

Language Learning and Cultural Connections

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Abstract

The present article shares the process of engaging in Project-Based Learning (PBL) of English through one's cultural and local context. It presents an example of how teachers can value learners' cultural background, knowledge systems, languages, and community while teaching-learning a language. It explicitly shares the process one can follow to enrich learners' writing skills in a language. It further includes a reflection on the process by both the teacher and the learners. It then concludes with ideas and suggestions for using the project in teaching-learning languages in different contexts.

Keywords: Project-based Language Learning (PBL), ideation, content creation, data sources, vocabulary bank, feedback, reflections

Introduction

"English is in India today a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and fuller participation in national and international life" (NCERT, 2006, p. 1). People in our country aspire to identify themselves with English, the culture of power; in this process, they often turn a blind eye to their culture. Inadvertently, this leads to a belief that their culture, place of origin, and language are subordinate to English. As Harrison (2010) points out, "children are coerced out of their heritage, their religion, their identity" (p. 265).

On the other hand, Heugh et al. (2019) note that the objective of language learning must be to use languages as independent and separate systems connecting them through language mixing, switching, interpreting, and translating. This observation raises a question whether it is possible to

teach English in a manner that builds connections with the multilingual and multicultural milieu within which it is taught? I focused on enriching students' English language skills through intense one-on-one support of five seventeen-year-old undergraduate linguistically diverse students with this question in mind. I looked for ways to connect English teaching with students' sense of belonging to a culture or context to value and take pride in it. Thus began Project-based Language Learning (PBL) discussed in this article.

"PBL is in line with various concepts in a second language (L2) learning and teaching, such as experiential learning, learner autonomy, cooperative learning, and critical thinking" (Beckett, 2006, as cited in Pitura and Berlińska-Kopec, 2018, p. 41). "What makes this approach particularly suitable for L2 learning is the authenticity inherent in this process, i.e. authenticity of text, purpose, audience and interaction" (Stoller, 2006, as cited in Pitura and Berlińska-Kopec, 2018, p. 41).

The following article provides teachers with an example of how these features are incorporated in PBL and simultaneously value children's cultural connections. Furthermore, the article outlines how learners can develop writing skills while integrating with listening, speaking, and reading in English and learners' languages.

Process

The process of PBL consisted of the project ideation, content creation, creating a vocabulary bank, writing the first draft, self, and peer-editing, writing the second draft, teacher feedback, final submission and, presentation. A sample of one student's writing is taken to illustrate the development of writing.

Ideation

We worked together to identify some place students would like to explore, which had some history to it, such as an old building, a ruin, a road, and so on. The first condition for this choice was that the place should have a historical or personal significance, making them curious to explore in-depth. Secondly, the place should not be so famous that all its information is available on the internet. However, it should be

a place about which community members have something to say. It would be helpful, not necessary if students had visited or could visit the place. Thus, choosing a place in their vicinity may be useful. With these conditions, the five students respectively decided to work upon *Mahendragiri Parvat*, Chhattisgarh; *Mittai Theruvu* (S.M. Street), Kerala; *Silapathikaram Art Gallery*, Tamil Nadu; *Afzalgarh Fort*, Uttar Pradesh, and *Pillalamarri*, Telangana.

Students created a Google Doc that I could also access and listed at least two names of people who would give meaningful insights into the place for the interview. They could also use information from their personal experience. Students listed: father, maternal grandmother, aunt, neighbour, and so on, under the 'Sources of Data'.

The next step was to identify a medium of expression. A narrative, travelogue-entry, tourism video, blog-entry, vlog, tourism guide pamphlet, essay, report, article, or any other medium or style suited to the writing were suggested as options to students. They were free to explore the ones they had not used before with a promise of support from the teacher's end. They were free to change the medium as the project progressed. Three students were interested in vlogs. However, due to paucity of time, lockdown, and personal constraints, everyone chose to express in writing even when they chose different forms such as narrative, travel-blog, essay, and article.

Students prepared a semi-structured interview to help them have a conversation. Some of the questions were: *Why is the parvat also called Shringi Rishi Mountain?*, *What does each section in the gallery represent?*, *How could the Pillalamarri survive for 800 years?*, etc. This day's work was then given a heading as a preparatory note.

Creating Content

Students spent the next two weeks on data collection. They had conversations with people identified earlier and looked at secondary data sources, such as books, articles, online entries, that could provide more information about the place. They made extensive notes of the same in the earlier created Google Doc under the sub-heading 'Data' (Figure 1).

Figure 1 : Sample of 'Data' Collected by a Student

Data collection:
<u>Interview with Manimegalai:</u>
<u>Kalaingar-</u>
Kovalan- Hero
Kannagi - heroine
History/ not myth
6 sayavanam in sea/ out of 7
Silapathikaram meettu eduthu/ in 1972-1973 - construction works happened/ 500 houses 35 boat/
Musical instrument
Last 10 years, no good maintenance/ 8 days celebration/ all ministers and MLA came/ 5 lakh ppl(even foreigners)/
TN tourist (1/24)
<u>Machappa:</u>
Tree- magundam fruit famous
Silapathikaram full story on walls
War weapons and instrument
Silambu shape building

Creation of Vocabulary Bank

Before data collection, the group watched videos of travel shows, especially those that explored places from a historical and community lens, such as 'Ekaant' on Epic Web Channel. This particular travel series is in Hindi with English subtitles. Everyone was expected to pay close attention to subtitles and make notes. Students who could comprehend Hindi further benefited by noticing the use of Hindi in this context.

From these inputs, students collected words and phrases they could use in their writing and created a 'Vocabulary Bank' in their Google Docs (Figure 2). They shared their banks; we collected 243 words and phrases that could be used in writing.

As students had made this bank from a context, they could notice how these words and phrases can be used in a situation. They were further asked to notice the style of expression in these inputs. The discussion led to understanding how words could create a sense of intrigue in the audience when used in a specific combination at specific places.

Figure 2: Sample of 'Vocabulary Bank' Created by a Student

- Our journey often ends at the fat books found in libraries but there are many histories not found in books that are still alive. In folk songs. In folklore (it is the expression body of culture shared by a particular group of people), in old people's stories, in the sound of houses, in the current of lakes that flow amidst cities, in the line of towns situated near the banks.
- I have come not to read history, but to feel it.
- The meaning of the place and why is it called by that name.
- Firstly, the place to which it belongs has been described like who was the founder/ discoverer of that place and when it happened? Then went to the actual unique and unknown story.
- In the middle of the desert, there exists an unrecorded, but well-known history and it is calling to me. So come on. Let's hear and know.
- Describing the place with words like forgotten homes, unknown lanes, silence and a gust of wind. The place is silent and now it wants to speak, it feels scared and nervous. Can you feel it?
- How was that place in the past, how people lived and how it is now, how it looks now?
- Describing the place, its structure, plan, surroundings in the past (how it was built). The story behind its structure and layout.
- ^{about}, about the residents of the place, their lifestyle, their origin at the place etc.
- Now, what happened, why is it like this now all with ruins, who and what made this place like this...
- Story of the place narrated by villagers.
- Obstinate (stubbornly adhering to an opinion, purpose, or course despite the reason, arguments, or persuasion).
- To know what transpired in Kuldhara and other villages many years ago, it is important to talk to the people around.
- All the possible different stories are gathered by different people.
- Horrendous (extremely unpleasant, horrifying, or terrible).

First Draft

At this stage, students started writing. They had compiled data from different sources and were armed with the language they could use for expression. The data helped them write without writer's block or groping for content or ways of expression.

Self and Peer-Edit

After completing the first draft, students took a day's break before looking at their work from a fresher perspective and engaging in self-editing by noticing errors in tenses, sentence structure, punctuation, spellings, paragraphing, and overall flow and coherence of writing.

When confident with their work, students cyclically shared it with one more student for peer-editing. Peers provided written feedback to each other based on criteria for self-editing (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Sample of Peer-Editing

Today morning, when I was walking in front of our porch, my neighbour, who was feeding her one-year-old son, waved her hands at me. Though we are neighbours, we are seeing each other once or twice a week through the compound wall, due to the covid lockdown. I beamed and waved my hands too. Then, something luminous distracted my view of her. It was her son's new shimmering anklet. It wasn't a usual chain type anklet. It was in a ring shape.

You don't need to change paragraphs here.

It reminded me of one of my visits to the 'Silappathikaram art gallery' which is the only thing famous in our town Poompuhar (a coastal region in the state of Tamil Nadu). I have been there many times before and after this visit. But I remember this visit very well because only on that visit, I understood what the art gallery ~~has been~~ had been portraying and the history behind our town. And also, it was my first visit to the gallery with my dad. It was during my fourth standard's summer vacation. I was nine years old then. ~~Until~~ ~~in~~ my fourth standard, my dad was working away from our home. So the chance ~~for~~ of going out with him was limited. Maybe I had been there earlier with him when he visited our home, but I don't remember anything like that.

On that day, we got ready around four in the evening ~~for~~ ~~to~~ ~~visit~~ visit the art gallery. I was very excited to go out with him after a long time. The gallery was about one kilometre away from our house. I, my dad, my mom and my brother started on our journey with excitement.

The first thing we saw was the huge silvery gate which was in 'silambu' shape. I couldn't take my gaze from the gate for the next two minutes. ~~By~~

Second Draft

According to Cameron (2001), 'editing drafts helps children develop self-direction in writing by offering them an external model to check their work. The experience of checking work with others can then be internalized and become a tool for individual learners' (p. 156). Thus, after discussing with peers their editing and feedback, students wrote second drafts of their work.

Teacher's Feedback

The second draft was submitted to the teacher for detailed feedback. Since self and peer editing had taken care of most of these concerns, teachers' inputs were in using sentence structures that enhance the

overall quality of writing and framing ideas in paragraphs in a coherent way that gives a flow to the writing (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Sample of Teacher's Feedback

Today morning, when I was walking in front of our porch, my neighbour, who was feeding her one-year-old son, waved ~~her hands~~ at me. ~~Even though we are neighbours, due to the pandemic lockdown, we are seeing~~ see each other only once or twice a week through the compound wall. ~~due to the covid lockdown.~~ I beamed at her and waved ~~my hands~~ too. ~~Then,~~ Suddenly, ~~something~~ a bright, luminous ~~distracted my view of her~~ streak of light caught my attention. It was her son's new shimmering anklet. It wasn't ~~at~~ the usual chain type anklet. It was a beautiful, ~~in a~~ ring shaped one.

~~The~~ The anklet ~~reminded me of~~ instantly brought back memories of one of my visits to the 'Silappathikaram art gallery' which is the only thing famous in our town Poompuhar-~~(,~~ a coastal region in the state of Tamil Nadu). I have been there ~~many~~ several times, even before and after this particular visit which I was reminded of. ~~But I remember this visit very well because~~ the reason this particular visit is strongly etched in my memory is that only on that visit, I understood what the art gallery had been portraying and the history behind our town. ~~And also,~~

Another reason that made the visit stand out from the rest is that it was my first visit to the gallery with my dad. It was during my fourth standard's summer vacation. I was nine years old then. Until my fourth standard, my dad was working away from our home. So, the ~~chance~~ opportunities of going out with him ~~was~~ were limited. ~~Maybe I had~~ I may have been there earlier with him when he would visited ~~our~~ home, but being the young kid that I was, I don't remember anything like that.

~~On that day,~~ The memory of that day is so fresh in my mind as if it happened only yesterday. We had got ready around four in the evening to visit the art gallery. I was very excited to go out with ~~him~~ my dad after a long time. The gallery was about one kilometre away from our house. ~~I,~~ My dad, my mom ~~and,~~ my brother and I started on our journey ~~with excitement.~~

As soon as we reached the gallery, the first thing we saw was the huge silvery gate which was in 'silambu' shape. I couldn't take my ~~gaze from the gate for the next~~ eyes off the gate for at least two minutes. ~~By that time~~ Meanwhile, my dad had bought two adult tickets and two children tickets for the four of us, from the small ticket counter opposite ~~to~~ the gate. As my dad caught me staring at the gate, he suddenly asked me why the

(Note. Additional comments with a rationale are not in the figure)

I reasoned my suggestions using the 'insert comment.' This conversation between the students and the teacher becomes a model for students to think independently or peer-edit. Essentially, students do not become passive receivers but actively and critically engage with their work. The changes they made to the draft are in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Sample of Students' Work with Changes to Their Draft in Response to the Teacher's Feedback

son's new shimmering anklet. It wasn't the usual chain type anklet. It was a beautiful, ~~..... in a~~ beautiful and glittering ring shaped one.

The anklet instantly brought back memories of one of my visits to the 'Silappathikaram art gallery' which is the only thing famous in our town Poompuhar, a coastal region in the state of Tamil Nadu. I have been there several times, even before and after this particular visit which I was reminded of. But the reason this particular visit is strongly etched in my memory is that only on that visit I understood what the art gallery had been portraying and the history behind our town.

Another reason that made the visit stand out from the rest is that it was my first visit to the gallery with my dad. It was during my fourth standard's summer vacation. I was nine years old then. Until my fourth standard, my dad was working away from our home. So, the opportunities of going out with him were limited. I may have been there earlier with him when he would visit home, but being the young kid that I was, I don't remember anything like that.

The memory of that day is so fresh in my mind as if it happened only yesterday. We had got ready around four in the evening to visit the art gallery. I was very excited to go out with my dad after a long time. The gallery was about one kilometre away from our house. My dad, my mom, my brother and I started on our journey in my dad's scooter. I was sitting behind my dad and holding his shirt tightly with my fists while my mom was sitting behind me with my four years old brother on her lap. It didn't take more than five minutes to reach our destination.

~~The memory of that day is so fresh in my mind as if it happened only yesterday. My dad, my mom, my brother and I were standing near the~~

~~As soon as we reached the gallery, the first thing we saw was the huge silvery gate which was in 'silambu' (an anklet worn mostly in Indian subcontinent) shape. I couldn't take my eyes off the gate for at least two minutes. Meanwhile, my dad had bought two adult tickets and two children tickets for the four of us. from the small ticket counter opposite the gate. As~~

The Final Draft

Students worked on my detailed feedback and completed the final draft of their work. They had to wait for a few hours, or a day if possible, before returning to their work to proofread it for final self-editing. They made submissions only after this proofreading. In my opinion, the final versions I received were a significant improvement on the earlier versions (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Sample of Student's Final Draft

Today morning, when I was walking in front of our porch, my neighbour, who was feeding her one-year-old son, waved at me. Even though we are neighbours, due to the pandemic lockdown, we see each other only once or twice a week through the compound wall. I beamed at her and waved too. Suddenly, a bright, luminous streak of light caught my attention. It was her son's new shimmering anklet. It wasn't the usual chain type anklet. It was a beautiful, glittering, ring shaped one.

The anklet instantly brought back memories of one of my visits to the 'Silappathikaram art gallery' which is the only thing famous in our town Poompuhar, a coastal region in the state of Tamil Nadu. I have been there several times, even before and after this particular visit which I was reminded of. But the reason this particular visit is strongly etched in my memory is that only on that visit I understood what the art gallery had been portraying and the history behind our town.

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The memory of that day is so fresh in my mind as if it happened only yesterday. We had got ready around four in the evening to visit the art gallery. I was very excited to go out with my dad after a long time. The gallery was about one kilometre away from our house. My dad, my mom, my brother and I started our journey on my dad's scooter. I sat behind my dad, his shirt held tightly in my hands, while my mom sat behind me with my four years old brother on her lap. I wished that we would go a long ride but the ride wasn't more than five minutes long. We reached our destination very soon.

The moment we reached the gallery, the first thing we saw was the huge silvery gate which was in 'silambu' (an anklet worn mostly in Indian subcontinent) shape. I couldn't take my eyes off the gate for at least two minutes. Meanwhile, my dad had bought two adult tickets and two children tickets for the four of us, from the small ticket counter opposite the gate. As my dad caught me staring at the gate, he suddenly asked me why the gate was in 'Silambu' shape. I hadn't expected that question. I smirked and said that the art gallery's owner liked this design and so they made it in that shape. He smiled amiably and said that he would tell why after entering the gallery.

Presentations

Students were given reading practice to prepare them for their presentations. They were excited to hear what others had to say about their place of choice and writing. The audience gave oral feedback, which allowed them to engage in purposeful listening and give feedback.

Reflections

The project could get students excited about the process of writing, demystifying the idea of good writing. They start recognizing writing

as a step-by-step collaborative process that is possible for all. The project took away students' anxiety about writing in English by creating a collaborative environment, allowing space for mistakes, and helping them accept feedback critically, opening them up to different perspectives.

Students shared how they discovered new aspects about the place they felt they had always known. Having conversations with their community members in their home language allowed them to value their knowledge. Exploring folklore, myths, and stories of their culture brought out its richness. They felt proud sharing about a place that was less well known but special to their community. Their pride was more so when everyone expressed their wonderment about discovering the unknown places shared by their peers. Thus, as Cameron (2001) points out, the theme of the project opened "up the language classroom by bringing in the world outside and linking into children's real interests and enthusiasms" (p. 197).

Students could freely use words from their home language, such as *silambu* (anklet), *parvat* (mountain), *samadhi* (grave), *mittai theruvu* (candy street) with English because there was no other best way to describe what they wanted to say. Free mixing was vital to them.

As Khanna (2017) highlights, in classrooms, "the learner is treated like an island in himself/herself, having nothing to gain from the community to which he/she belongs" (p. 31). However, this project enabled combining home language and English by complementing each other to help students share their stories. Thus, as one student shared, they found a voice and a space to discuss their cultural history and places of pride.

Finally, English language skills were enriched through the PBL process. The journey of writing helped students use English with a sense of purpose. Students further shared that they liked learning English not through didactic ways but by exploring topics of choice with the freedom to write in their manner. Some students shared that even though initially the project seemed difficult as it started taking shape, they became more involved and interested. According to them, feedback helped. They could identify personal styles and difficulties in writing by looking at others' work and found things to work. They discovered their strengths as well and could notice their individual growth along the process.

Suggestions

The project can be adapted for different language learning contexts, including Indian languages. The project, regardless of the use of technology, follows the same process. Teachers should demystify writing by giving explicit instructions on writing headings, organizing data, taking extensive notes, brainstorming ideas before venturing into writing, and the like. Respectfully giving and receiving constructive feedback should be made part of the classroom. Teachers could bring authentic materials such as travelogues, travel pamphlets, narratives on places, episodes of shows in different Indian languages with English subtitles, etc. Learners require experiences to say something or share. "The use of heritage, as a resource or a context, provides authentic situations in which participants can start dialogues, share sensations, express feelings, and exchange opinions" (Garcia-Sampedro, 2018, p. 308).

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