

Telling China's Stories Well in English: Project-Based Learning in the Ideological and Political Education of College English

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Abstract: Telling China's stories well in English has become a distinctive objective of ideological and political education in college English courses, yet its realization is often limited by decontextualized drills and a lack of productive tasks through which students construct and voice Chinese narratives in the target language. Drawing on project-based learning (PBL), this study designed a four-stage storytelling project, covering theme selection, bilingual source reading and script writing, multimodal production, and public presentation, and implemented it in two college English classes for physical education undergraduates at Yan'an University across a twelve-week semester. A mixed-method evaluation with 42 students, combining pre- and post-course questionnaires, product assessment, and semi-structured interviews, showed significant gains in students' confidence in telling Chinese stories in English, willingness to communicate about Chinese culture, and perceived speaking self-efficacy. Most group products reached the expected level in narrative structure, linguistic accuracy, and cultural interpretation. The findings suggest that PBL offers an effective pathway for integrating value education with foreign language competence, and the paper discusses the conditions under which the approach can be transferred to other disciplinary contexts.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning; Telling China's Stories in English; Ideological and Political Education; College English; Cultural Confidence

1. Introduction

Ideological and political education has become a defining feature of curriculum reform in Chinese higher education, and college English, as a compulsory course with a wide student audience, carries particular responsibility in this endeavor [1]. Among the forms this responsibility can take,

telling China's stories well in English has drawn growing attention because it connects language learning with cultural confidence and cross-cultural communication; researchers have explored this theme through the production-oriented approach and outcome-based education, arguing that storytelling projects can turn value-oriented course goals into concrete learning activities [1, 2]. Classroom practice, however, lags behind policy discourse. Storytelling is often reduced to isolated translation exercises or recitation of prepared paragraphs, in which students reproduce fixed texts without constructing meanings of their own [1]. Such tasks seldom require sustained English production, rarely engage students with authentic source materials, and leave little room for critical interpretation of Chinese culture. This study responds to this gap by introducing project-based learning (PBL) into the ideological and political education of a college English course for physical education undergraduates, and reports how the approach was designed, implemented, and evaluated.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 Telling China's Stories Well as a Value-Oriented Task

The rationale for telling China's stories in English classrooms rests on two foundations. The first is Byram's notion of intercultural communicative competence, which holds that effective cross-cultural communication requires critical cultural awareness, the ability to evaluate one's own and other cultures against explicit criteria [3]; a learner who speaks fluent English but cannot articulate the values, history, and daily life of his or her own culture possesses an incomplete communicative competence. The second is research on language and culture, which maintains that language teaching is inseparable from cultural meaning [4]. When Chinese culture is absent from English lessons, students may lack the lexical and discursive

resources needed to talk about China in English. Telling China's stories well is therefore not an ideological slogan attached to language teaching but a linguistically demanding task: students must select and organize facts, choose appropriate registers, manage cultural references, and anticipate how an international audience will receive their narration, all of which engage higher-order thinking and extended language production [1, 2].

2.2 Project-Based Learning in Foreign Language Education

Project-based learning is an instructional model in which students acquire knowledge and skills by working over an extended period on an authentic, engaging challenge; its core features include a driving question, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, and a public product [5, 6]. Compared with teacher-fronted instruction, PBL shifts control to learners and requires them to plan, negotiate, and take responsibility for a tangible outcome. Empirical studies at the tertiary level have generally supported its value: Kemaloglu Er found significant gains in Turkish university students' perceived oral presentation skills, speaking fluency, confidence, and creativity [7], while Mohamed reported that EFL teachers adapted project tasks through scaffolding and multimodal elements, concluding that flexible implementation can enhance language learning and critical thinking [8]. Zhang and Wu further documented a project-based course in a Chinese university in which students produced multimedia works about their native culture, showing that PBL strengthened native cultural awareness and the ability to express local identity in English [9]. These studies confirm that PBL can serve the cultural and value-oriented goals of language education, although few examples integrate an explicit ideological and political agenda with local cultural resources in general college English courses.

3. Design of the Project-Based Practice

3.1 Context and Design Principles

The practice was carried out in a college English course for first-year undergraduates majoring in physical education at Yan'an University during the spring semester. As a revolutionary center in modern Chinese history, Yan'an offers natural story resources such as its revolutionary sports

heritage. Forty-two students from two intact classes participated, forming twelve groups of three to four members. The design followed four principles: students select stories rather than receive assigned topics [5, 6]; every stage requires productive use of English [7]; source materials are authentic and bilingual so that students learn to verify information [9]; and final products reach audiences beyond the classroom to create communicative purpose [6, 8].

3.2 The Four-Stage Project Framework

The project lasted twelve weeks and was organized into four stages (Table 1). Groups first selected a theme from a menu that included the revolutionary sports heritage of Yan'an, the development of Chinese Wushu, table-tennis diplomacy, and the rise of Chinese women's volleyball, and wrote a statement justifying the choice. Students then collected bilingual materials from library databases and reputable websites, extracted key facts, and drafted an English script that underwent peer review and teacher feedback. Each group next produced a multimodal product, typically a three-to-five-minute video with subtitles and voice-over or a bilingual poster with an oral explanation. Finally, products were presented in class, displayed on campus digital screens, and uploaded to a course platform, followed by question-and-answer sessions and rubric-based evaluation.

Table 1. Four-Stage Framework of the Storytelling Project

Stage	Core Tasks	Linguistic Focus	Value Orientation
Stage 1 (Weeks 1-3)	Theme selection, grouping, topic statement	Academic writing; justification	Cultural confidence
Stage 2 (Weeks 4-6)	Bilingual source reading, script drafting and revision	Reading; narrative writing	Evidence-based narration
Stage 3 (Weeks 7-9)	Multimodal production with subtitles and voice-over	Speaking; media literacy	Creativity; teamwork
Stage 4 (Weeks 10-12)	Public presentation, display, Q&A, evaluation	Oral presentation	Intercultural responsibility

3.3 Assessment

Assessment combined process and product measures. Process evaluation drew on the topic statement, two script drafts, peer review forms,

and reflection journals, accounting for forty percent of the project score. Product evaluation used a rubric with four equally weighted criteria, narrative structure, linguistic accuracy, cultural interpretation, and multimodal quality, each rated on a five-point scale, accounting for sixty percent. Two teachers scored each product independently; the average was used when the discrepancy was within one point, and discrepant cases were resolved through discussion.

4. Implementation and Learning Outcomes

4.1 Implementation Process

Two adjustments were made during implementation. Several groups initially chose broad themes such as Chinese food or festivals, and the teacher guided them to narrow the focus to a specific person, event, or object. Because the students had varied English proficiency, the teacher provided a shared bank of sentence frames and key vocabulary during script writing, while more proficient groups were encouraged to write more freely. Peer review proved productive: groups reported that classmates' comments helped them notice background information that a Chinese audience would take for granted but an international audience would not understand.

4.2 Learning Outcomes

A questionnaire was administered before and after the project, using five-point Likert items on confidence in telling Chinese stories in English, willingness to communicate about Chinese culture, and perceived speaking self-efficacy. Paired-samples *t* tests on the responses of the 42 students showed significant increases on all three scales, with mean gains of 0.7 to 0.9 points ($p < .001$; Cohen's *d* between 0.6 and 0.9). The twelve products scored from 3.4 to 4.6 on the five-point rubric, with a mean of 4.0; narratives about the Yan'an revolutionary sports heritage received the highest average scores for cultural interpretation. Interviews with one student per group confirmed that the project increased cultural awareness, improved students' ability to discuss Chinese culture in English, and strengthened their sense of ownership over learning.

5. Discussion

5.1 Why Project-Based Learning Works

The results support the argument that PBL can translate the abstract goal of telling China's stories well into concrete learning experiences [1, 9]. Three mechanisms explain its effectiveness. First, the public product created genuine communicative pressure: because students knew their videos would be watched by classmates, teachers, and campus audiences, they attended to accuracy, coherence, and audience awareness more seriously than in a routine assignment [6, 8]. Second, verifying facts from bilingual sources turned cultural learning into active inquiry rather than passive reception, consistent with evidence that native cultural awareness develops through investigation and production [9]. Third, locally rooted themes, particularly the revolutionary sports heritage of Yan'an, connected the task to students' environment and professional identity as physical education majors, strengthening motivation and the sense that telling China's stories is a personal responsibility.

5.2 Conditions, Limitations, and Implications

The approach depends on enabling conditions that deserve attention in any transfer attempt. Adequate class time is essential, since sustained inquiry cannot be compressed into occasional sessions; in this study the project occupied roughly one third of the course hours. Teachers must act as designers and facilitators, providing scaffolding such as source lists, sentence frames, and revision protocols [8]. Assessment must be aligned with project goals so that linguistic accuracy and cultural interpretation are valued equally. Several limitations should be acknowledged: the study relied on a single institution, a small sample, and self-reported measures, and no control group was available, while products were assessed by the teachers who designed the project. Future research could adopt experimental designs, extend the approach to other disciplines and proficiency levels, and examine long-term effects on intercultural communicative behavior.

6. Conclusion

This study designed and implemented a project-based storytelling practice to advance the ideological and political education of college English, with telling China's stories well in English as its organizing task. A four-stage framework, moving from theme selection and bilingual source reading to multimodal

production and public presentation, was carried out with 42 physical education undergraduates at Yan'an University over twelve weeks. Evaluation indicated significant improvements in students' confidence in telling Chinese stories in English, willingness to communicate about Chinese culture, and perceived speaking self-efficacy, and group products reached a satisfactory standard. The study shows that value-oriented and language learning goals can be pursued simultaneously when they are embedded in an authentic, well-structured, and locally meaningful project. College English courses that give students the opportunity to investigate, narrate, and present Chinese culture in English can prepare them not only to use the language but also to speak about their own society with accuracy and confidence.

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