

# Combination of Project-Based and Case-Based Learning Methods in Foreign-Language Teaching

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## Abstract

Foreign-language teaching will have effective results by combining theoretical instruction with practical instruction. Project-based learning is mainly theory-oriented and case-based learning is mainly practice-oriented, and the two educational methods can both enhance the students' learning motivation and efficiency. Foreign language teachers are expected to change the traditional teacher-centered teaching ways and employ the two learning methods to increase the learning efficiency of foreign languages.

**Key words:** Project-based learning; Case-based learning; Foreign-language teaching; Combination

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is a language that is universally used. English teaching may be most popular in education all over the world, including in the English-speaking countries; therefore, the improvement, reform and innovation of English teaching is most frequently mentioned

in education institutions, especially in colleges and universities. Nowadays, with the advancement of learning environments and the appearance of diversified learning methods, the traditional teacher-centered teaching method is being outdated, and the student-centered teaching method is more preferred by modern students. English teachers must keep pace with the times and be fully prepared for the change and adopt new teaching methods to meet the students' learning demands. Among the popular teaching methods, the project-based learning method and case-based learning method are welcome by many English teachers for foreign-language teaching around the world and are proved to be appropriate for the student-centered teaching purpose.

## 2. PROJECT-BASED LEARNING METHOD

### 2.1 Definition of Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning is a kind of learning method in which, guided by the teacher, the students independently accomplish a learning project. For completing the project, the students will finish the work of planning, implementing, and evaluating the project; they collect data themselves and demonstrate the learning outcomes in the class. The students are in charge of the whole project and they should understand and grasp every link of it. The most prominent feature of project-based learning is that the students are the main body in the learning process, while the teacher only serves as a learning guider. Although the project is accomplished with the guide of the teacher, the students are the protagonist in the project and the teacher only plays a minor role.

Project-based learning stemmed from the labour education in Europe in 18<sup>th</sup> century and the cooperative education in US in 19<sup>th</sup> century. It became rather perfect in the middle and late 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been popularly adopted by teachers from then on. As a modern

learning method in education, project-based learning is welcome by the students because it is mostly involved with the participation of the students in the project which is assigned by the teacher. The students can actively conduct the project as they like. This learning method is advantageous for cultivating the students' creativity and innovation, and thus the students are active and willing to acquire more knowledge; they will not passively accept the knowledge imparted by the teacher like the traditional teaching. In project-based learning, the students find out the result of the project by themselves with team work, not induced by the teacher to arrive at a result. So the students can have the feeling of accomplishment, which can spur anyone to carry on the learning task, and the learning efficiency will be enhanced significantly (Zheng, 2006).

## 2.2 The Stages of Implementing Project-Based Learning

The application of project-based learning can be divided into three stages (Chen, 2009). The first stage is called the preparation stage. The detailed content of the project is devised by the teacher according to the teaching objectives of each course. The teacher may divide the course into several parts, and each part is a project; then the students will be divided into several groups, and each group will undertake a project. With team work and team spirit, the group sets out for the preparation of the project. The preparation work includes collecting material, analyzing data, discussing the key points, summarizing the project, preparing the presentation of the project, etc. During the preparation stage, the students' abilities of autonomous learning and creativity can be made into full play. Thus the motive force for acquiring knowledge is so strong that the learning interest and efficiency is huge. The second stage is called the implementation stage. Each group first makes presentation for their preparation work and the teacher and other groups comment on their preparation work and give suggestions for further study. Next, the teacher is to instruct some key and difficult points involved in the project and then lets the students discuss the project in groups and then each group provides their opinions on the project. During the discussion, the teacher is expected to make some guidance for the students' thought-provoking learning. The third stage is called the evaluation stage. In this stage, the students will write an essay for what they have learned in the project, what they want to improve, what they want to learn later or further. The teacher gives some advice on their evaluation essays and then the students finally accomplished the project and are ready for next project assigned by the teacher.

## 3. CASE-BASED LEARNING METHOD

### 3.1 The Definition of Case-Based Learning

Case-based learning is to use real cases for classroom teaching. It was first put forward by Professor Langdell in

Harvard in 1870. This teaching method was first applied in medical school, and was then successfully applied in business school in 1920s, and has been soon spread and universally used (Li & Wang, 2010). This teaching method replaces the traditional teaching textbooks with real cases as the teaching material and changes the traditional teacher-centered way of teaching into a student-centered one.

In case-based learning, the teacher plays the role of learning deviser and motivator, encouraging the students to take part in the discussion of the case, unlike the traditional teaching in which the teacher is a scholar who impart knowledge to the students.

Case-based learning is advantageous for the students to acquire knowledge actively. First, it encourages the students to think independently. Traditional teaching normally theoretically instructs the students the way to do something, but this way may not be feasible in reality. This mere theoretical learning makes the students bored and the learning enthusiasm and efficiency are reduced significantly to some extent. Secondly, case-based learning focuses on ability rather than mere knowledge. The traditional textbook study will ignore the ability cultivation; as a result, the students can not apply the knowledge in practice. While case-based learning combines knowledge in practice, which makes the students later establish their career more easily. Third, case-based learning emphasizes two-way communication. In traditional education, the teacher is the actor of the show and the students are the audiences, and there is little communication. While in case-based learning, with the cases, the teacher and the students communicates much more for knowledge acquiring, problem solving, critical thinking (Zheng, 2006).

### 3.2 The Steps of Case-Based Learning

Case-based learning is a good means for the teacher to illustrate some difficult or dull theoretical knowledge. As it is boring and monotonous to merely teach the students theories in class, it is more interesting and effective to let the students grasp some theory by real, vivid, specific cases.

The first step of case-based learning is that the teacher finds the most appropriate cases for the classroom instruction. The cases must be selected according to the teaching objective and match the point of learning. The teacher should first study the cases before beforehand, make full preparations, and get ready for any question that may be raised by the students in class. In addition, the teacher should find several questions according to the case, for the students to find the answers in class. The second step is carried out during the class. The teacher provides the relative case according to some difficult theoretical point, and the students read and analyze the case and take several minutes to think about it to arrive at their own idea and understanding of the case. Then the

teacher divides the class into several groups and lets the students have a discussion about the case and share their ideas within the group. Each group should summarize their main opinions and then presents their main opinions before the class. Through the group discussion, the students can have a thorough understanding of the case, and if necessary, the teacher can make some further explanation to clarify the case. After that, the teacher should ask the students some the questions about the case and let the students find the answers by group discussion. After the discussion, each group provides their answers before the class. Then it is the teacher's task to summary the case and relate it to the difficult theoretical point to ensure the complete understanding of it. The third step is that after class, the teacher asks all the students to write a reflection report about the case and summarize the understanding of the theoretical point and if necessary, the students should find more cases about the point to deepen the understanding of it.

Through the three steps of case-based learning, the difficult and abstract theoretical study becomes easy and concrete; the students' learning motivation and efficiency is enormously enhanced. Through the analysis and discussion of the case, case-based learning can cultivate the students' ability to analyze cases, to solve questions, to carry out teamwork and mutual communication.

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## **4. COMBINATION OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AND CASE-BASED LEARNING IN FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TEACHING**

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### **4.1 Application of Project-Based Learning in Foreign Language Teaching**

With the wide use of project-based learning in education, many teachers and researchers have begun to apply the method in foreign language teaching, and there are many representatives like Eyring (1989), Hedge (1993), Henry (1994), Beckett (1999), Fried-Booth (2002), Beckett & Slater (2005), Beckett & Miller (2006), Dooly (2008). The famous educator John Dewey put forward the notion of "Learning through Doing", and foreign-language learning is no exception. The foreign language teacher should enable the students to do language tasks to harvest the success of foreign language learning. He should assign the students some language projects to do according to students' interest and language usage. The teacher can invite the students to participate in the project design to satisfy their real language needs. This way can solve the problem that many students now have less motivation to study foreign languages because the classroom knowledge has less feasible usage in real life or because the knowledge imparted by the teacher in class has no depth and breadth to some students. Through project-based learning, the students can get the knowledge according

to their own needs and they are active to accomplish the project assigned to them, and the students' independent learning ability is highly elevated.

### **4.2 Application of Case-Based Learning in Foreign Language Learning**

Case-based learning, which was proved in 1924 to be successful and effective by the Business School of Harvard University in MBA teaching, has been universally adopted by many teachers (Li, 2002). Because the cases are practical and related to real environments, the students are more willing to accept this learning method. Foreign-language learning, especially the grammar, is sometimes very boring and dull to students, so the teacher should find the appropriate cases to make some linguistic parts that are the boring and difficulty to understand interesting and easy to grasp. The cases are just like examples, clarifying and making clear and simple the linguistic points that are hard to some students. The teacher should arrange the cases according to different levels, to make the easy cases as the foundation for more difficult ones and finally form a case chain for further learning. Case-based learning can make foreign-language acquisition easier and is thus more welcome by the students; therefore, the teacher should accumulate as many as possible cases to facilitate foreign language learning.

### **4.3 Combination of Project-Based Learning and Case-Based Learning in Foreign-Language Teaching**

#### **4.3.1 Before the Class**

Before the foreign-language class, the teacher should devise the projects that will later be assigned to the students to complete. The contents of the projects should be devised according to the teaching objectives and should help to realize the learning objectives for the students. The teacher can also collect the learning needs of the students and combine them in the projects. For example, for grammar teaching, the teacher can divide it into several projects like the tense, the voice, the mood, the nonfinite verbs, the clause, the parallel structure, the sentence pattern, etc. Then the teacher hands out the projects to the students who have been divided into several groups in advance. Each group will finish a project with teamwork. Before the classroom teaching, the students will do several tasks according to the assigned project, like understanding the project, discussing the key and difficult points of it, getting the related information, analyzing the information, preparing the class report. The time before the class is mostly involved with independent learning and teamwork for the students.

#### **4.3.2 During the Class**

After the preparation before the class, it is time for real class time. Unlike the traditional teaching, to use project-based learning and case-based learning, the teacher in the class is not the main participant, but the students are

the main participants in the whole class time. In this way, John Dewey's notion of "Learning through Doing" can be really realized, and because the students are fully engaged in the class, they will not be distracted, so the learning efficiency is considerable.

During the class, first, the teacher will ask each group to present what they have learned about the project before the class, what problems they have met and how they solved them. After the presentation, the teacher can make some further explanations or comments about the project and if there are some problems not yet solved, the teacher should provide some help. Then is the time for case-based learning. For each project, there may be some key and difficult point for the students to grasp, the teacher should provide the students with some cases related to foreign-language learning. The students then analyze the cases and discuss them in groups. The teacher should also raise some questions according to the cases for the students to answer. During students' discussion, the teacher can take part in their discussion, to provide some help and instruction. After the discussion of the case, each group should give their opinions about the case and provide the answers to the questions. This discussion part can enhance the students' abilities of solving problems and critical thinking. Then the teacher comments on the discussion work and gives some insights on the case and relates the case to the linguistic point, so as to facilitate the students to have a better understanding of the project.

#### 4.3.3 After the Class

After the class, the students are asked to write an essay to summarize the project and the cases for the project, which is called the reflection part. The students should write what they have learned through the project, what linguistic points the project is mainly involved with, how many linguistic problems they have encountered, whether the problems are all solved, how much further related linguistic learning they may carry out later. The teacher should give more cases for linguistic practice to consolidate the students' further understanding of the project, and if necessary, the teacher should ask the students to find out more related linguistic cases, until the students have completely grasp the main aspect of the foreign language in the project. Then the project is finally accomplished, and the students are ready for the next project.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Project-based learning is advantageous to cultivate students' ability of independent learning and teamwork, making the students find problems in the process of completing the project and learn how to solve problems independently. Case-based learning helps to facilitate the key and difficult theoretical point in classroom teaching with practice, which can make the classroom learning more interesting and efficient. Foreign-language teaching is involved with both theoretical and practical learning, so the teacher should combine project-based learning with case-based learning in their work. As project-based learning is mostly concerned with theory and case-based learning is mostly concerned with practice, the combination of the two teaching methods can arrive at effective results in foreign language learning.

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