

REVITALISING ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION

# Peace Project

## The new needs of an Oral English classroom

Peace Project was a crafted answer to the new needs of an Oral English classroom. It combines a number of teaching methods and goals, such as sustainability and problem-based learning. Learners, at first, found Peace Project overwhelming but, by the semester's end, found the course stimulating, engaging, and the right amount of challenging. It allows learners to take control of their own learning by choosing topics, jobs within their groups, how they will prepare for each class, and what they help produce in class each week. Peace Project could be graded up or down depending on learner and classroom needs.

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## Introduction

Traditional teacher-centred learning is the norm in China. However, for an Oral English course that is not constructive for the language learners. Peace Project, a new semester-long Oral English course, was created to address this. Peace Project pulls from multiple points of inspiration for an active learning, flipped classroom where learners choose a country and topics, and learn, think about, and negotiate regarding the United Nation's (UN's) 17 Sustainability Goals (UN nd.b). All research and planning are conducted outside the classroom so that class time is all oral language production. Peace Project's aims are to allow learners to research the problems facing the world now and in the future, learn and use the lexis and grammar to discuss them, work together and plan with a team, negotiate and collaborate with other peers, logically think, and write up a treaty, in English, to (begin to) correct the problem within each chosen sustainability goal.

## Inspiration

Inspiration for the Peace Project derives from a number of sources. Two TED(x) Talks, by John Hunter (2011) and Joe Ruhl (TEDx Talks 2015), are combined with my experience in the Model UN program (UN nd.a) in high school for three of the four legs of the foundation of Peace Project. The UN's list of 17 Sustainability Development Goals (UN nd.b) is the fourth leg of the foundation of Peace Project. John Hunter's World Peace Game (Hunter 2011) has been an inspirational video of mine for many years.

The World Peace Game Foundation explains the game as:

*[t]he World Peace Game is a hands-on political simulation that gives players the opportunity to explore the connectedness of the global community through the lens of the economic, social, and environmental crises and the imminent threat of war. The goal of the game is to extricate each country from dangerous circumstances and achieve global prosperity with the least amount of military intervention. As "nation teams," students will gain greater understanding of the critical impact of information and how it is used. (WPGF nd)*

The World Peace Game, then, is clearly more focused on politics as it calls itself a political simulation, while Peace Project is more focused on sustainability. Overall, I was highly impressed with the idea of classroom teams solving these tough and 'adult' problems. The World Peace Game reminded me of the UN's Model UN program (UN nd.a) This influenced the design of the course, so that each week the groups were tasked with negotiating an actionable, international treaty with the aim of resolving a problem. While the complete scenario might not be authentic to the futures of these learners, the research, teamwork, planning, and collaboration through negotiation to create a treaty/contract are all real world, authentic skills

they will need for their careers as English teachers, English interpreters, English translators, and using English in business settings, as well as in private life. Joe Ruhl's TED Talk (TEDx Talks 2015), in which he advocates giving learners choice in the classroom to encourage and empower them, is the third point of foundation. I was excited by the idea of taking myself out of the driver's seat and allowing the learners to determine what they would learn (within the framework of the 17 Sustainability Goals). This was an empowering aspect of the class for the first-semester first year learners and assisted them in realizing that they would be running their own classrooms and undertaking the decision making, so it had an immediate effect, as well as potential future effects.

## New Approaches and Concepts

Two new concepts were introduced in this course. The flipped classroom was the first. Chinese universities mostly use traditional teaching methods where teachers instruct learners via the 'banking system', as Freire would call it (Freire 1968). This is where the teachers are the container of knowledge, pouring the knowledge or liquid in the container into the empty container which is the learner. Chinese learners are used to sitting down, listening intently to, and copying everything written on the blackboard or Microsoft PowerPoint presentation slide. These learners are not used to having to process and immediately use information or, possibly, to ever use the information besides repeating it for testing purposes. The flipped classroom is quite different as it uses many student-centred learning theories, such as active learning, peer-assisted learning, and collaborative learning (Akçayır & Akçayır 2018). Peace Project utilizes all these learning approaches. Learners must find the information they need and decide how and when to use it. They are working together in groups/country cabinets to support and teach each other in peer-assisted learning. Collaborative learning is when the group/country's cabinet members interact and negotiate with other groups/country's cabinet members. In total, it is all active learning as the teacher is not imparting knowledge until, possibly, the language review towards the end of class.

In the flipped classroom, 'in-class time can be used for conducting higher-order learning and teaching activities that cannot be "automated"' (Jong 2017: 306). In this way, the groups/countries would conduct their research and planning outside the classroom as homework. 'Since classroom time is not used to transmit knowledge to students by means of lectures, the teacher is able to engage with students by means of other learning activities such as discussion, solving problems proposed by the students, hands-on activities, and guidance' (Akçayır & Akçayır 2018: 1). In class, the groups/countries would be negotiating with the aim of creating an actionable, international treaty they would deliver by the end of the 90-minute class on the goal of the week. Should learners not conduct research or assist in the planning with their group/

country outside classes, if they free-ride on other learners' efforts, it would be obvious during classes as they would not have information to use in negotiations with other groups/countries. As this is an Oral English course, learners need to be speaking for practice, for the purpose of the class, and for eventual assessment.

The second concept introduced into the classroom was sustainability. 'Sustainability is a paradigm for thinking about a future in which environmental, social, and economic considerations are balanced in the pursuit of development and an improved quality of life' (UNESCO 2012: 5). Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a greater and greater focus as climate change affects the lives of so many in a plethora of ways. Teaching learners the interconnectedness of problems and of how people from different places are dealing with the same problem but in different ways is important. Showing learners how a decision in one place affects not only that local area but can, does, and will have far reaching consequences is important. It is even more important to teach these concepts to the leaders of the next generation. ESD is not uncontroversial. Ellis and Weekes (2008) briefly explain that there are some who think there needs to be an educational revolution in how we all think about and conduct education, while others believe a revolution is not needed to integrate ESD into curricula now. I do not wish to wade into this debate but merely share how this covers the tip of the iceberg (though this does so without a revolution). While Peace Project does not fully cover all aspects of sustainability literacy, it is a first step in a few ways. First, it introduces these concepts and lexis to learners. Second, it utilizes student-centred learning with ESD. Third, Peace Project allows learners (mostly) familiar with their peers and classrooms to challenge themselves and grow by taking on the roles of a country's cabinet which is seeking to get assistance from and give assistance to other countries to solve these global problems we are all dealing with.

The UN's 17 Sustainability Goals are used as the topic for each week (UN nd.b). The learners in this Oral English course were Chinese pre-service English teachers. Guadelli (2014) asks: 'how can educators expect future generations to address such concerns without providing basic knowledge about the problems and also the skills and tools for addressing them' (39)? China has one of the, if not the, largest populations. What future Chinese generations are taught will have a great impact on the future of China and the world. I believe it is important to answer this question and implement that answer immediately for best results. Ryan et al. (2010) explain that 'it has been observed, for example in detailed studies of the Australian context, that within the education sector, learning processes for sustainability are frequently neglected' (111). Peace Project is taking the first steps to combat this for the current learners and the future learners of these pre-service English teachers. By focusing on these topics, learners found the vocabulary needed for each sustainability goal when needed and used those terms throughout class in an authentic way. Additionally,

learners were educated about these issues that they are inheriting and will be dealing with, in some way, in their own future classrooms. Empathy is also learned, as their research shows them how these topics are affecting others around the world and how we can assist each other while working together.

### Activity Design

Learners are quickly introduced to the concepts discussed above. After being put into groups, the groups are assigned countries. In each class, these countries are a mix of developed and developing countries that covers each of the continents. To avoid information collusion or plagiarism from one class to another, any single country is only assigned to a group in one class. Within their group/country, each learner chooses which part of the cabinet (ruling advisory board of that country) they will be. The terms 'minister' and 'secretary' are used interchangeably but learners are expected to find out which term their country uses. These countries and jobs are theirs for the duration of the semester. Lanyard name tags are given out to wear for each class. These include basic information on each participant's country and job. Learners add their picture and name to the name tag, which is held within a plastic sleeve. At the end of the project introduction class, learners vote on which UN Sustainability Goal to discuss first.

The problems chosen were the 17 Sustainability Goals (UN nd.b) that are impacting all countries around the world. Choice occurs in which goals are discussed and when. At the end of each class, learners democratically vote for the next sustainability goal that will be discussed the following week. There are never 17 weeks in a semester, so some sustainability goals are never dealt with. Each class chooses the next sustainability goal for the following week for their own class. This means that within a week, where four different Peace Project Oral English classes are running, up to four different goals might have discussions happening.

At this point the classroom is flipped. Outside class, the groups meet to conduct research on their country and the goal chosen. They find out what their country is lacking. They find out how their country is affected by this problem, such as access to clean water. They learn what the problem entails, what solutions are already available, and what might be the choices they could champion. They begin to plan what they believe will benefit their country the most. Later in the semester, once the groups know more about their own country, the groups start to include research about the other countries being represented in the class. They learn that this will speed up the negotiations and allow them to make better deals for their country.

### Running the Activity

Peace Project was run twice for autumn semesters to eight classes of first year pre-service English teachers. While their English levels would be higher than other average native Chinese learners, most topics and associated vocabulary would not have been acquired pre-university. Most learners would not have a lot of experience in oral production of language with other learners and/or in front of a foreign (native English speaking) teacher.

The class offers an active learning environment. The teacher is merely a facilitator and moderator. After a short greeting at the beginning of class, I would only say 'go' before the learners would leap to their feet and rush to each other to begin negotiations. Facilitation is needed because learners would become so engrossed in their negotiations that they would forget to return to their group/country cabinet to discuss matters with each other. Therefore, learners are given 20 minutes for negotiation before a required period of five minutes for groups/country cabinets to meet and discuss what is happening. This is repeated twice more before the groups/countries need to explain their actionable, international treaty to the teacher. The teacher acts as a scribe of their treaty, as the basis for a quick discussion about the ideas presented by the learners. Moderation occurs while the learners are talking in their own groups/country cabinets or while negotiating with other group/country cabinet members. Good language use is noted but learners are not identified. Language needing assistance or improvement is also noted, again without identifying the relevant learners. Before voting for the following week's different goal, these language examples are considered by the class. They are shared with learners, who decide whether the language in question is good or needs improvement. If learners decide the language needs improving, they must explain the problem they see and how to correct it. As pre-service English teachers, this allows them to begin to think about how to correct their own language and that of their future learners.

Lastly, learners exercise their power of choice (TEDx Talks 2015). Each of the 17 goals are offered for the first vote and are then deleted from the list as they are chosen. Each vote is conducted by a simple show of hands for speed. When a tie occurs for the winning spot, learners vote for a second time with only the tied options allowed. The teacher could, in theory, act as a tie-breaker. However, that situation never occurred within those classes.

### Results

As the learners were first semester first year students seeking degrees using English for the majority of their careers, but did not have a lot of speaking experience, the first few weeks were usually full of timid learners conducting tentative interactions. After the fourth week, however, confidence and understanding grew. As with all course goals, learner knowledge and skills grew through use by the end of the course. Learners have told me that they had not known anything about these global problems or that they were problems outside China. They have said that they learned so many new ideas and words in a process they enjoyed, instead of being forced to memorize a list of words for testing. Lastly, learners agreed that their confidence in speaking and pronunciation had grown.

Certain goals were chosen by all groups. Certain goals were chosen before others. Goals that were always chosen and tended to be chosen early in the semester are: no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, and reduced inequality (UN nd.b). Topics that were chosen later are climate change, life below water, and life on land (UN nd.b). Occasionally, decent work and economic growth, sustainable cities and communities, and industry, innovation and infrastructure (UN nd.b) were chosen. Two goals were only ever chosen once each: responsible consumption and production; and peace, justice and strong institutions (UN nd.). Partnerships for the goals was never chosen (UN nd.b). During voting, there were times when negotiations occurred, with promises of one goal to be negotiated in a fortnight instead of the following week so the other option could win. On one occasion the class realized that a particular learner had continued to vote for one topic that no one else was voting for and decided to choose that goal. The learner wanted to discuss the ninth goal: industry, innovation and infrastructure. Every week there had only been his vote for that goal. The semester was ending and the others, in a show of empathy and solidarity, joined him in voting for the ninth goal.

The ability to choose has an interesting effect on learners. As the semester progresses, learners' attitudes toward the voting changes. Some learners grasp the ability to choose the direction of their own education. The opportunity excites them. They vote eagerly, throwing their hand in the air (or sometimes both hands) to vote for their favourite goals. Some of these learners have their interest and eagerness peter out when certain topics have concluded. Other learners need to be coaxed into voting. They seem afraid to show their interest in particular goals but grow in confidence, seeing that the teacher follows the decision voted on. As with any class, there are learners who are not interested in voting and try to not vote. By the end of the semester, though, there are few, if any, of those learners.

## Future Modifications and Development

Modifications have been made and could continue to be made. A modification made between the first two years this course was run was to add lanyard name tags for learners. The name tags create a more authentic feel for learners. It is helpful for everyone to identify each other, including learners from one's own group/country cabinet. As first year learners, they were not familiar with each other so having identification alleviated some social discomfort. It was good for other groups and myself to know what that learner's job/role in their country's cabinet was, as well as their name and country. That would give some insight into what that learner might be thinking or what a person in that role from that country might be considering.

A second modification that I believe would be helpful for first year learners is to include a basic country fact sheet in the materials learners receive. Previously, only websites and suggestions on where to gain information were given to learners. This should continue, because learners will default to conducting research in Chinese (their native language) and use a local, native language internet search engine (specifically Baidu). I cannot assist in information verification, as it is in Chinese, so I tell learners to search in English using [www.bing.com](http://www.bing.com). China blocks the use of Google so Microsoft's Bing is the best available option. The basic fact sheet could include a picture or map of the country, its name, language(s) spoken, continent it is on, type of economy and any goods produced, type of government, and more. The fact sheet should include website links for that country's government and possibly other website links to information about that country. The links to the 17 Sustainability Goals and Bing would be prominently included.

Country presentations could be a third modification. Instead of introducing the class in the second week and then beginning the negotiations in the third week, country presentations could be added in between. The learners get their groups and the instructions on what they need to do and how the semester will go. For this third week, however, the groups/country cabinets would create a PowerPoint presentation with maps, pictures, and lots of other information about their country. This allows the learners time to learn about their own country while teaching their peers about it. This is another version of a flipped classroom where learners take on the role of the teacher in instructing their peers.

Future learning for the facilitator/moderator is wanted, as well. Attending the training from The World Peace Game Foundation to possibly incorporate more of those ideas into Peace Project is a current dream of mine. However, since Peace Project began during the Covid pandemic, the inability to travel did not allow for training. Upon checking with the World Peace Game Foundation's website, the Foundation was not running any of their training workshops, even online, which meant there was no way for said training. With the world re-opening, there is hope that the Foundation will resume training.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Peace Project was created from an amalgamation of personal inspirations that bring active learning and education on sustainability to a flipped classroom. The four points of inspiration act as a foundation for this course. Learners in the course choose what sustainability goals they will learn about and negotiate on. The end goal for each class is to create an actionable, international treaty. I would like to continue conducting this course and expand it to other learners considering the benefits that learners gained. Such learners do not have to be pre-service English teachers but could be learners in any field. This could be conducted in any language, as well. In the future, modifications, such as including basic country fact sheets and country presentations at the beginning, could be added.

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