

Language Learning Reimagined

by Amy Reed

Summary: Consider project-based learning as a platform for language development instruction.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning, PBL, Problem-Based Enhanced Language Learning, PBELL, WIDA standards

The 2020-2021 school year was not lacking in firsts! While there were some firsts that I would dread if they stuck around, i.e., distance learning, there was one that I hope permanently remains within my teaching repertoire: project-based learning (PBL). As an English language development teacher, I have been accustomed to delivering a curriculum directly and explicitly. Typically, in person, this has served my students well. However, due to the need for increased engagement on account of distance learning this past year, I knew I needed to find a different approach. Project-based learning was the answer.

With the support of [Designing a Problem-Based Enhanced Language Learning Lesson](#) (iTeach ELLs, 2020) guide, I was able to provide a unique and engaging learning experience for my students (see Figure 1). Linguistically driven, this instructional tool assured me that language would be squarely rooted in the lessons that

I co-created with my students. This excellent resource guaranteed that my students would continue to develop their foundational as well as academic language, all while exploring a topic that was compelling and exciting for them to learn about. I recommend that you check out the website [iTeachELLs](#), which has an online module sequence that highlights the essential PBELL Lesson components necessary to get you started, and excited.

Launching my PBL investigation was aided by a fantastic episode on the [Cult of Pedagogy](#) website called [How to Create a Project-Based Learning Lesson](#) (Gonzalez, 2020). Jennifer Gonzalez and her guest, Dr. Jenny Pieratt, are thorough as they outline and detail PBL lesson design. They provide critical information that ranges from pre-planning to creating assessment rubrics for evaluating student projects. I also recommend Dr. Pieratt's website, [CraftED Curriculum](#). Another essential resource that supported my instructional endeavor was [PBLWorks](#) (Buck Institute of Education), whose website provides resources like online learning tools, ready-made projects, planning templates, and student self-assessment rubrics. One tool to note is their [Project Planner](#), which is a template that can map an entire unit onto one page. Working with PBLWorks materials helped me to discover three key PBL tenets: participation, collaboration, and presentation. These dovetailed perfectly with the [WIDA Social and Instructional Language Standards](#) (WIDA, 2020). With Washington state becoming a part of the WIDA consortium, this was a great opportunity to embed those standards more fully into our class project investigations.

In addition to the project-based learning resources, I engaged students with [Kath Murdoch's Cycle of Inquiry](#) (Joseph, 2013) model as well as a six-step research process to add rigor and structure to our work. Combining the cycle of inquiry and research process allowed me to chunk and structure the workload so that students were not overwhelmed. [Aida Evan's Editable Flipbook Template](#) (Slidesmania) allowed students to organize and present their research, citations, and bibliographies in a digital format. Collective group work, aided by embedded student discussion protocols, like those found in Jeff

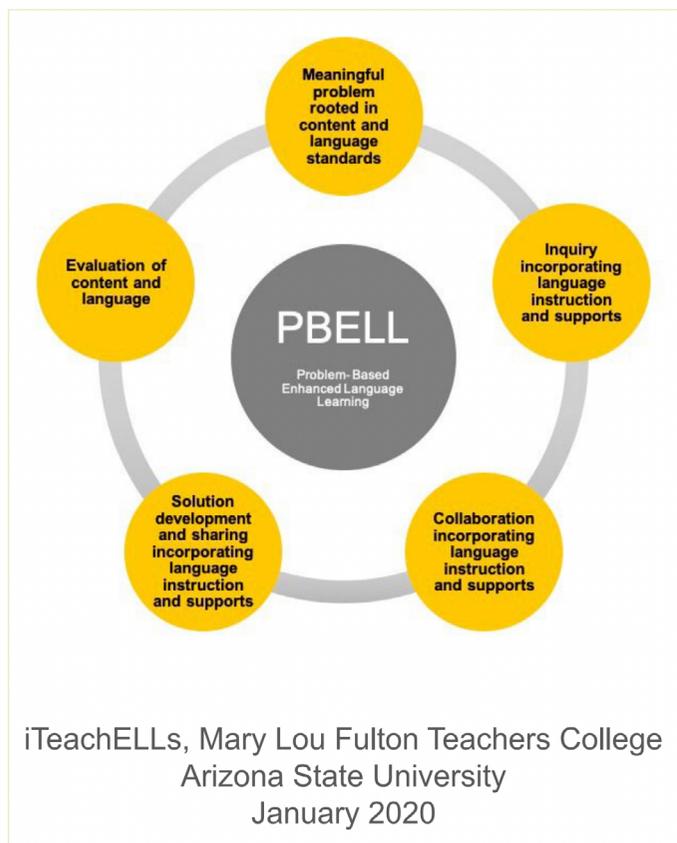


Figure 1: Designing a Problem-Based Enhanced Language Learning (PBELL) Lesson

Zwiers' book, *Next Steps with Academic Conversations* (Zwiers, 2019), was student centered as well as culturally responsive due to the interactive nature of learning. Lastly, PBL was the perfect platform in which to exercise [Universal Design for Learning](#) (CAST, 2018) strategies, which allowed me to create and provide flexible learning options and pathways within our exploration of study. For example, using a project choice board, students had the option to choose a digital final project to represent their learning. There were many *Minecraft* creations. All these additional strategies and frameworks bolstered student work and participation.

Through a wealth of resources, I was able to provide distance learning that students felt compelled to attend

and engage with while simultaneously continuing their journey of language development. Authentic engagement yielded much meaning-making, rich conversation, and knowledge building as students investigated and researched. Language objectives were realized as evidenced by the academic language that abounded from breakout rooms, well-posed interview questions and responses, and vocabulary-rich presentations about myriad inquiry topics. The entire class flourished with the promising platform of Problem-Based Learning as its base. With my new understanding of the advantages that this approach offers as a vehicle for language acquisition and development, I plan to continue to provide a reimagined language experience for my students this next fall. I encourage you to do the same!

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