



Cultivating Advanced Integrated Skills With PBI

by [Shélynn Riel](#)

Project-based instruction (PBI) has gained popularity in both general and second-language (L2) education. Grounded in constructivist theory, PBI affords many possibilities for transforming classrooms into active learning environments (Krajcik et al., 1994). However, a review of the literature shows discrepancies between English language teachers' and students' evaluations of PBI. Although some teachers endorse PBI because it provides opportunities for comprehensible output and integrated language teaching, there is some evidence that students are frustrated by this form of instruction because it prevents them from learning from the teacher and textbooks and from focusing on language skills (Beckett, 2002). There is also discussion about whether PBI should be incorporated at the university level, as projects can seem juvenile in nature and design unless framed appropriately for an audience of adult learners.

The project I present here was not only amenable to my university-level English learners, but it transformed our classroom into one in which students embraced the role of critical consumer, cultural observer, researcher, and journalist. Through the creation of a digital newspaper, students examined narrative, persuasive, and argumentative writing structures, noticing an overlap of skills needed for effective oral and written communication.

Launching An Integrated Skills Project

In spring of 2019, I set out to deliver advanced integrated skills through project-based learning for a group of nontraditional adult students. I feared the worst—a total lack of buy-in from the students—as I hoped for the best.

Over the course of 15 weeks, students explored distinct rhetorical structures and purposes in writing as they developed individual digital newspapers. The project wasn't without its challenges, though; the creation of a digital newspaper, particularly for students who may have been out of the classroom for several years or are unfamiliar with emerging tech tools, is no easy feat.

This project encouraged recognizing the “beauty of the journey” just as much as it promised a unique outcome for each individual. Today I want to take you on this journey with the hope that you'll be able to discover nuggets of inspiration to use in your own classroom.

Learning and Language Objectives

But first, a bit of context. The course, which ran for the first time in this format in spring 2019, was entitled “Advanced Integrated Skills: Journalism and Media Studies.” The learning and language objectives covered all language domains, the most important of which are outlined here. Together, we aimed to

- sharpen note-taking skills and the ability to understand and infer the main ideas and details of readings and classroom discussions;
- create and discuss original written pieces using various structures, including descriptive, compare/contrast, and problem/solution;
- perform basic research to locate and later incorporate resources effectively in written work;
- become familiar with newspaper formatting and terminology;
- plan and execute well-organized and cohesive presentations on selected topics; and ultimately
- create and publish a digital newspaper.

The Project

Part 1. Reflecting on Media Consumption and Bias

We began the semester thinking about what it means to be a critical consumer of information, a skillset that has proven incredibly important in the age of widespread misinformation. Students reflected on bias, both as it exists in their own lives and across media, analyzing headlines of current events and attempting to understand political underpinnings. Students looked at the phenomenon that is targeted advertisement, and pinpointed marketing strategies as they appeal to distinct demographics.

For their first major assignment, students created an advertising campaign for a product or service of their choice, offering two separate advertisement strategies, each lending itself to a different demographic. In the following samples, the student shows how she would advertise Trek brand mountain bikes for an “independent preteen” (Figure 1) and a “concerned parent” (Figure 2).



It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.

Figure 1. Bike advertisement targeting “independent preteens.”

TREK

COOL!

FUNNY!

FAST!

THE BEST GIFT FOR YOUR KID!
since 1975

- This isn't a small adult bike—it's built from the ground up for kids, by people who know exactly what works for them and what doesn't
- When you're learning to ride, simplicity is best: a 1x8 drivetrain lets kids focus on keeping the rubber side down
- The kid-specific frame geometry has a sloping top tube that makes it easier to hop on and off
- The rear brake caliper is tucked into the frame to help prevent damage from laying the bike down
- More information, please come to our website below.

https://www.trekbikes.com/us/en_US/

Figure 2. Bike advertisement targeting “concerned parents.”

Part 2. Considering Unique Experiences

After recognizing the bias that exists around us, we started to reflect on how our unique experiences have shaped who we are. Students recalled moments, people, and things from their past that bring up feelings of joy. Naturally, the conversation shifted to food. Students chose recipes from their home countries and painted a picture of their experiences preparing or sharing that meal. Students used a personal narrative to introduce their special dish to their peers during a

presentation, and some even brought samples to share. In their e-newspapers, students included the recipe. Figure 3 shows a students' recipe for Jiuniang Yuanzi.

INGREDIENTS:

jiuniang:200g
yuanzi:100g
Eggs: 2
goji:5g
water:50g

STEP1:

Put a pot of water to boil, then threw yuanzi into the water.

STEP2:

Cook until the yuanzi upward drift, then put eggs, cook over low heat until the egg is set.

STEP3:

Put jiuniang to boil again, then turn off the heat, add a few goji. Done!

Figure 3. Recipe for Jiuniang Yuanzi.

Part 3. Researching History and Historical Figures

The next two segments in the students' newspapers would emphasize key figures and moments in history. Students selected a day and individual that they believed to be of great importance in the history of the world. Students wrote expositions and biographies to include in their

newspapers, and shared timelines that they created during presentations. In Figures 4 and 5, respectively, you'll see a student's biography of Steve Jobs and her main takeaways from the infamous Tiananmen Square protest.

Steve Jobs was born on February 24, 1955, in San Francisco, California. He enrolled at Reed College in Portland, Oregon in 1972. Although he dropped out of college after six months, he developed his love of typography from a single calligraphy class, which later influenced the design and marketing of the Apple company. Jobs traveled to India in mid-1974, in search of spiritual enlightenment. After staying for seven months, Jobs left India and returned to the US.

In 1976, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak started Apple Computer in the Jobs' family garage. In the same year, Wozniak invented the Apple I computer. In 1980, Apple Computer became a publicly traded company. On September 17, 1985, Jobs resigned from Apple due to his divarication with CEO Sculley. In 1985, Jobs founded hardware and software enterprise NeXT Inc.. In 1986, he bought the Graphics Group (later renamed Pixar) from Lucasfilm's computer graphics division, the studio merged with Walt Disney in 2006, making Steve Jobs Disney's largest shareholder. In 1989, Jobs first met his future wife, Laurene Powell. They married on March 18, 1991, then had three children afterward. In 1997, Jobs returned to his post as Apple's CEO. In 2008, Apple became the second-biggest music retailer in America. In 2009, Fortune magazine named him as the CEO of the decade.

In October 2003, Jobs was diagnosed with pancreas cancer, after a decade of struggling with the disease, he died at his Palo Alto, California, home around 3 p.m. (PDT) on October 5, 2011.

Figure 4. Steve Jobs biography.

The Chinese government begins its crackdown on pro-democracy activists in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Hundreds are killed and thousands are arrested.

- May 20, Martial law was declared, 250,000 troops were sent to the capital, blocked by protesters.
- June 3, Troops marched along the main roads surrounding central Tiananmen Square, firing at civilians, caused mass killing near Tiananmen square.
- The first armored personnel vehicle appeared on the Square. More troops arrived, began to seal off the square. Students were persuaded to leave, or expelled by violence.

EFFECTS

- On others: The Tiananmen crackdown changed the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese economy, and Chinese foreign policy.
- On me: Aroused my curiosity of this piece of true histroy and more thinkings of democracy.

Figure 5. Historical highlight: Tiananmen Square.

Part 4. Writing Travel Guides

In the next segment, students selected one of their favorite places to share with their peers in the form of a travel guide, highlighting some of their go-to activities. This gave students another opportunity to work on building their descriptive language through narration; they shared how to spend 72 hours in their chosen locale. The student example in Figure 6 acts as a great tool for tourists in Shenzhen.

72 HOURS IN SHENZHEN

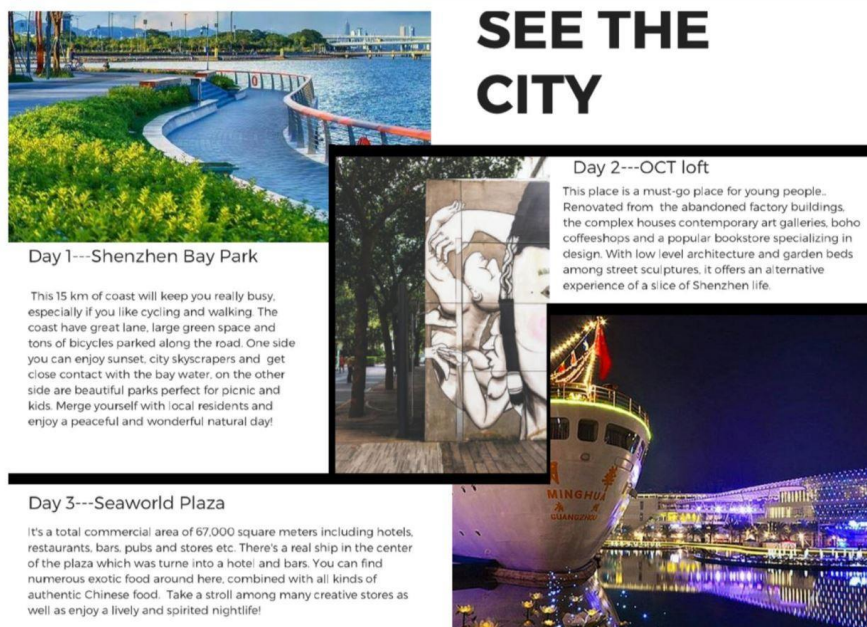


Figure 6. Travel guide for 72 Hours in Shenzhen.

Part 5. Examining Advice Columns

Another segment examined the history of advice columns, taking “[Dear Abby](#)” as an example. Students wrote letters soliciting advice and then worked in pairs to provide advice to one another; in this way, students were able to be featured in each other’s newspapers. This activity created a solid introduction to persuasive writing, and inspired students to create annotated bibliographies, in which they provided extension resources that directly correlated with the advice they gave to their peers. (E.g., a student who wrote about a challenge with weight received a list of resources related to mindful eating and breaking habits.)

Part 6. Discussing Current Events Through Editorials

The second to last piece of the puzzle, and perhaps my favorite, was the inclusion of an editorial. Throughout the semester we examined current events and held several discussions and debates about topics that resonated with students: abortion, same-sex marriage, the legalization of marijuana, and so on. The editorial portion of this e-newspaper project was an opportunity for students to select a topic that spoke to them on a personal level and craft an opinion piece, pulling from persuasive elements that we had seen in earlier segments. Students were responsible for sharing their thoughts and guiding conversation around their topic.

Part 7. Recognizing Students

The very last segment was the “Meet the Editor” autobiographical piece. During the construction of this section, students expressed discomfort in speaking about themselves and their accomplishments. I took this opportunity for students to share words of appreciation for their

peers, highlighting what personality traits they'd noticed about one another that deserved recognition. This not only created a warm environment, but inspired individuals to see themselves as others see them, catapulting them into the autobiographical process with increased ease.

The Final Project

Students truly embraced each of the segments for its unique characteristics and opportunities for sharing with their peers, and witnessing the coalescence of their culminating artifacts proved more rewarding than we could have anticipated. What seemed like a lofty goal at the start of the semester came to fruition, and with it, a deep sense of pride and nostalgia. During one last presentation, individuals shared their final products, highlighting language and content objectives that presented themselves along the way, and reflected on insights gained throughout the process.

Figure 7 provides a snapshot of the final product, the first page of two students' newspapers. For entire compilations, see [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#).

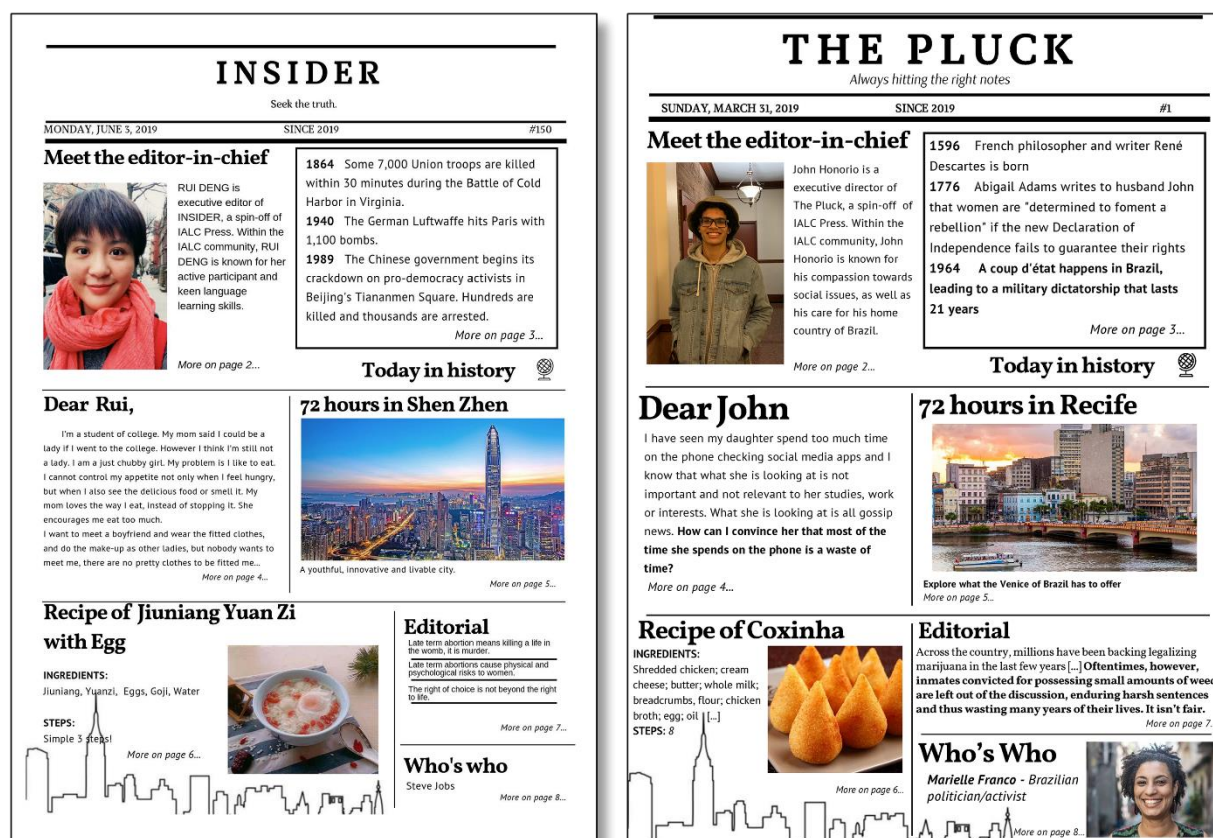


Figure 7. Examples final student project.
(See [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#) for the full sample projects.)

Table 1 shows how each of the segments aligned with content and language objectives.

Table 1. Project Segments Aligned With Objectives

Newspaper Segment	Content Themes	Language Considerations
Advertisements	Consumer tendencies Recognizing distinct demographics	Persuasive language Recognizing bias in media Linguistic registers
Recipes	International cuisine	Personal narrative
Today in History	Historical perspectives Creation of timelines	Author's purpose and tone Historical narrative/ exposition
Who's Who?	Influential figures of our time	Biography
72 Hours in...	Tourist attractions	Descriptive language
Dear Abby	History of advice columns	Giving advice Annotated bibliography
Editorial	Synthesis of current events	Language for debate Argumentation
Meet the Editor-in-Chief	The role of an editor	Autobiography

Reflections and Implementation Tips

- 1. Take advantage of free tech tools.*** There is so much out there, especially now that so many classrooms are online. Expect to spend some time orienting yourself before introducing these tools to your students, and allow time for a learning curve on their end, too. I relied heavily on the following resources and created an in-class tutorial for each, which allowed students to navigate these new tools in a supported way:

- [Padlet](#): Despite their work being primarily independent, students participated in a great deal of peer revision activities and brainstorming sessions. This tool (now quite familiar to most) allows for online collaboration and continuing the conversation outside of class.
- [Canva](#): A free design platform that offers a plethora of free images, icons, and layouts, Canva also offers the ability to create teams so students can share their work during the process.
- [Piktochart](#): Another design platform that allows students to create infographics with ease, Piktochart is particularly useful when relaying high-impact takeaways.

**Students who didn't feel comfortable working with these tools were permitted to rely on Microsoft tools (PowerPoint and Word) to create and present their work. They were*

required, however, to use the new tools for at least three of their submissions to ensure exposure for potential future use.

2. **Create ample opportunity for collaboration and peer feedback.** These collaborative interactions are important, despite the outcome being individual. While this was the culminating project for the term, students were provided with class time to work through some of their segments. Some peer feedback was guided, but the most incredible exchanges occurred when students simply had a chance to share ideas and ask questions in an informal way.
3. **Choose segments based on the needs and interests of your group.** Working with advanced students meant that I had predetermined structures and skills to incorporate, which is why I chose segments that lent themselves to our specific objectives. This is a project that could easily be pared down and scaffolded, incorporating fewer segments and language and content objectives that serve your unique purposes. And of course, beyond instructional and curricular design is the question of student engagement: The more students felt like they had a say in the segments we created, the more effort they put forth.
4. **Pair each segment with a short presentation.** Although students often knew what their peers were planning, they were eager to see the “final products.” It was obvious that they felt proud of their processes and really reveled in seeing how their suggestions came to fruition in their peers’ creations.
5. **Be present and available throughout the process.** I won’t sugarcoat it—from a planning perspective, this project presented a challenge. I tried to find a balance between encouraging student autonomy and celebrating our learning community working toward a common goal. During this first run, I worked with nine students. It was effective because I was available to guide them throughout the process.

If you are attempting this with a larger group, I would definitely recommend setting up accountability partners within the group, so that students can use each other as resources in a more structured way. I would also recommend scheduling check-ins for each segment, and not waiting to see items until they are finalized.

A year later, I find myself constantly looking for opportunities to facilitate the creation of another round of digital newspapers with my students. Despite my initial reticence to commit to PBI fully, I have since discovered that thoughtful PBI can be so enthralling that students forget that they are even learning.

This project not only served as an excellent formative assessment tool of integrated skills in this particular class, but proved a class favorite. Students were proud of their work and called attention to how working toward the creation of a highly personal learning artifact bolstered not only their language skills throughout the process, but their confidence in their abilities as well. What more can an educator ask for?

References

Beckett, G. (2002). Teacher and student evaluations of project-based instruction. *TESL Canada Journal*, 19(2), 52–66. <https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v19i2.929>

Krajcik, J. S., Blumenfeld, P. C., Marx, R. W., & Soloway, E. (1994). A collaborative model for helping middle grade science teachers learn project-based instruction. *The Elementary School Journal*, 94(5), 483–497. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1086/461779>

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