
ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THEIR JAPANESE LEARNING THROUGH PROJECT BASED LEARNING (PBL)

NATHAN LANE
St Mary MacKillop College

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines an approach to engage students in their learning of Japanese through the Project Based Learning (PBL) pedagogy. The way the High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS) and an instructional model for explicit teaching were incorporated in the Project Based Learning framework will also be outlined.

INTRODUCTION

There is a lot of information online and in a variety of books published about Project Based Learning (PBL). However, to my knowledge little has been written about how PBL can be used as a contemporary pedagogy for teaching and learning Japanese. The purpose of this paper is to outline how PBL can be a vehicle for engaging students in their study of Japanese at a secondary school level.

A search on the internet provides many reasons about the importance of incorporating PBL into the curriculum. For instance, Edutopia provides a comprehensive rationale for PBL:

PBL Helps Students Develop Skills for Living in a Knowledge-Based, Highly Technological Society. The old-school model of passively learning facts and reciting them out of context is no longer sufficient to prepare students to survive in today's world. Solving highly complex problems requires that students have both fundamental skills (reading, writing, and math) and 21st century skills (teamwork, problem solving, research gathering, time management, information synthesizing, utilizing high tech tools). With this combination of skills, students become directors and managers of their learning process, guided and mentored by a skilled teacher. (Edutopia 2007)

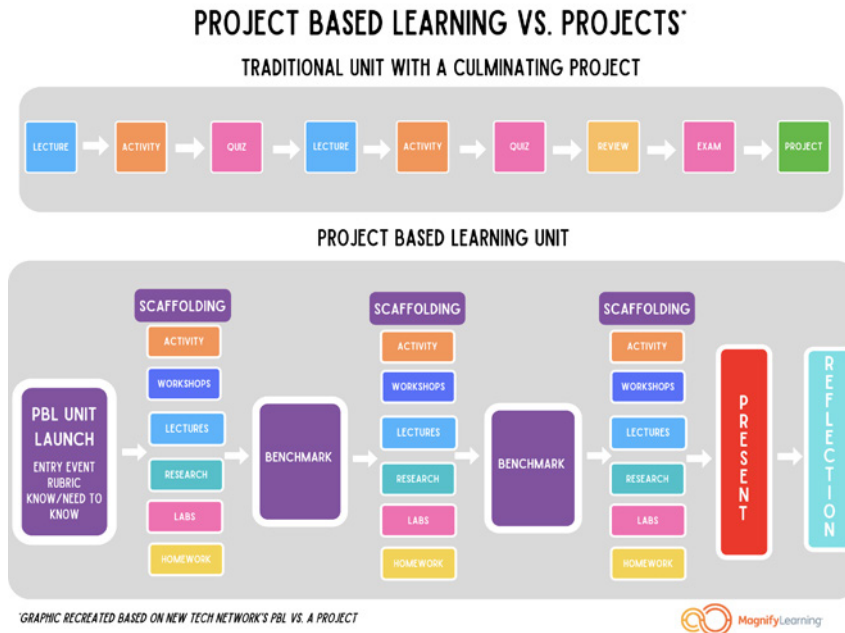
There are a number of misconceptions and myths around PBL. The most common myth is that PBL is not rigorous, there is no explicit teaching, and it is all about group work. To address these misconceptions, teachers can access PBL frameworks that provide some structure and sequence to the creation of engaging units of work. One useful framework is available on the Magnify Learning website (see Figure 1 below). This framework provides a useful structure for teachers to follow from the beginning to the end of a PBL unit of work.

The challenge for Japanese teachers embedding PBL into their programs is how to create authentic PBL experiences without forcing the pedagogy into a unit of work.

The key features of this framework are:

- A driving question or a question to which students are unable to do a simple search online to find out the answer. Rather this question needs to be open-ended and thought provoking; and it needs to spark interest.
- Entry event—an activity to spark the student's interest in the unit.
- Scaffolding—this is where a model of explicit instruction can be incorporated, and addresses the misconception that there is no explicit teaching in PBL. This issue will be discussed further below.
- Benchmark tasks—these are formative assessment tasks students complete as they progress through the unit.
- Presentation—or an opportunity for students to present their knowledge to the class, to another class or to people outside of the school, either individually or in groups.
- Reflection—regular opportunities for students to reflect individually or with others on what they are learning and how they are learning.

Figure 1 Traditional Unit vs. PBL Unit



(Source: Magnify Learning (N.d.): <https://www.magnifylearningin.org/planning-a-project-based-learning-unit>)

MODEL OF EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION

The scaffolding component of the PBL framework allows a model of explicit instruction to be incorporated into PBL. Recently, many schools have adopted a model of explicit instruction to assist in developing a common structure for the way lessons are taught, and a common language around teaching practice. An explicit instructional model also assists in embedding the High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS) developed by the Department of Education in Victoria. The HITS “are a bank of 10 instructional practices that are internationally recognised as some of the most reliable teaching strategies for delivering learning outcomes.” (State Government of Victoria 2023) The HITS are: setting goals, structuring lessons, explicit teaching, worked examples, collaborative learning, multiple exposures, questioning, feedback, metacognitive strategies, and differentiated teaching. A useful and easy to remember and follow model of explicit instruction uses the LEARN acronym (see Table 1).

Table 1
AN EXAMPLE OF A MODEL OF EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION

L earning Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning intentions and success criteria are introduced to students.
E ngagement and Prior Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage students with a hook (or entry event) and/or explore student’s prior knowledge. Review learning from previous lessons.
A pply Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encounter new learning using the High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS). Opportunities for students to explore, create or build.
R eflect and Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review learning intentions and success criteria. Students indicate their understanding. Teachers provide feedback to support student learning.
N ext Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify areas for improvement and address students’ individual needs. This will inform the direction of teaching in the next class.

Source: Adapted from Bayside P-12 College (2024) <https://bayside.vic.edu.au/instructional-framework-2-2/>

AN EXAMPLE LESSON USING THE LEARN EXPLICIT INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL

In this section an example lesson using the LEARN model will be discussed. The lesson is designed for the students to learn body parts in Japanese.

Learning Objective

- To be able to brainstorm adjectives in Japanese.
- To be able to sing a song to learn the body parts.
- To be able to label the body parts in Japanese on a character/mascot.

Engagement and Prior Knowledge

Brainstorm known adjectives.

Apply Learning

Introduce body parts using the “head, shoulders, knees and toes” song. Label body parts on どーもくん (Doomo-kun, the official mascot of NHK, Japan’s public broadcaster) and use a Blooket game or Quizlet to practice the vocabulary for body parts.

Reflect and Feedback

Reflect on today’s learning. What did you find easy? What did you find challenging? In what other ways or areas can you apply today’s learning?

Next Steps

- To be able to use adjectives to describe body parts.
- The engaging activities and explicit instruction in this lesson ensure the students achieve the Learning Objectives for the lesson.

USING THE PBL FRAMEWORK

In this section an example of the progression through the stages of the PBL framework created by Magnify Learning will be outlined for a unit of work at Year 9 focusing on ゆるキャラ (see Table 2). The driving question for this unit is “How can we create a mascot to effectively promote a place?” Throughout the unit students conduct research and engage in discussions and reflections on ゆるキャラ in order to respond to the driving question. Examples of where the HITS fit into the stages of the PBL framework have also been included in italics.

Table 2

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW THE PBL FRAMEWORK CAN BE USED

Entry Event	Scaffolding	Benchmark 1	Scaffolding	Benchmark 2
Hold a ゆるキャラ Grand Prix contest. Students make their favourite ゆるキャラ out of materials they can find around their home. Look at photos and a video of ゆるキャラ. What do you see, think, wonder when you look at these viewing texts?	Review the ～があります structure from Year 8 and the vocabulary for places in a city (e.g. beach, restaurant) and adjectives to describe a place (e.g. pretty). <i>HITS questioning (what do we remember from Year 8?)</i> <i>Throughout the unit ensure learning intentions and success criteria are provided for each lesson. HITS setting goals.</i>	Students choose a city in Australia or around the world, and create a brochure for this place in Japanese using the ～があります structure. For example:メルボルンにきれいなうみがあります。 <i>Provide an example of a brochure—HITS worked examples.</i>	Introduce vocabulary: body parts (use song), colours (mini car activity and song), and adjectives to describe physical features (e.g. 大きい、小さい、長い). Kahoot/Blooket/Quizlet to learn vocabulary. Body parts puzzle. Fly swat game to learn colours. <i>HITS explicit teaching, multiple exposures and differentiated teaching.</i>	Vocabulary quizzes on body parts, colours and adjectives.

Scaffolding	Benchmark 3	Scaffolding	Present	Reflection
<p>Use vocabulary wheels to learn the grammatical structures for describing appearance.</p> <p>Students listen to a description and make the body part out of plasticine (e.g. 目が大きいです。)</p> <p><i>HITS explicit teaching, multiple exposures and differentiated teaching</i></p>	<p>Put together a poster of 10 different ゆるキャラ and use the vocabulary wheels to describe the features of the characters in Japanese.</p> <p><i>Provide an example of a poster—HITS worked examples.</i></p>	<p>Introduce the vocabulary for writing a profile of a character (e.g. name, age, where they live, things they like).</p> <p><i>Provide an example of a profil—HITS worked examples.</i></p>	<p>Students design a ゆるキャラ for the place they created the brochure for at the start of the unit.</p> <p>They describe their mascot in Japanese and present their description to the class (and another class) in a fashion parade activity.</p> <p>They design the costume for their mascot that their partner will wear during the fashion parade while they read the description.</p> <p>Students write a profile of the character they design (e.g. name, age, where they live, things they like).</p> <p>Peer feedback will be provided as well as feedback from the teacher in the form of a rubric.</p> <p><i>HITS collaborative learning.</i></p>	<p>Student Reflections</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did I have to do today? • What did I find easy? • What did I find difficult? • Which skills did I use? • Where else could I use these skills? (transfer of skills to other learning, real life etc.) • Continue to reflect on the driving question. • Use a rubric to assess the fashion parade task. <p><i>HITS feedback and metacognitive strategies.</i></p>

Footnote: Spinning vocabulary wheels are useful interactive learning tools. The large wheel has the words written in Japanese on the side. The smaller wheel has a cut-out section that will reveal the translation of the word in English as it is moved around. The two wheels are joined together by a split pin.

The Magnify Learning PBL framework uses benchmarks to assess learning throughout the unit. The benchmark tasks can be formative assessment tasks, for example vocabulary quizzes. The assessment of macro skills throughout the unit is through the use of rubrics: for example, the brochure and poster writing tasks, written profile and description of the mascot, and the oral presentation describing the mascot.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of things to consider when implementing PBL pedagogy in a Japanese program. First is student collaboration. Teachers cannot assume that students know how to collaborate and work effectively in a group situation. Experience shows that some students do more work than others and this can cause friction. Students therefore need to be taught the skills on how to collaborate. One way PBL addresses, and supports, student collaboration is to make students accountable in a group situation through group contracts. These contracts outline how the group will work together, and include norms and agreements to help keep the students on track throughout the project.

Second, student voice and agency are important considerations when developing a program that will engage students in their learning of Japanese. Opportunities for students to be involved in developing PBL units need to be explored. This includes finding out what students want to learn, and receiving feedback from them at the end of the unit on what they enjoyed and did not enjoy so the unit can be refined for future use.

Third, a key component of PBL is developing 21st century skills. Rubrics for language learning tend to focus on the way students are developing their skills to communicate in Japanese, for example, their listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing skills. However, ways to assess 21st century skills in rubrics, for example, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication, also need to be explored.

Fourth, another key component of PBL is creating connections with other subject areas. Traditionally secondary school subjects are taught in silos, but PBL presents an opportunity to explore connections across subject areas. These links across curriculum areas should be authentic and meaningful, and not forced.

Fifth, a PBL unit is framed around a driving question. One way to develop such questions is by framing them in a similar manner to the International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Program (MYP), which provides three types of inquiry questions to promote deeper levels of thinking. These are 1) factual inquiry questions—remembering facts and topics; 2) conceptual questions—analysing big ideas; and 3) debatable questions—evaluating perspectives and developing theories. This will enable lots of deep thought and reflection throughout the unit as these questions are explored. At the junior secondary level, much of the reflection will be in English as students do not have the language skills to reflect in Japanese. However, in the *ゆるキャラ* unit there are opportunities for students to develop their Japanese language skills through engaging in the activities outlined above.

Finally, PBL encourages students to share their learning in a public forum. Such a forum may take the form of presenting to peers, adults or people from outside of the school. Opportunities for students to present in Japanese in a public forum need to be explored more comprehensively. In the *ゆるキャラ* unit, the students present their fashion parade of characters/mascots to students from another class. In this way, PBL offers opportunities for teachers to explore how student learning can be shared and displayed beyond the classroom. Other options may include a display in a public space such as the library, thereby creating links with members of the community and local organisations.

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