Promoting Student Engagement and Proficiency Through Project-based Learning (PBL):

Focus on Heritage Language Learners in Community-Based Schools

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Project-based learning (PBL) is a proficiency-oriented instructional approach that supports real-world language use, fosters student engagement, and facilitates learner-centered instruction. These features make PBL ideal for teaching heritage language (HL) learners in community-based schools. This document outlines the general principles and best practices of PBL, as applied to language teaching. In addition, it presents HL-specific tips, which can be used in community-based schools.

Essentially, these are the elements of a well-designed and executed project for HL learners:

1. It has a theme that is engaging and developmentally appropriate for learners.
2. It is authentic and addresses a real-world problem.
3. It is linguistically appropriate for learners. Linguistically appropriate projects for HL learners (a) build on their strengths and address their specific needs, and (b) are at the right level of challenge – hard enough to promote learning but not so hard as to frustrate them.
4. It is process oriented, engaging students in gathering, processing, and presenting information. This process provides exposure to authentic input in the target language and pushes learners to produce high-quality output.
5. It enacts performance-based assessment. That is, it prioritizes what students can do with the language, as opposed to what they know about the language.

The rest of this document delves into each of these elements in greater detail.

The three steps of project design

- Step 1: Decide on a theme for the project
- Step 2: Determine the final outcome (product)
- Step 3: Structure the project
Step 1: Selecting project themes/topics

Project themes and topics should (1) respond to HL learners’ goals and motivations vis-à-vis their HL, (2) be engaging, and (3) make authentic use of the language.

1. Responding to HL learners’ goals and motivations

A. Choose topics that are age appropriate, keeping in mind that many HL learners go through a phase when they reject their home language and culture. This is a natural phase, and most learners eventually emerge out of it. The priority at this point is to keep up the use of the HL.

Example: Engaging project topics or themes for this stage might include popular music, sports, career plans, etc.

B. During the high school years, many HL learners emerge out of the rejection phase and enter a stage where they seek connections to their heritage language and culture. The main reasons why HL learners at this stage study their HL are listed below.

Professional reasons
Finding identity
Communicating with family and friends in the U.S.
Communicating with family, friends, and other speakers of the HL outside the U.S.
(Carreira & Kagan, 2011)

Also: To deal with the challenges of bilingualism and biculturalism, such as being criticized for the way they speak or having to reconcile cultural differences between home and family and the larger society.

Example: Project themes that respond to the above reasons include exploring the HL community’s immigration history and exploring professional opportunities that involve using the HL.

2. Fostering engagement

To promote student engagement, Fredricka Stoller recommends choosing themes that …

Are relevant locally
Are of interest to students
Can be supported with plentiful print and non-print resources
Arouse student curiosity
Spring from textbook materials in other areas of study
Connect to other classes or school activities
Stimulate pride among students

3. **Developing projects that promote authentic use of the language**

*Authenticity* is a central piece of project design. According to Larmer (n.d.), a project can be authentic in one or more ways if

A. It meets a real-world need beyond the classroom, or the products created are used by real people.

  **Example**: A guide for buying gifts for moms, dads, grandparents, teachers, the students themselves, etc. Students can use a survey to gather ideas and other tools such as online catalogues, reviews, etc.

B. It focuses on a problem, an issue, or a topic that is relevant to students’ lives—the more directly, the better—or on a problem or issue that is being faced by adults in the world that students will soon enter.

  **Example**: A brochure on careers presenting information on how to prepare for different ones, employment projections, salary information, and how knowing the HL can be of benefit in the labor market.

C. It sets up a scenario or simulation that is realistic, even if it is fictitious.

  **Example**: A re-enactment of an historical event, as experienced by people from different vantage points.

D. It involves tools, tasks, standards, or processes used by adults in real settings and by professionals in the workplace.

  **Example**: A study of how to improve the school menu or how to create an advertising campaign for the school to recruit students

Adapted from
[https://www.bie.org/blog/3_tips_for_planning_authentic_pbl_projects](https://www.bie.org/blog/3_tips_for_planning_authentic_pbl_projects)
Note: To access this document, this link must be copied and posted into an internet site; e.g., Google.

For more information about authenticity and examples of authentic projects, see the document on this page, “What does it take for a project to be authentic?”

In terms of what not to do:

Larmer (n.d.), “What does it take for a project to be authentic,” gives the following examples of non-authentic projects:

A non-authentic project would involve the kind of assignment students are typically given in school: compose an essay, create a poster or model, write and present a book report, or make a PowerPoint presentation on a topic they've researched. Beyond their teacher and maybe their classmates, there's no public audience for students' work, no one actually uses what they create, and the work they do is not what people do in the real world.

Step 2: Determining the final product

1. Input v. output-oriented projects

Input-oriented projects involve working with a product that already exists. As shown in the chart below, input-oriented projects can involve (a) refashioning an existing product (e.g. shortening it or changing its genre), (b) applying an existing product to a new situation, or (c) creating a collection of tokens of a product.

From a linguistic standpoint, input-oriented projects are easier than output-oriented ones, which involve outright creating with language. For that reason, input-oriented projects may be more appropriate with low proficiency learners. However, higher proficiency learners may also benefit from working on input-oriented projects before transitioning to output-oriented products. For example, in (c) below, pulling together a collection of favorite poems may help prepare learners to write a poem of their own.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Easier: Input-oriented projects</th>
<th>Harder: Output-oriented projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Making a poster out of an existing pamphlet</td>
<td>Creating a pamphlet from information that has been gathered</td>
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</table>
Creating projects in learners’ Zone of Proximal Development

Projects should be in the learners’ Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Lui, 2012)

1. The ZPD is the difference between what a child can do independently and what he or she is capable of doing with targeted assistance (e.g., scaffolding).
2. Knowledge that is beyond the learners’ ZPD will not likely be grasped, even with extensive scaffolding.
3. Knowledge that is under the learners’ ZPD will not lead to learning.

Understanding the notions of proficiency and performance are key to designing projects in learners’ ZPD.

Proficiency relates to what learners can do independently and spontaneously. This is what the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines describe. From points 2 and 3 in the box above, it follows that projects that match learners’ proficiency levels will be too easy to lead to learning, while those that are too far above that level will prove too difficult.

(Think of this in terms of designing an exercise regimen. A daily walk around the block is too easy for a person in reasonably good health to build fitness. On the other hand, starting out by running 10 miles a day is probably too difficult. It is better to start with a challenging but doable goal, such as running 1-2 miles, and slowly build up to 10 miles).

To create projects in learners’ ZPD, it is important to consider performance, which is what learners can do with assistance, typically in the classroom context. Performance-based projects engage learners in producing work that is beyond their proficiency level, at learners’ ZPD, which is where learning takes place.

What to do

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>b. Administering an existing survey – i.e., one that someone else has created – to a local HL community and reporting on the results</th>
<th>Creating a survey with an interview piece and administering it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. Creating a book of favorite poems, sayings, dishes, etc.</td>
<td>Writing a poem and reciting it</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1. Use the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and Can-Do Statements to get a general sense of learners’ proficiency levels in each of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and the three modes of communication (interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive). For example, if students in your classes can only speak using short, formulaic expressions and cannot create with language and communicate full sentences, they are likely at the Novice level for speaking.

2. To promote learning, design projects that are above learners’ proficiency levels but within their reach, with proper instruction. The sublevels of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines can help with this. If learners are at the Novice-high level in speaking, create a project that involves speaking at the Intermediate-low or Intermediate-mid level.

3. Plan instruction with a view toward helping learners perform at the target level, at the level of the product that they will need to produce. This may involve studying models of authentic products and appropriating some of the language used.

4. HL learners’ speaking and listening skills are typically stronger than their reading and writing skills, and their interpersonal skills are stronger than their presentational skills. This creates the basis for designing projects that use HL learners’ speaking and listening skills as a bridge to creating products that build literacy skills, reading and writing.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines describe what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context. For example:

**Speaking**

**Novice**: Use memorized words and phrases, cannot sustain sentence-level discourse, can only handle a limited number of everyday topics.

**Intermediate**: Can create with language; communicate at the sentence level (loosely connected sentences) about familiar topics related to daily life to express personal meaning.

**Advanced**: Paragraph-length discourse. Can narrate and describe in major time frames. Can deal with an unexpected situations.

**Superior**: Can communicate with accuracy and fluency on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings. Extended discourse, writing: series of paragraphs.

The ACTFL Can-do Statements describe what learners can do in terms of the three modes of communication: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational. Sample can-do statements are shown below.
Intermediate Mid: I can give straightforward presentations on a variety of familiar topics and some concrete topics I have researched, using sentences and a series of connected sentences.

Intermediate High: I can give detailed presentations on a variety of familiar topics and some concrete topics I have researched, using a few short paragraphs, often across various time frames.

Advanced Low: I can tell stories about school and community events and personal experiences, using paragraphs across major time frames.

Advanced Mid: I can deliver detailed presentations and elaborate on a variety of concrete academic, social, and professional topics of interest, using organized paragraphs across major time frames.

Advanced High: I can deliver cohesive presentations on a variety of complex concrete topics related to community interests and some specialized fields, and often deal with related issues hypothetically.

Step 3: Structuring the project

1. Follow a three-step process

   1. Information gathering
      Engage learners in collecting authentic models of the target product as well as in researching the real-world issues being addressed. Preferably, this would all be done in the target language.
   2. Information processing
      Engage learners in studying the format and language of the authentic models, as well as in engaging with the issues.
   3. Information presenting
      This step refers to both the final product and the preliminary pieces created along the way. Engage learners in presenting their work on an ongoing basis to each other, as a way to improve on their work. For example, if the learners are preparing a brochure, have them present to each other the captions on the pictures that will appear on the brochure. In other words, create a cycle of presenting preliminary work, followed by receiving feedback, and then improving on the work.

2. Use best practices

   a. Give students a choice of topic, some aspect of the product, etc. ….
   b. Aim for a process and product orientation.
c. Provide plentiful input and output.

d. Aim for authentic integration of skills.

e. Be content driven.

f. Engage in meaningful language, strategy, and study skill instruction.

g. Focus on developing topic-related vocabulary and key grammatical structures.

h. Provide opportunities for students to reflect on the learning process.

(Adapted from Fredricka Stoller)

3. Assess students’ progress

a. Assess not just the final product, but also the process by which the product gets created. One way to do this is to give a grade for all of the intermediate steps that lead up to the final product.

Example: If students are going to use a survey to explore how the HL community feels about a particular issue, assign points for key pieces of the project, such as studying the issue, creating and piloting the survey, analyzing and interpreting the results, and presenting the results.

b. Prioritize assessment of performance over proficiency. Effectively, this means assessing the product based on what has been done in the classroom. (See table below)

c. Select a small number of language features to grade at any given time.
Other considerations:

Essential project-design elements checklist:

Below are general guidelines from the Buck Institute of Education for projects in all areas of study. The tips accompanying each guideline are specific to heritage language learners and were created for this handbook. For more information on each guideline, see the document on this web page, “PBLWorks: Gold Standard PBL: Essential Project Design Elements”.

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2015, p. 5)
### KEY KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING, AND SUCCESS SKILLS
The project is focused on teaching students key knowledge and understanding derived from standards, and success skills including critical thinking/problem solving, collaboration, and self-management.

**TIP:** At the lower levels, students can collect, organize, and summarize information, translate it into English, make a graphic representation, etc. Consider the [ACTFL can-do statements](#).

### CHALLENGING PROBLEM OR QUESTION
The project is based on a meaningful problem to solve or a question to answer, at the appropriate level of challenge for students, which is operationalized by an open-ended, engaging driving question.

**TIP:** The community, parents, and schools are good sources of meaningful problems.

### SUSTAINED INQUIRY
The project involves an active, in-depth process over time, in which students generate questions, find and use resources, ask further questions, and develop their own answers.

**TIP:** To sustain inquiry, provide extensive scaffolding and frequent feedback at every juncture of the process.

### AUTHENTICITY
The project has a real-world context; uses real-world processes, tools, and quality standards; makes a real impact; and is connected to students’ own concerns, interests, and identities.

**TIP:** Meaningful problems or questions and place-based issues are the foundations of authenticity.
### STUDENT VOICE AND CHOICE
The project allows students to make some choices about the products they create, how they work, and how they use their time, guided by the teacher and depending on their age and PBL experience.

**TIP:** Make sure that students have all the information they need to make the right choices at each juncture of the project. For example, if they choose to write a letter to a newspaper, make sure they understand the level of difficulty involved, as compared to other products for addressing the real-world issue in question.

### REFLECTION
The project provides opportunities for students to reflect on what and how they are learning, and on the project’s design and implementation.

**TIP:** Provide opportunities for reflection at each step of the three steps of the process, including the information gathering, processing, and presenting phases.

### CRITIQUE AND REVISION
The project includes opportunities for students to give and receive feedback on their work, in order to revise their ideas and products or conduct further inquiry.

**TIP:** Build in opportunities for “controlled failure” and subsequent recovery.

### PUBLIC PRODUCT
The project requires students to demonstrate what they have learned by creating a product that is presented or offered to people beyond the classroom.

**TIP:** The intended public should inform the design of the project.

Adapted from: https://my.pblworks.org/resource/document/gold_standard_pbl_project_based_teaching_practices1

**Works cited**


**Additional Resources**

The National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) at the University of Hawaii has many resources on Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL) for language classrooms: [http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/projects/view/2014A/](http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/projects/view/2014A/)

They also hold online symposiums on this topic (described at the link above) and conduct a summer institute on Project-Based Learning: [http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/events/view/119/](http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/events/view/119/)

The next summer institute will be July 22-26, 2019, at the University of Minnesota.