

Realizing the Potential of Project Learning in the English Language Education KLA

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Project learning in the English Language Education KLA

The importance of project learning in promoting English learning has always been recognized in the English Language curriculum. As stated in the English Language Curriculum Guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2004), projects promote the **integrative use of language skills and strategies**. Through the process of planning, information searching, note-taking, interviewing, data analysis, discussion, presentation and other steps often involved in project work, students use language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and other learning strategies in an integrated manner.

Projects, in most cases, encompass **life-wide learning and self-learning**. Students are moved out of the classroom and learn in the community. Familiar classroom settings are replaced by a more stimulating and engaging environment. Through engaging in meaningful tasks for authentic purposes, students are motivated to explore more and learn independently (Beckett & Miller, 2006). All this can help students connect what they learn at school with the outside world.

Project learning at Wai Chow Public School (Sheung Shui)

Teachers at Wai Chow Public School (Sheung Shui) have introduced project learning into their school-based English curriculum for more than 10 years. For instance, every year, P.4 students work in groups to interview foreign visitors in Tsim Sha Tsui. After the outing, students construct a collage and present their findings verbally. In terms of language focus and theme, this project has been a natural extension of the textbook chapter *Having fun in Hong Kong*. Teachers observe that students enjoy this kind of experiential activity and recycle learned vocabulary and grammar forms in a meaningful way.

Creating space for project work: Textbook adaptation

Recently, teachers have introduced a new project titled *A School Outing to Kadoorie Farm* in P.5. Compared with the project in P.4, this project was intended to be more challenging as students were required to complete the majority of the work individually. To scaffold students' learning, project work was incorporated into classroom teaching. The original textbook chapter *Fantastic people* has been replaced by project materials. Reading passages, the biographies about the athlete *Liu Xiang* and the astronaut *Yang Liwei*, have been replaced by the biography of *Sir Horace Kadoorie*, the founder of Kadoorie Farm (Appendix A). In this way, teachers have retained the text type biographies in the curriculum as well as provided students with some background information about the farm. The final task in the textbook, *Doing a presentation about a famous person*, has been replaced by a writing task based on the visit to Kadoorie Farm. The language focus on the present perfect tense has been merged with the previous units (Chapter 5 & 6) which have similar grammatical foci.

Making project work a natural extension of classroom teaching

Itineraries

The visit to Kadoorie Farm can take a whole morning. Students can be divided into 4 groups, with 20-25 students in each group. Four parallel activities are conducted at the same time, each lasting about 40 minutes. These activities include (1) Animal encounters, (2) Art activities at the Art House, (3) Guided tour of the Piers Jacobs Wildlife Sanctuary and (4) 'Pig' talk at the Pigsties. The following timetable can be used as reference:

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
9:30 - 10:10	Animal Encounters	Art Activities	Guided Tour	'Pig' talk
10:10 - 10:50	Art Activities	Animal Encounters	'Pig' talk	Guided Tour
10:50 – 11:30	'Pig' talk	Guided Tour	Animal Encounters	Art Activities
11:30 – 12:10	Guided Tour	'Pig' talk	Art Activities	Animal Encounters

Animal encounters

Students can be given the task of interviewing the animal caretaker who looks

after the African Ball Python at Kadoorie Farm. To help students prepare for the interview, teachers can brainstorm a few examples in class. Students then work in groups to generate their own questions. The interview questions are collected and grouped under the headings *appearance, habitat, enemies, diet etc.* Each student can be assigned to ask a particular question during the interview. To help students build confidence in speaking English in front of strangers, students can practise the interview in class. On the day of the visit, individual students, with a full set of questions on hand, can take turns to interview the animal caretaker. Students must jot down their answers. They are expected to reflect on this experience and write down their feelings and thoughts in the reflection log.

Art activities at the Art House

In the Art House, students can be taught to protect trees and to use tree rings to do handcrafts. In order to strengthen the message of protecting trees, the story *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein can be taught in class. Students can be encouraged to deepen their understanding of the story by expressing their feelings and thoughts in the post-reading session. Apart from linguistic responses, students can further express themselves kinesthetically through an activity called *Scavenger Hunt* (Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden, 2017). In this activity, students can stick one thing they find on the farm in the project book to represent one of the following propositions:

- One item which represents Past, Present and Future
- One item that they want to be
- Something that reminds them of their childhood
- One item they want to exist forever
- Find something which cannot be seen through the eyes
- A place where they would like to lie down

Guided tour at the Piers Jacobs Wildlife Sanctuary and ‘pig’ talk at Pigsties

There are four kinds of animals on the farm. They are namely: barking deer, wild boars, dog-faced fruit bats and pigs. All animals are kept there for conservation and educational purposes. Before the visit, students can be asked to search the Internet for information about these animals. This could help students prepare for the talks given by the tour guides at Kadoorie farm. Afterwards, students can observe these animals and outline their features in the project book.

Catering for learner diversity

Since students are streamed into different classes based on their abilities,

teachers have designed **differentiated outputs** to cater for their needs: **Average and lower ability classes write a journal** about this visit. To produce more detailed and interesting writing, students need to reflect on this outing before they proceed to journal writing. In the reflection log, students must think about what they have learned, the most interesting part of their visit and what they think about this outing. **High achievers need to write an informational text** in the form of a report on fruit bats, one of the animals students see at Kadoorie Farm. The idea is that higher ability students are familiar with journal writing and ready to take on a more challenging task.

Teachers have used the concept of flipped classrooms (EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, 2012)¹ to structure the lessons: High achievers need to watch a few episodes of teaching videos about informational texts in class and finish the rest at home. This allows students to view the learning content multiple times at home and allows teachers to use class time to assess students' understanding of report writing. In class, students apply the knowledge they gained from the video (i.e. the organization of informational texts) to deconstruct the report on barking deer (Appendix B). The next step is to collect information about fruit bats. Once again, students watch a video clip at home and jot down facts about this species. They are encouraged to search the Internet for further information and to make use of the information they have learned from the tour guide to write up their reports.

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Impact on teaching and learning

The visit to Kadoorie Farm generated much interest among students. Students looked forward to this visit and were motivated to find information about the Kadoorie family and farm online. Teachers channeled this enthusiasm into learning by using the KWL strategy (**K**now, **W**ant to know, **L**earned).

Before reading the biography of Sir Horace Kadoorie (Appendix A), students were asked to share what they knew ('Know' column) about this topic from other sources. A great deal of information about the Kadoorie family and the farm was shared in class. Students then worked in groups and formulated questions about any further information they wanted to learn ('Want to know' column). With questions written explicitly on the blackboard, students then read and checked if they could find answers from the passage. This reading strategy not only helped promote effective reading, but also turned reading into an active process. Students were able to **connect**

¹ The flipped classroom is a pedagogical model in which the typical lectures and homework elements of a course are reversed. Short video lectures are viewed by students at home before the class session, while in-class time is devoted to exercises, projects, or discussions.

the knowledge they gained online with learning in the classroom. In this way, learning became a more meaningful and pleasurable activity.

As mentioned earlier, teachers helped students brainstorm and rehearse interview questions before the **Animal encounters**. To **increase the interaction between students and animal caretaker**, teachers emailed copies of interview questions to the caretaker. This enabled her to communicate with the children better by preparing real objects such as strings and photos for illustration. She also had an understanding that she would not do all the talking, but rather let students take the lead in the interview. During the Animal encounters, individual students had the chance to observe and touch the African Ball Python, and, most importantly, talk to the animal caretaker. Teachers observed that students engaged in the task and participated actively in the interview. Quiet students overcame their shyness to interact with the animal caretaker. **They were willing to express themselves and able to speak loudly and confidently in an unfamiliar setting.** A few students were able to demonstrate more mature interaction skills by coming up with follow-up questions spontaneously.

Furthermore, teachers found that it was useful to use photos taken during the visit to help students recall their memory before **writing the journal**. In the pre-writing stage, teachers shared their own journals with the class. Since the whole class experienced the same outing, students were aware that they should **write more than what they did and saw together in their personal journal. They should provide descriptions with details and personal feelings as well.** The following extracts are taken from the journals of an average student (Extract 1) and a low ability student (Extract 2):

“Everyone was excited because it was the first time we went to Kadoorie Farm. First, we went to the toilet. Then, we visited the Pier’s Jocabs Wildlife Sanctuary. We saw barking deer. They were Mark and Lily. Their sound was like a dog barking. We also saw fruit bats there. They were very small! Next, we visited da hua bai pigs and wild boars. They were very fat. They loved sleeping and eating. After that, we interviewed the snake caretaker. We knew a lot of knowledge about African Ball Python. In the end, we went to the Art House to make the painting of a tree ring. My classmates’ works were very beautiful.” (Extract 1)

“We visited a lot of animals there such as barking deer, fruit bats and African ball Python. Also we made the print of a tree ring in the Art House. I liked seeing the African Ball Python most because I could touch it. Also I interviewed the animal caretaker of the African Ball Python. She loved her job very much. She was nice too.” (Extract 2)

Both students wrote about activities that they were interested in and added details to enrich their writing. The average ability student was able to use adjectives (*excited*) and an exclamation mark to express her feelings. The low ability student was able to talk about her thinking in sentences such as ‘*I liked seeing...*’ and ‘*She was nice...*’.

For students in the **high ability class**, they had to **write an informational text**. Teachers used the app EDpuzzle **to do flipped learning**.¹ This app can scaffold and monitor the viewing process. Teachers set comprehension questions to check students’ understanding and used the viewing reports to monitor students’ viewing behavior (viewing duration and frequency). Since all students had some background information about informational texts and fruit bats at home before attending the writing lessons, this saved much class time for discussion. Teachers reflected that flipped classrooms could successfully reduce the teaching load and allow quality interaction in class.

Moreover, teachers were amazed to learn from the EDpuzzle reports that some students viewed the same videos several times. Clearly, this group of students needed a considerable amount of time to understand a short educational video. This was a revealing experience as teachers were alert that they should not choose videos that last for too long and may need to edit or divide videos into segments to provide more support to students of different ability levels. In addition, the EDpuzzle reports showed that students paused and repeated several times (EDpuzzle prevents viewers from skipping) to cater for their own learning needs. In this, teachers showed much appreciation of **students’ self-regulated learning behaviour**. Students understood that viewing educational videos were different from viewing entertainment videos and they were able to monitor their understanding and reflect on their own learning. By infusing e-elements into project work, learning was truly extended beyond the classroom. Moreover, it became **more student-centered** as students had much control about the process.

Furthermore, teachers observed that most students were enthusiastic about the learning process. They were well-prepared for the writing lessons. Through deconstructing an informational text on barking deer (Appendix B) and brainstorming, teachers could elicit students’ knowledge and check their understanding. In the end, most students completed **a formal report with an introduction, headings and a conclusion (Appendix C)**. They made use of techniques such as asking rhetorical questions to arouse readers’ interest, providing surprising facts to attract readers’ attention in the introductory paragraph; and summarizing facts in the concluding

paragraph. However, teachers reflected that variations in terms of content among students were not strong. Students' reports contained similar information about fruit bats. This is understandable as the input source was the same in class. Teachers reflected that **learners' autonomy** was an issue they needed to address in the future. They should have trusted the students more and given them freedom to write about animals of their own choice or even to choose their own final products, be they oral reports or posters. In this way, the final output could be more diverse and the sharing of students' works can become more meaningful.

In this presentation, teachers are going to focus on the following aspects: teaching the biography, preparing students for the interview, and scaffolding students to write journals and informational reports (flipped classrooms). Since this project lasted for two weeks, the audience may be interested to know more about textbook adaptation and assessment focus. Teachers will address these issues as well. After the presentation, you can download a full version of this project at the website of Wai Chow Public School (Sheung Shui).

References:

1. Beckett, G. H., & Miller, P. C. (Eds.) (2006). *Project-based second and foreign language education: Past, present, future*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.
2. Curriculum Development Council. (2004). *English Language Education Key Learning Area English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1–6)*. Hong Kong: Government Printing Department.
3. EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative. (2012, February 7). *7 Things you should know about flipped classrooms*. Retrieved from <https://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eli7081.pdf> on 20 Dec 2016.
4. Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden. (2017). *Scavenger Hunt*. Retrieved from <http://www.kfbg.org/upload/Documents/scavenger-hunt.pdf> on February 15 2017.

Appendix A:

Read the biography and find out more about the founder of Kadoorie Farm.

Sir Horace Kadoorie

Sir Horace Kadoorie was a philanthropist. He was a member of the Kadoorie family who owns China Light and Power Company and The Peninsula Hotel. The Kadoorie name is famous in Hong Kong. The name is everywhere: Kadoorie Avenue, Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden, Sir Ellis Kadoorie Secondary School (West Kowloon) and Sir Ellis Kadoorie (Sookunpo) Primary School.

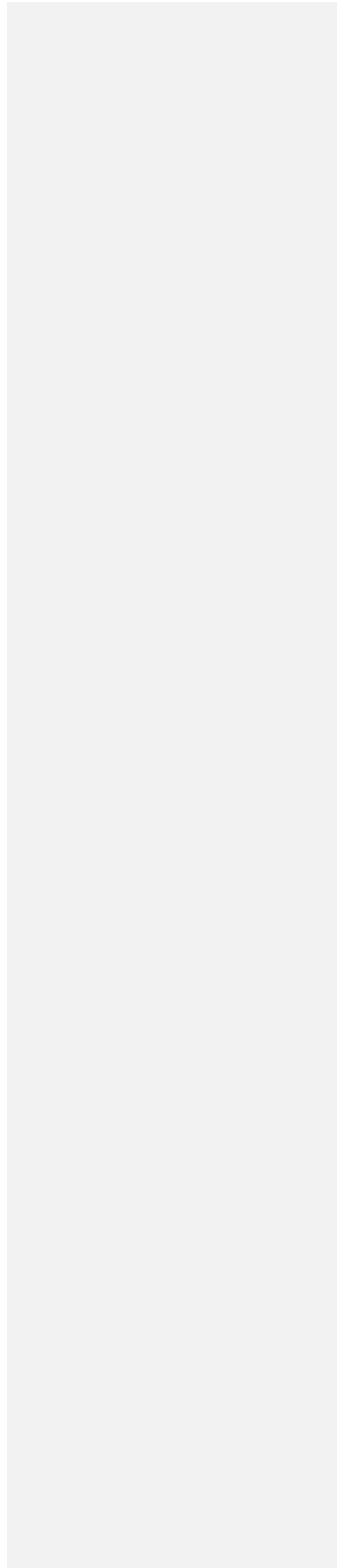
Sir Horace Kadoorie was the son of a Jewish businessman from Iraq. He was born in 1902 and died at the age of 92. He and his brother Lawrence Kadoorie founded Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden (KFBG) in 1956. The Farm is at the foot of Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's highest mountain. It aims at helping farmers to improve their lives and provides the public with a beautiful place for leisure and educational experiences.

Sir Horace believed that the best way to help people in need is by helping people help themselves. In the 1960's most people were farmers from Mainland China. They lived in the New Territories and were very poor. Horace cared a lot about these villagers. He, through KFBG, helped hundreds of thousands of farmers to earn their own living. They were given free pigs, chickens, hens and cattle to run their own farms. They were also helped to grow easily marketable fruits and vegetables.

Nowadays there are not many farmers in Hong Kong. KFBG has become a place with theme gardens, vegetable terraces, walking trails as well as conservation and educational facilities. Visitors can enjoy nature by touring the Farm, learning about different species of animals and plants in Hong Kong. They can also learn how to grow crops and make handcrafts in workshops and talks.

People can see the statue of Sir Horace near the entrance of KFBG. The statue shows Sir Horace sitting on a bench. It looks like he is welcoming everyone

who comes to visit KFBG. One can easily feel his love and compassion in his motto: help people to help themselves.



Appendix B:

Read this informational text (report). Number the following:

① Topic /title, ② Introduction, ③ Headings, ④ Conclusion.

What information can you find in the introduction and conclusion?

A Report on Barking Deer at Kadoorie Farm

Have you ever seen a barking deer? Barking deer are shy animals. They are so timid that they can be scared to death easily. You can see them if you visit Kadoorie Farm in Kam Tin. There are two barking deer there. They lost their mothers when they were babies. People at Kadoorie Farm take good care of them. They have become tame and cannot return to nature.

Appearance

Barking deer are small. They are about 30 inches long and 20 inches tall. They are brown in colour. Their faces are darker than their bodies. Male barking deer are usually bigger than female barking deer.

Diet

Barking deer do not eat meat. They eat leaves, seeds and fruits. They look for food at night.

Habitat

They live in the countryside. If you are lucky, you can see them in Sai Kung and on Lantau Island.

Interesting facts

Barking deer are timid animals. They are afraid of humans and dogs. They call like dogs' barking, that is why they are called barking deer.

Barking deer are one of the few wild animals in Hong Kong. People should protect the countryside and make sure that their living place is safe and nice. You can learn more about barking deer if you visit Kadoorie Farm or its website.

Appendix C:

A report on Fruit Bat

Have you ever seen a fruit bat? ~~Some~~ people call fruit bats the Flying Fox. ~~There~~ are ten types of fruit bats. ~~They~~ are hard to see because ^{they are} ~~their~~ small.)

Appearance

Fruit bats are really small. They are black. Some of them have brown coloured body. They are really cute too.

Diet

Fruit bats do not drink blood. They eat fruit, small insects, nectar, small animals like ants, butterflies, or bees.

Habitat

Fruit bats come only at night. They live in dark caves. If you look everywhere at night, maybe you can find them.

interesting facts

Bats have poor vision, but fruit bats have large eyes and they also have excellent vision. Most fruit bats are larger. Their sense of smell is excellent.

Fruit bats are one of the few animals in Hong Kong. People should protect the countryside and make sure that their living place is safe and nice. You can learn more about fruit bats if you read other books or check the website about them.