students in each class were invited to the interviews, and there were more students in F's class than in W's class.

Unstructured classroom observations were employed to enrich the author's initial understanding of the PBL EAP classes (Robson, 2011), particularly of how the data were obtained from both the programme setting (such as the way in which the teacher arranged the PBL activities) and the human setting (such as the students' genuine reactions to the EAP lesson) (Morrison, 1993). In order to avoid the obtrusive effect, the fieldwork author asked the teachers to inform the students about the research and get their consent, but did not let the teachers introduce him formally to the students, and during the initial stage of the research, the fieldwork author attended each class with the students on time and sat at the back almost unnoticed by the students. The fieldwork author also asked the teachers to provide some of their course materials. For example, W offered the PowerPoint slides (PPT) that she had used at a local EAP conference, where she served as an invited speaker, and F shared his teaching plans.

In the later stage of the study, the fieldwork author became more familiar with the teachers and students. For example, he was invited by W to participate in tutoring the students' group projects. At this stage, the observations were participant observations. Becoming a tutor symbolised the fieldwork author's emergence as a member of the PBL EAP community and indicated that he was capable of standing in the shoes of the insiders and had auto-ethnographic reflections, which would otherwise be unattainable. For example, feeling the teacher's difficulty in dealing with disciplinary knowledge

and having limited resources to support project processing, which will be discussed in more detail in Section 5.

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 *How PBL was integrated into the EAP course in UA*

Teacher F in UA described how PBL was integrated into the EAP course:

We are using PBL in the EAP course. There are tasks under each project. By doing tasks one after another, students could step by step make progress ... we put our emphasis on EAP teaching on guiding them to complete projects; letting them experience projects like what John Dewey suggests – learning by doing – is our current focus.

F's remark reveals the mechanism of the PBL EAP course. Several aspects were identified after fieldwork in F's and W's classes, which will be described in the following subsections.

#### 5.1.1 *Students' completion of and contribution to projects as the major source of assessment*

Unlike the EGP course, in which students are examined in tests at the end of each semester, project contribution and completion are the major assessed credits (60% of students' grade) and are formatively assessed in the PBL EAP class at UA. For example, in F's class, which was intended for newly enrolled first-year EAP students, a whole process of mid-term assessment for EAP students was observed. In two class periods, ten groups of students (six people in a group) took turns to present their questionnaires on the theme of "twin brothers/sisters' characteristics" (a topic in Key Concepts 1) and also their theories underpinning the questionnaire design. F stated that he had led the students at the very beginning of the course to read a few English articles on the characteristics of twins, in which different psychological theories were demonstrated. Before the students started working on their group projects, he also taught the students some fundamentals in formulating questionnaire questions from the established theories.

The project required the students to learn about questionnaire design, to read about the psychology of twins, and to produce a questionnaire in academic English. They had two months to finish this task by visiting the library, consulting experts, and carrying out group discussions, during which F gave guidance to the students every other week. The students split the work within their groups and at the end of the project they co-presented and justified their questionnaires to the class in English. As observed in the class, F gave comments and graded their presentations and questionnaires. Although designing an academic questionnaire was challenging for the first-year students, it was essential to the data collection that they would learn in the second year. In addition to these projects, weekly essays related to the topics in the textbooks accounted for another 40% of the students' final mark in the EAP course.

In W's class of second-year EAP students, the fieldwork author was a tutor and a participant observer of the projects. This allowed him to give his support and guidance to student groups to help prepare them for their projects. One group was planning to interview nearby shop managers to ask them about the commercial strategies that they adopted for university students. The other group's topic was the convenience of the students' cross-institution course selection. The students sought guidance from the tutors to help them focus on specific topics, produce their research questions, and prepare relevant methodology. Under the supervision of the tutors, all of W's students were able to produce a research proposal written in English. The assessment of their first semester EAP course in the second academic year required the submission of a research proposal.

Meanwhile, the assignments in the second semester required the students to implement the research and report the results. Every other week, W taught her students Key Concepts 2. Academic English was required when writing up the proposals and the research reports at the end of the year. In addition to W's grading of the students' projects, she also welcomed peer ratings. W suggested a set of rating criteria for the students to grade the other group's project, which included the rubrics of

academic writing, the design of their research, their use of language, and the clarity of their presentation. W's grading made up 50% of the students' mark, and the students' peer rating accounted for 10%, while the students' weekly essays accounted for the remaining 40%.

### **5.1.2 Coursework and project related issues**

In the lessons that were observed, F and W taught their students' textbook coursework and instructed them to do research projects intermittently. For example, W pointed out when discussing her course design:

I started by giving them advice on research topics and planning; then I evaluated the difficulty and feasibility of the students' projects. In the next week, I taught them academic writing, for example how to write the introduction. (interview with W)

After teaching based on the textbook, W gave students handouts with prescriptive instructions on how to write a research essay. She drew the students' attention to discourse markers and word choices in academic writing, and she led the students to read works of different writers. She also showed the students their peers' essays. In class, W let the students read different articles on the same topic to help them distinguish the differences in several genres of writing. The homework asked the students to work in a group to write short compositions on a topic in several different genres (i.e. an academic argumentative essay, a personal diary, a poem, and a song's lyrics). Consequently, the students were expected to know what register they should use in a particular context.

W's description was consistent with the field author's observation. Every other week in class, W gave the students guidance on how to do the projects. In these sessions, W frequently gave guidance to each group on their research aims, literature search methods, and data analysis methods. Sometimes, these sessions were used to let the students present their research and to hold discussions. The teachers were attempting to seek a balance between facilitating the students' projects and teaching academic English, for example:

Just doing projects is still problematic, because the students are learning English. So, we are making an equilibrium between them. (interview with F)

### **5.1.3 Demanding the students to carry out a research project in their extracurricular time and to report their results in Academic English**

The crucial component of the PBL EAP course in UA was that the students were doing a research project. Consequently, the students conducted their research work after the class. At a later stage, they produced essays in English. After some preliminary discussions with their EAP tutors, the second-year students discussed within their study groups and agreed on the topics that they were interested in. Normally, the teacher would require the students to have some basic reading of the topic that they had chosen and the teachers would help them to produce a research proposal. The students then collected the data. Some of the students went to local government offices to meet relevant officers. Some handed out questionnaires to the students in the university, while some went to companies to do observations. The students were then required to report their project's results in English essays, in-class presentations, and sometimes in student research conferences that were organised by UA. Most of the project tasks were undertaken in the students' extracurricular hours.

## **5.2 In what aspects did PBL promote the teaching and learning of EAP in UA?**

### **5.2.1 PBL improved the EAP students' use and understanding of Academic English**

F described how the PBL pedagogy gave his students chances to learn academic English:

Why do we ask the students to do projects? Because the most authentic academic English is in academic journals. If they want to do projects, they have to do literature reviews, they will read for their writing,

and they may unconsciously imitate the language... we are using the integration of PBL and EAP to help them understand what academic English is like. Reading is input, writing and rewriting is output... students' academic English proficiency then can be improved. (interview with F)

Echoing their teachers, F's students confirmed their progress in acquiring academic English in a group interview:

We have acquired a lot of academic terminologies... in making the psychology questionnaire. We also learned how to structure a sentence in academic English and how to express ideas academically. (group interview with F's students)

Another student even paid attention to the contexts in academic English use:

When we were designing the questionnaire, we began to pay particular attention to our academic rhetoric choices for fear of hindering readers' understanding. (group interview with F's students)

One of W's students also confirmed that writing up essays had helped her to improve her academic English. For example, she pointed out that she had learned to use the passive voice more often in academic writing.

### **5.2.2 PBL improved EAP students' disciplinary learning and identity**

F realised the importance of PBL EAP in improving his students' disciplinary identity, as he stated in an interview:

PBL EAP aims to transfer students' awareness and identity as academics/researchers, helping them to act as members of the academic communities to solve real-world problems. (interview with F)

The teachers' expected that the students would switch their identity from being a student to being a researcher. In the student feedback, the authors found a good example of a student's identity change. This student reflected that before joining the PBL EAP course, the way she did homework was to "just hand them in as required by teachers." After taking the PBL EAP course, she looked at homework differently:

We have to consider some practical issues, as the questionnaire was to be read by respondents in the streets, we should make them readable, we should stand in the shoes of respondents and revise the questionnaire. (group interview with F's students)

Although this student might not have realised a possible change in her identity, her words shed light on her increased self-awareness as a researcher.

As the EAP students' first supervisors in doing research projects, W and F were proud of their EAP students who presented their research findings at academic conferences. Both teachers felt that these students were good examples of EAP students developing disciplinary identities. By the end of the first semester of the second year, some EAP student groups in UA were selected to participate in a university-organised student research conference. They presented their project outcomes to a large audience in the format of either oral presentations or posters. After rigorous selection, six groups were recommended by the conference committee to present their research outcomes at the conference. In the middle of 2017, among W's new batch of PBL EAP students, four of them as a group won an Outstanding Award in a Shanghai International University Students Forum for their English essay and presentation about pollution and urbanisation.

PBL also facilitated the students' disciplinary learning. From the group interviews, F's and W's students all reported that the PBL EAP course had facilitated their disciplinary learning. For example, one student claimed that:

The research and presentation skills we learned from this course (PBL EAP) will be useful for learning any discipline, particularly finance, in theory, and practice. (group interview with F's students)

UA students, particularly those majoring in marketing, finance, and in international trade, used imported English textbooks. The students reported that the PBL EAP course was helpful for them



because it helped them to read authentic texts in English. After doing research projects in the EAP course, the students became more familiar with the methods of doing a literature review and designing questionnaires.

### **5.2.3 PBL increased the EAP students' autonomy**

From F's years of teaching in China, he discovered that Chinese students were prone to follow what the teachers told them to do rather than to take the lead in their learning. F assumed that such passiveness in the study was related to a Chinese value of learning nurtured in their foundation education:

Chinese students are used to being passive in learning, and they even consider that learning is to develop a memory container, not dropping out anything their teachers have offered. (F interview)

F pointed out that such culturally bounded learning mentality inhibited his students in adapting to the PBL EAP learning:

Some students felt insecure when we stop telling them to recite and to memorise English vocabulary. (F interview)

However, after completing some of the PBL coursework, F observed that his students had increased autonomy. He then reported that two students, after finishing the first-year EAP programme, had asked him to instruct them in doing a social research project that explored the traditional textile industry in rural China. The two students were partners in a project group in the EAP class, who cooperated smoothly and befriended each other. Beyond the EAP class, they were classmates in studying business. Before the summer break, their teacher in marketing had asked them to either write book reviews or to write a report on the local business industry based on online information. F reported that while most students were absent-minded in doing their homework in the summer break, this pair of students decided to travel to southwest rural China to an ethnic minority resort to search for some traditional textile factories to see their marketing challenges and cultural difficulties. The students made the connections themselves, and they came to F for guidance in their research design. Although F was only an English teacher in UA and did not teach any of the two students' disciplinary subjects, he agreed to supervise the students in support of their passion for research, after he had attained permission from their director of studies. These students were just first-year university students. Neither of them had learned how to do academic research in their discipline class except for their experience in F's PBL EAP class. However, even after the class, the students were still autonomous in applying what they learned in disciplinary projects.

### **5.2.4 Improvement in interpersonal skills and teamwork**

In the group interviews, the students confirmed the improvement in their interpersonal and teamwork skills. One of W's students even thought that the improvement of these skills was the primary aim of the PBL EAP course:

I think the teacher intends to help us to gain a better sense of teamwork. (group interview with W's students)

Similarly, in a group interview, three of F's students reflected on their weaknesses in project collaboration:

I realise that we have inadequacy in teamwork, everyone has his/her idea, we should not pour our ideas onto other teammates while they were speaking.

We really should learn to respect others' opinions, N (a student's pseudonym) is hard to work with, he always insisted on his ideas.

N apologised for that:

I should be more open towards collaboration and should listen to others' voices. (group interview with F's students)

### **5.3 Perceived challenges in the application of the PBL pedagogy in the UA EAP course**

There were many challenges when adopting PBL in EAP teaching, as F already mentioned, his students often felt insecure when he asked them to learn English by doing research, which seemed to be a culture of learning among Chinese students.

W pointed out her doubled workload in teaching EAP while supervising group projects at the same time. It took nearly 20 minutes to tutor a single group of EAP students in each session. However, in each class unit, there were about ten groups, and W taught two classes each semester. Because the project instruction happened every other week, W used her extracurricular time to fulfil this obligation. Thus, teaching the EAP course that adopted a PBL approach had occupied a lot of W's spare time, posing a big challenge for her. These difficulties were within the control of the teachers as long as they sacrificed their spare time; however, there were other challenges, which were considered more urgent.

#### **5.3.1 The EAP teachers' lack of disciplinary knowledge**

One of the biggest problems was that the EAP teachers' disciplinary knowledge was not consistent with those of their students. In particular, W reported that she found it challenging when dealing with students' disciplinary knowledge. The fieldwork author witnessed these challenges when tutoring W's students. For example, when he gave suggestions to a group about their case study in a marketing project, he shared his knowledge of case study as a research method in educational studies, which made the students very confused. What the students had learned about case studies in marketing was completely different from the authors' experience. W's PowerPoint presentations for an EAP workshop in Shanghai revealed her worries that the EAP teachers lacked the same disciplinary knowledge that their students possessed.

#### **5.3.2 Limited resources for conducting research projects**

Regarding challenges caused by inadequate resources, W gave an example of her students encountering unforthcoming situations when attempting to engage in their potential research fields. For example, some of the students made an appointment with a governmental department head for an interview, but in the interview, he answered almost none of the questions that the students asked. Thus, the students could not achieve valid results, which made them frustrated, because they had spent a considerable amount of time in the community in vain. Eventually, they had to change their research topic. In other examples, the students were unable to reach graduates when planning to investigate student employment, and some students were unable to find cooperative companies with which to perform a case analysis. Although W was able to help her students to design their research and to refine their academic English, she was unable to provide the students with the necessary disciplinary resources. On many occasions, limited resources hindered the implementation of PBL in the EAP course. For example, in her PowerPoint slides for an EAP conference, W complained about the limited institutional support that she had received in the PBL EAP course:

If the university does not make connections with society for us, then how can we as language teachers guide students to do academic research in the society?

#### **5.3.3 Difficulties in disseminating the students' research results**

After commenting on and tutoring many of the EAP students' research projects, the fieldwork author found that, due to the weak relationship between the university and the societal resources, the dissemination of EAP students' research findings had a limited impact. Although the students reported on and disseminated their research findings in class and at forums in the university, they had little

chance to report back the findings and to transfer implications to the companies/organisations where they had conducted the research.

## 6 Discussion

The PBL EAP course in UA has, to some extent, filled a gap in integrating PBL into the teaching of EAP in tertiary education in China. This ethnographic study has given a glimpse of PBL based EAP teaching during the Shanghai EAP reform, which has seldom been reported in international publications (Li & Wang, 2018). In the present study, PBL was integrated into EAP teaching in the following three ways: academic English and project work was intermittently taught to students by their EAP teachers; the students' completion of and contribution to projects were set as the major source of assessment; and the students were required to carry out project research in their extracurricular time and to report their project results in academic English in class and/or at conferences. This combination reduced the negative effects that summative assessments may have on the implementation of PBL (van Lier, 2006). Concerning the present study's contribution to the EAP practitioners' knowledge base, it is hoped that a detailed account of the PBL EAP course design, and possible opportunities and limitations of PBL EAP discussed in this paper could serve as a reference for practitioners elsewhere. This contribution could help to keep the EAP theories fresh and free from sclerotisation (Bruce, 2017).

In the present study, the EAP teachers observed students' improvements in developing their disciplinary identities after embarking on PBL. In the group interviews, the students shared their raised awareness in choosing rhetoric in designing questionnaires, which they assumed could help the respondents to understand the questions. Through the PBL projects, F's and W's students even competed for prizes at academic conferences. These results reflect that the students had a clearer understanding of research and the roles of researchers. The students also reported the usefulness of EAP in helping them to study discipline related contents. This echoes Beckett's (2006) claim that PBL could facilitate students' disciplinary content study. Thus, to some extent, the PBL EAP course in UA accelerated the EAP students' transition into members of disciplinary communities, as required by the academic socialisation strand of EAP (Hyland, 2006). From the teachers' perspectives, the PBL EAP course provided students with abundant academic English input and output, such as having students to read journals and write proposals. This is similar to van Lier's (2006) report that PBL sustained authentic English input and output for students. The PBL EAP course in the present study kept an organic balance between students' learning of academic English and disciplinary knowledge, which is similar to Poonpon's (2017) findings.

The students' feedback showed that they had started to learn how to cooperate with their group members. This is in agreement with Kettanun's (2015) and Jaleniauskiene's (2016) reports that PBL could improve the students' interpersonal skills. F noticed that his students became more autonomous, as the students used the project research skills that they had learned from their PBL EAP classes to complete assignments in their disciplinary studies. This result also reflects the opinion that PBL could be used to increase the students' motivation (Bas & Beyhan, 2010; Jaleniauskiene, 2016; Kettanun, 2015). Guo (2006) argues that students in China might not be accustomed to PBL due to the different Chinese culture of learning. This was the case at the beginning of the current study, which was interpreted by F as the Chinese students' different cultural approach to learning, but later most students got used to the new style of learning and produced proper research essays. Furthermore, de Chazal (2014) emphasises that EAP classes are normally places of cultural and academic exchange. Raising the EAP teachers' awareness of and helping them to make use of the students' culture of learning would accelerate the students' adaptation to the new context and new style of learning (Singh & Doherty, 2004).

Tsiplakides and Fragoulis (2009) found that PBL could be time-consuming to apply and this notion was similarly reflected in teacher W's extra working hours. The challenge of the EAP teachers not having enough specific disciplinary knowledge, as summarised in Ding and Campion (2016), was experienced by the EAP tutors, especially W and the fieldwork author. When suggesting how English-

language teachers should deal with the teaching of disciplinary specificity in EAP, many scholars have proposed that they should foster cooperation, collaboration, and team teaching between subject teachers and language teachers (Dudley-Evans, 2001; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Gao & Bartlett, 2014; Hyland, 2006). However, the majority of scholars have been unable to propose a scientific and effective method to implement team teaching for large size classes in China, particularly when an institution such as UA plays a passive role in coordinating resources for implementing the PBL EAP. Gao and Bartlett (2014) point out that utilising currently existing university resources and human resources to support and optimise EAP teaching was a challenge faced by many English-language teachers in China's higher education sector.

## 7 Conclusion

This ethnographic study has explored a PBL EAP course at a university in Shanghai, China. Given that there were few examples of using PBL to teach EAP, and even fewer empirical studies investigating EAP teaching in China, the current study was intended to fill this gap. This study has described how the PBL pedagogy was integrated with the EAP course, which proved to be useful in improving the students' academic English, helped the students' disciplinary knowledge learning and disciplinary identity formation, stimulated the students' autonomy, and was instructive to their interpersonal ability and teamwork. However, several major challenges to the implementation of the PBL pedagogy in EAP teaching in UA remain, including the English teachers' limited disciplinary knowledge, limited resources for conducting student-led research projects, and limited opportunities for the dissemination of the students' research outcomes. It is recommended that future studies should aim to address these challenges. Taking an ethnographic approach, the current study did not mean to represent a large sample of teaching and learning of EAP in China; however, it could still shed some light on the research of EAP teaching. It is hoped that the PBL EAP course developed by UA's EAP teachers could serve as a useful reference for EAP teachers elsewhere who wish to adopt a similar approach.

## References

- Anthony, E. M. (2011). Language learning: Collaboration in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) problem-based learning (PBL) classroom. In R. M., Millar & M., Durham (Eds.), *Applied linguistics, global and local: Proceedings of the 43rd Annual Meeting of the British Association for Applied Linguistics* (pp. 11–21). London: Scitsiugnill Press.
- Barron, P. (2002). Providing a more successful educational experience for Asian hospitality management students studying in Australia: A focus on teaching and learning styles. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 2(2), 63–88.
- Baş, G. (2011). Investigating the effects of project-based learning on students' academic achievement and attitudes towards English lesson. *The Online Journal of New Horizons in Education*, 1(4), 1–15.
- Baş, G., & Beyhan, O. (2010). Effects of MIs supported project-based learning on students' achievement levels and attitudes towards English lesson. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 2(3), 365–385.
- Beckett, G. H. (2005). Academic language and literacy socialisation through project-based instruction: ESL student perspectives and issues. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 15(1), 191–206.
- Beckett, G. H. (2006). Project-based second and foreign language education. In G. H. Beckett & P. C. Miller (Eds.), *Project-based second and foreign language education: Past, present, and future* (pp. 3–16). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.
- Bosuwon, T., & Woodrow, L. (2009). Developing a problem-based course based on needs analysis to enhance English reading ability of Thai undergraduate students. *RELJ Journal*, 40(1), 42–64.
- Bruce, I. (2017, January). *What knowledge do practitioners need to master to inform and direct not only their teaching but also, more broadly, their professional activities including understandings of academia in both its epistemological and sociological dimensions?* Presentation at BALEAP ResTes Knowledge and the EAP Practitioner: A Symposium, The University of Leeds, UK.
- Cai, J. G. (2017). Debates around the orientation of TEFL in Chinese tertiary education. In H. Reinder, D. Nunan, & B. Zou (Eds.), *Innovation in language learning and teaching: The case of China* (pp. 115–153). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Cheng, A. (2016). EAP at the tertiary level in China: Challenges and possibilities. In K. Hyland & P. Shaw (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of English for Academic Purposes* (pp. 208–230). London: Routledge.
- de Chazal, E. (2014). *English for Academic Purposes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ding, A., & Campion, G. (2016). EAP teacher development. In K. Hyland & P. Shaw (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of English for Academic Purposes* (pp. 547–559). London: Routledge.
- Dudley-Evans, T. (2001). English for specific purposes. In R. Carter & D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages* (pp. 131–137). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dudley-Evans, T., & St John, M. J. (1998). *Developments in English for specific purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elizabeth, M. A., & Zulida, A. K. (2012). Problem-based learning: A source of learning opportunities in undergraduate English for Specific Purposes. *The International Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(1), 47–56.
- Eyring, J. L. (1989). *Teacher experience and student responses in ESL project work instruction: A case study* (Unpublished PhD dissertation). University of California, Los Angeles, USA.
- Farouk, I. (2016). A project-based language learning model for improving the willingness to communicate of EFL students. *Journal of Systemics*, 14(2), 11–18.
- Gao, Y., & Bartlett, B. (2014). Opportunities and challenges for negotiating appropriate EAP in China. In I. Liyanage & T. Walker (Eds.), *English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Asia: Negotiating appropriate practices in a global context* (pp. 13–32). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Guo, Y. (2006). Project-based EFL in China. In G. H. Beckett & P. C. Miller (Eds.), *Project-based second and foreign language education: Past, present, and future* (pp. 143–155). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hedge, T. (1993). Project work. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 47(3), 276–277.
- Hyland, K. (2006). *English for Academic Purposes: An advanced resource book*. London: Routledge.
- Jaleniauskienė, E. (2016). Revitalizing foreign language learning in higher education using a PBL curriculum. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232, 265–275.
- Kettanun, C. (2015). Project-based learning and its validity in a Thai EFL classroom. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 192, 567–573.
- Knudsen, S. (2014). Students are doing it for themselves – the problem-oriented problem’ in academic writing in the humanities. *Studies in higher education*, 39(10), 1838–1859.
- Krauss, J., & Boss, S. (2013). *Thinking through project-based learning: Guiding deeper inquiry*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Lea, M., & Street, B. V. (2000). Student writing and staff feedback in higher education. In M. Lea & B. Stierer (Eds.), *Student writing in higher education: New contexts* (pp. 32–46). Buckingham: Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Li, Y., & Wang, L. (2018). An ethnography of Chinese college English teachers’ transition from teaching English for General Purposes to teaching English for Academic Purposes. *ESP Today*, 6(1), 107–124.
- Maggs-Rapport, F. (2000). Combining methodological approaches in research: Ethnography and interpretive phenomenology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 31(1), 219–225.
- Malkova, I. Y., & Kiselyova, P. V. (2014). Development of personal competences in project-based learning in the EFL classroom. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 154, 254–258.
- Miller, L., Hafner, C. A., & Fun, C. N. K. (2012). Project-based learning in a technologically enhanced learning environment for second language learners: Students’ perceptions. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 9(2), 183–195.
- Morrison, K. R. B. (1993). *Planning and accomplishing school-centred evaluation*. Brighton: Peter Francis.
- O’Reilly, K. (2008). *Key concepts in ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Ogden, A., & Roulon, S. (2009). *From field projects in anthropology: A student handbook*. Illinois: Waveland Press Inc.
- Poonpon, K. (2017). Enhancing English skills through project-based learning. *The English Teacher*, XL, 1–10.
- Robson, C. (2011). *Real world research*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Rochmahwati, P. (2015). Fostering students’ critical thinking by project-based learning. *Journal on English as a Foreign Language*, 5(1), 37–44.
- Shafaei, A., & Rahim, H. A. (2015). Does project-based learning enhance Iranian EFL learners’ vocabulary recall and retention? *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 3(2), 83–99.
- Singh, P., & Doherty, C. (2004). Global cultural flows and pedagogic dilemmas: Teaching in the global university contact zone. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(1), 9–42.

- Smith-Palinkas, B., & Croghan-Ford, K. (2009). *Key concepts 1: Reading and writing across the disciplines*. Boston: Heinle, Cengage Learning.
- Smith-Palinkas, B., & Croghan-Ford, K. (2010). *Key concepts 2: Reading and writing across the disciplines*. Boston: Heinle, Cengage Learning.
- Solomon, E. V., & Shelley, J. L. (2006a). *Key concepts 1: Listening, note taking, and speaking across the disciplines*. Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning.
- Solomon, E. V., & Shelley, J. L. (2006b). *Key concepts 2: Listening, note taking, and speaking across the disciplines*. Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning.
- Stoller, F. (2006). Establishing a theoretical foundation for project-based learning in second and foreign-language contexts. In G. H. Beckett & P. C. Miller (Eds.), *Project-based second and foreign language education: past, present, and future* (pp.19–40). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.
- Tsiplakides, I., & Fragoulis, I. (2009). Project-based learning in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Greek primary schools: From theory to practice. *English Language Teaching*, 2(3), 113–119.
- Vaca Torres, A. M., & Gómez Rodríguez, L. F. (2017). Increasing EFL learners' oral production at a public school through project-based learning. *Profile: Issues in Teachers Professional Development*, 19(2), 57–71.
- van Lier, L. (2006). Foreword. In G. H. Beckett & P. C. Miller (Eds.), *Project-based second and foreign language education: past, present, and future* (pp. xi-xvi). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.
- Wang, N. (2018). Xueshu yingyu de shishi feifei – Fudan daxue cai jigang jiaoshou fangtan lu. [The right and wrong of academic English – An interview with Professor Cai Jiagang, Fudan University]. *Zhongguo Daxue Jiaoxue*, 2, 47–62.
- Wingate, U. (2015). *Academic literacy and student diversity: The case for inclusive practice*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Wolcott, H. F. (2008). *Ethnography: A way of seeing*. Maryland: Altamira Press.
- Wood, A., & Head, M. (2004). Just what the doctor ordered: The application of problem-based learning to EAP. *English for Specific Purposes*, 23(1), 3–17.