Enhancing Critical Thinking About Real-World Challenges: Insights From a Project-Based EFL Course on Healthy Ageing

Záborská Schack Dorota

1. Introduction

Project-based learning (PBL) as a student-centered pedagogical methodology has been recognized for its positive impact on students' critical thinking skills. In their systematic review of literature, Song et al. (2024) looked at the effects of PBL on fostering critical thinking skills and language skills within the EFL context over the past years (2013-2023), and confirmed that "[t]he findings indicate that PBL, as a student-centered approach, fosters an environment conducive to enhancing both critical thinking and language proficiency, crucial competencies in the modern educational landscape." (Song et al., 2024, p. 407).

Project-based English (PBE) course is one of the five types of Integrated English (IE) courses offered by the Center for Multilingual Education at the University of Osaka. In this paper, I reflect on my experience designing and teaching one of these PBE courses in the fall-winter semester of the academic year 2024. This 15-week-long course brought together twenty students from diverse departments of faculty of science and faculty of engineering who used English as a tool for research, discussion, and collaboration. My goal was to create an environment where students could develop particularly their productive English language skills while engaging in meaningful, interdisciplinary inquiry related to the real-world challenges, in this case their possible contribution to healthy ageing.

The course followed a structured progression: (1) students read *AGE*, a brief book about ageing written by biogerontologist Suresh Rattan, to build foundational knowledge; (2) they conducted interviews with older adults in their families or neighborhoods to explore real-world perspectives on healthy ageing and lived experiences with ageing; (3) in interdisciplinary groups, they developed projects proposing how their fields could contribute to healthy ageing; (4) in group presentations, they shared their ideas with their peers, receiving constructive feedback from their audience; and (5) they compiled portfolios documenting their work and reflections.

Students' reflections serve as the primary basis for assessing the course's impact. Drawing from their feedback and my own observations, I explore how project-based learning fostered their engagement, critical thinking, and confidence in using English. To serve as a practical guide, I provide a chronological, week-by-week account of what took place in each class. This description is followed by an explanation of the pedagogical underpinning - specifically, my goals for each class or sets of classes. I then present illustrative excerpts from students' reflections and/or key themes that emerged from their end-of-semester portfolios.

2. The Teaching Context

2.1 *Course Type: Integrated English (Project-Based English)*

There are five types of face-to-face Integrated English (IE) courses offered within the general education curriculum to first-year and second-year students by the Center of Multilingual Education at the University of Osaka: IE Liberal Arts & Sciences, IE Performance Workshop, IE Academic Skills, and IE Project-Based English. These are semi-compulsory, meaning that the students have to take a certain number of English classes during their university studies, but they have the freedom of choice. There are several instructors in charge of each type of IE who are free to create their syllabi and content of their courses following the basic guidelines regarding each type.

The aim of IE Project-Based English is described on the university website as follows (author's translation of the Japanese): Project-based English is a course centered on research projects conducted individually or in groups, starting from each student's interests. In this class, students present the results of their research in English after reading and listening to relevant English-language materials and discussing their findings and research direction with their classmates. Through these activities, the course aims to develop all four English language skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—

while also fostering research and research communication skills essential for academic work. In this class, actively using English and participating in activities is prioritized over striving for perfect accuracy. Students are encouraged to engage in discussions and express their ideas freely, even if their English is not flawless. To enhance learning outcomes, of course, it is important for students to refine their writing and speaking skills in other language-focused courses. (*Center for Multilingual Education*, n.d.)

2.2 *Why Healthy Ageing? Course Objectives and Learning Goals*

The subtitle of the course was *Healthy Ageing – Finding Possible Contributions from Our Fields of Study*. Several years ago, I designed a course on healthy ageing for students in the Department of Welfare Society and the Department of Public Policy at another public university (see Záborská, 2021). The feedback from students at that time was overwhelmingly positive. So, when I was assigned to teach a project-based course at the University of Osaka, I wanted to replicate that meaningful learning experience on a topic highly relevant to Japanese society. Additionally, I was curious to see how students from diverse fields—such as engineering, physics, chemistry, biological sciences, and applied natural sciences—would approach this issue from their unique disciplinary perspectives.

I described the course objectives and goals for them in the syllabus in the following manner: (1) Course Objectives: In this course, you will read a collection of short essays on age and ageing by biogerontologist Suresh Rattan, and other materials related to ageing. As students majoring in various fields of science, you will ponder the question of ageing in Japan, what healthy ageing is, and how can your field of study possibly contribute to or inform healthy ageing. In this course, you will become classmates with your colleagues from different faculties. Together, you will work on a project with an interdisciplinary approach to the topic in question. (2) Learning Goals: Upon successful completion of the course, students will have learned: 1. to engage in group and class discussions, 2. how to engage in online interactions, 3. how to make effective presentations individually and as a team, 4. how to conduct a research project in interdisciplinary collaborative groups, and 5. how to create a summative-reflective portfolio.

2.3 *An Online Platform*

I have been using Microsoft Teams as a supporting digital tool and online platform since the pandemic (see Záborská, 2021; Záborská, 2022; Záborská Schack, 2023). Besides utilizing its functions—such as assigning and collecting homework, distributing class materials, and easily communicating with students via chat—the ability to create separate channels for each class meeting enables me to keep a record of the classes. This also allows students to review my instructions, stay updated on class activities if they were absent, and participate in online discussions and written contributions related to that particular class meeting.

2.4 *Students*

Twenty students (5 female students: F1~F5, and 15 male students: M1~M15) from seven departments (physics, biology, chemistry, applied natural sciences, environmental and energy engineering, earth and comprehensive engineering, and earth and integrated engineering) in three different faculties (Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Applied Sciences) signed up for the course. Except for one fourth-year student, all were in their first year of university studies. The average attendance was 87 %, which is relatively high, considering that the class was meeting on the first period on Thursday.

3. Classwork and Homework Week by Week

3.1 *Week 01: Orientation and Brief Self-Introductions*

After I introduced myself to the students, I communicated to them my intentions when designing the course and the reasons for the choice of the topic of healthy ageing. We went through the syllabus together, and I explained the general flow of the classes, how to use MS Teams, what kind of work they would be expected to do, and how they would be evaluated.

Students wrote a very brief self-introduction on the MS Team channel for the first class. They were also asked to prepare for a mini professional self-introduction speech due in the following two classes.

3.1.1 *Goals*

The main goal for me was to make sure that students understood the expectations and workload clearly, so they could make an informed decision whether they wanted to stay in the course or not. None of the students quit the course. I consciously paid attention to being friendly and showing support, so that students would feel positively challenged and motivated rather than simply overwhelmed by the amount and complexity of the course work.

3.1.2 *Reflections*

According to the students' answers to the question 1. How did you feel after our very first class meeting? collected from their portfolios, overall, they experienced a range of emotions, from nervousness and uncertainty to excitement and curiosity. Many appreciated the interactive format, the opportunity to improve their English, and the chance to collaborate with classmates from different backgrounds.

"I was worried at first because I didn't know what I was going to learn, but the teacher and the friends in the group were very cheerful and made me feel at ease." (M15), or *"The introduction to the course content and structure made me want to learn more. The lecturer explained everything clearly and the atmosphere was friendly and engaging."* (M7), and *"The teacher was very kind, the members of the same team were very warm, and I felt that the classes would be conducted in a good atmosphere."* (F2) illustrate students' mixed initial reactions, such as nervousness, worries, and excitement, as well as appreciation for an interactive and friendly atmosphere.

Some students struggled with the English-only environment at first but saw it as an opportunity to improve their language skills. *"In my early English classes, I usually spoke Japanese, so I couldn't improve my skills well. However, in this class, Mrs. Dorota speaks English, so I struggled at first, but gradually got used to it."* (F5).

They showed interest in the course content and group work: *"I was glad to hear that we would be learning about healthy aging, as I thought the subject matter would be useful in real life."* (M15), or *"I thought this would be a great opportunity to practice presenting and collaborating with others."* (M5).

Some students had heard that the course was difficult but believed it would be valuable. *"Some friends told me this class is a little hard but worth taking. I was a little worried but excited."* (M5), and *"To be honest, I was not looking forward to this course because my friend said it was difficult due to the many assignments. However, I thought if I took this class seriously, I could improve my English, so I decided to work hard."* (F4) show expectations for a challenging but rewarding experience.

3.2 *Weeks 02-03: Mini Professional Self-Introduction Speeches*

In these two class meetings, students were asked to give a short (5~7-minute-long) professional self-introduction speech. The instructions were as follows: Here is a set of questions to help you prepare. *1. Who are you? 2. Where are you from? 3. How did you end up at Osaka University? (Why not another university?) 4. What is your faculty and major? (Check the English version of the website/webpage of your faculty for the correct names.) 5. What classes are you taking this semester? 6. What classes and/or topics are you looking forward to studying the most? Why is that so? 7. What are your most important study/research goals in this academic year? What (field of study/topic) do you want to explore? Why?* Let (make) your speech flow naturally. Incorporate the answers in your speech in a way that is comfortable for you. Feel free to share any other information about you.

Students in the audience were asked to take notes into their notebooks while listening to their classmates, so they could later write comments to the speaker's individual posts. (About 50 words or more within 48 hours from the class.) I provided them with a sample comment to a "sample" student post by Osaka Hanako (an imaginary classmate): *Hi Hanako. Thank you for your self-introduction. I found your interest in biomechanics quite fascinating. I didn't know much about its uses, so when you talked about ... (here comes something concrete that Hanako talked about) I got interested in it, too. Let's talk after class.* (number of words)

3.2.1 *Goals*

The main goals were to help students build positive rapport and collegiality within a relatively short time, and also think about and practice giving brief, yet more professional and in-depth self-introduction speech. This is also when I put students from different departments into six groups of 3

to 4 students

3.2.2 *Reflections*
Many students were surprised by the requirement to give, in their mind, a long self-introduction, but they saw value in it, as the following quotes show: *"I was surprised when you told us to make a self-introduction lasting at least five minutes because I had never made such a long self-introduction, even in Japanese."* (F1), or *"I had never introduced myself in such detail before, so it was a new experience."* (F5), and *"Listening to everyone's self-introductions, it was interesting to see people from different departments and faculties."* (M8)

Regarding dividing the class into heterogeneous groups, students seemed to accept it without any problems. At least, they did not show any significant stress about changing the seats and parting with their friends from the first three classes, nor did they share anything related to this later in their reflections.

3.3 *Week 04: Reading the Textbook, Writing Interview Questions, Brainstorming*
In this class, we watched a short video on WHO's work on the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030) released by the World Health Organization (*UN Decade of Healthy Ageing*, 2024), and talked and thought together about healthy ageing. I provided students with other useful materials and links related to the topic. I announced the next activity in a post titled *"Investigating older people's beliefs, experiences, and needs regarding healthy ageing through interview-Brainstorming."* The instructions communicated in class and also posted on MS Teams were: *The aim of your interview will be to gain a deeper understanding of the realities of older people, so in your group project you can think together about how you and your field of study could contribute to healthy ageing of already older people (and eventually to you, too).*

For their homework, students were asked to do the following. Instructions explained in class and shared on MS Teams were: *1. Finish reading the book AGE, 2. Access the links provided in today's class, get yourself familiar with the websites, and read the articles there to inform and educate yourself about what healthy aging can be, what the common misconceptions are, what ageism is, etc., 3. Summarize your informed understanding of healthy ageing in your notebook., 4. After you have acquired knowledge about (healthy) ageing, think of several interview questions that might help you make your interview with older people valuable and that will inform your main project of this course: Presenting A Project - Finding Possible Contributions From Our Field Of Study, and 5. Have your notes and questions ready for our next class.*

Students were also asked to brainstorm possible interview questions and post them online. I gave the students a framework for thinking about the possible questions to scaffold this activity:
As a reply to this post, share some possible interview questions for your investigation of older people's beliefs, experiences, and needs when it comes to healthy ageing. This is just our first brainstorming! What (kind of) questions do you think you could ask? E.g.: Osaka Hanako: Beliefs: ...here, write a question/questions related to what your interviewee(s) believe is connected to healthy ageing. Experiences: ...here, write a question/questions related to your interviewee(s)' experiences with (healthy) ageing. Needs: ..., write a question/questions answers to which would help you understand better what kind of needs your interviewee(s) express they have for ageing healthily.

3.3.1 *Goals*
My goals for this class were to engage the students with a variety of authentic materials related to the topic while scaffolding them with clear and paced instructions provided orally in class and in the written form online.

3.3.2 *Reflections*
Judging from the answers with their possible interview questions that all students posted within the due date, the scaffolding was successful, and they created a valuable and useful bank of questions for them to work with in the next class meeting. Here are but a few examples of students' questions investigating older people's: (1) beliefs: *How has your view of aging changed compared to before? / As you get older, have your values changed? What are they?*, (2) experiences: *What are some habits or endeavors you are glad you have done so far? Conversely, what have you done that you should not have done? / When did you start thinking of yourself as an old person? / What has changed the most*

as you get older? Also, how do you feel about being the age you are now?, (3) needs: *What do you need most to enrich your future life? / Is there anything that young people can do to support you for healthy ageing, or anything you would like them to do to support you? / Are there any health-related services that you want? / What do you think is necessary for you to continue to live longer?*

3.4 *Week 05: Finalizing Interview Protocols*
For this class meeting, we met online on Zoom in six breakout rooms (BOR), one for each group. The students finalized their group's interview protocols and got ready to conduct interviews with older people in their families or in the neighborhoods.

We also talked and thought about the idea of multiple ages within oneself taken from the reading the textbook AGE (Chapter 6, pp. 57~60).

3.4.1 *Goals*
The main goal for this class was to give students as much space as possible to work in groups. The Zoom breakout room setting allowed me to stop by in each BOR and help each group with anything they needed without being overheard by other groups.

There was only one question decided by me that I asked students to incorporate into their interviews, and that was a question of multiple ages within oneself. The instructions for the students were posted ahead of time in this class time, but on the channel for Week 06. They were as follows: In his book AGE, in the chapter ME AND MY MULTIPLE AGES, Suresh Rattan wrote: *"Age is neither one physical state of the body, nor one fixed state of the mind. Age is a continuum."* (p. 57) *"Our age flows forward and backward depending on how we feel, how we behave and how we visualize ourselves."* (p. 58) You were asked to ask your interviewees to share their opinion on this part. As a reply to this post, share their answers with the class. Start with your name in Romaji and identify the interviewee with M for a male participant and F for a female participant, followed by number and their age in the brackets and write his/her opinion. E.g., Zaborska Schack Dorota: F1 (65): F1 said that .... . M1 (72): M1 shared that ... . F2 (80): F2 told me that ... .

3.4.2 *Reflections*
Each group submitted their interview protocols within the due time. It is beyond the scope of this paper to report on each protocol. However, based on the results in the following class, the students managed to be ready for interviewing.

3.5 *Week 06: Conducting Interviews With Older People – Our Results – Now What?*
In this class, students analyzed the qualitative data from their interviews. They reported to their team mates (1) what ways of thinking their interviewees shared with them, (2) what needs their interviewees expressed, and (3) what tendencies they saw.

Students were then asked to decide together what kinds of literature/articles would each member search for and report back to the group in our next class.

3.5.1 *Goals*
Besides analyzing the qualitative data, another goal of this class was to summarize the tendencies, ways of thinking, experiences and needs, think what kind of literature would be relevant, and thus work on the background and introduction part of their group project presentation.

3.5.2 *Reflections*
Collectively, the students interviewed 37 older people in total (F=20, M=17): 14 grandfathers, 13 grandmothers, 5 unspecified, and five people other than a grandparent (aunt, uncle, mother, clerical worker, teacher). The average age of the interviewees was 75 years of age, the youngest being 50 and the oldest being 84. The total time spent interviewing was 17.5 hours, or 22 minutes on average, with the shortest time of 15 minutes and the longest time 40 minutes.

Many students reported that they had little prior experience interacting with older people in this way but found the interviews insightful. Some realized that they had misconceptions about ageing and elderly individuals. Due to the space constraints, here are but three illustrative excerpts from students reflecting on conducting interviews: *"Before I took this class, I seldom had an opportunity to talk with my grandparents. But thanks to this class's interview assignments, I got an opportunity to talk with*

my grandparents, and after this interview, we started talking once a week." (M1), *"Having lost both my grandfather and grandmother early in life, I had always assumed that the elderly were really frail, fragile, and had negative feelings about their own weakening bodies. However, when I actually interviewed them, I found that many elderly people are resisting aging and thinking about what they should do to live healthily."* (M6), and *"Through these conversations, I realized that many elderly people feel a lack of social connections. Even though they want to be more active, they often lack opportunities to do so."* (M2)

3.6 *Week 07: Working on the Project Introduction*
In this class, students worked on their project's introduction and background part. They summarized their findings in terms of beliefs and needs expressed in and tendencies emerged from their qualitative data. They tried to connect the findings with the literature they reported in class to their team mates.

The students were also asked to brainstorm ideas for their concrete project proposals, and they thought about the kinds of innovative actions which would contribute to healthy ageing.

3.6.1 *Goals*
The main goals for this class was to give the students enough of space to synthetize their findings with the literature, and to feel free to be creative while listening attentively to their peers' perspectives.

3.6.2 *Reflections*
Interdisciplinary learning, or working with students from different disciplines, emerged clearly as a key point in students' reflections. Many found it challenging but rewarding to collaborate with classmates from different academic backgrounds.

Illustrating this sentiment are the following quotes: *"Our group members were from engineering and physics, which made it difficult for me to understand physics-related aspects of our project. However, their presentation preparation was very quick, and the quality was good."* (M1), *"In my group, all members were in the faculty of engineering. However, each had a different point of view, and it was very interesting. When we decided on the outline of our project, a lot of ideas I could not have come up with appeared from other members."* (M5), *"By bringing together three people with different perspectives, exchanging opinions, and then putting them together, we came up with a good idea for a matching application for elderly people."* (M6), and *"It was very interesting that in this class, there were not only engineering students but also science students, and they had different ways of thinking when considering their respective fields of specialization."* (M8)

3.7 *Week 08:* **Mid-Term Oral Report: Introduction & Background**
In this class, all six groups gave a 10~12-minute-long mid-term oral presentation of their project introduction and background with a PowerPoint, which they did not have to submit. At this point, they also did not have to reveal whether they have any concrete ideas how their project could contribute to healthy ageing.

The students in the audience were asked to listen attentively and critically, take notes in their notebooks, and within 48 hours write their concrete comments and suggestions for each group on MS Teams.

3.7.1 *Goals*
The main goals in this class were to encourage students' attentive and critical listening and thinking, and also to show solidarity and support in making constructive suggestions to their colleagues. After each presentation, I also offered my own advice pointing out all the good and interesting possibilities and directions in which their projects could be developed, publicly, as well as individually approaching each group at their desks.

3.8 *Weeks 09~12: Preparing Group Projects and Its Presentations*
The students used these four classes for outlining, polishing, finishing, and practicing their project presentations. During the class time in Week 09, students worked on combining their own ideas with their classmates' suggestions, and my advice. During the Week 10, I was available to assist or support students only online via the chat due to influenza. Students were understanding of my condition and worked diligently on polishing their projects. They could work at a place convenient for all the group

members. Four out of six groups chose this option, and two groups worked in the classroom. In Week 11, I met with the students in our regular classroom and helped each group on individual basis listening to them, talking with them, and giving them last pieces of advice. The class time in Week 12 was again used for practicing the final versions of their presentations in the place of their choice. I was available online via the chat function. No questions were asked, nor any further assistance or help required.

3.8.1 *Goals*
The goals of these four classes were again two-fold. On one hand, I made sure that I show and provide students with solid support, while simultaneously allowing them space and time to work at their own pace.

3.9 *Weeks 13~15: Group Project Presentations*
Here are brief introductions to the six group projects based on my notes during the students' presentations in class and their PowerPoint files. Three groups also shared the script of their presentations, in more than 5000 words in total.

DOKODEMO DOOR Project (Group 1)
This project helps elderly people stay socially and mentally active by using the Metaverse to host virtual class reunions. Many older adults value reconnecting with friends but face challenges traveling long distances. By creating nostalgic virtual environments with familiar landscapes and foods, this project allows seniors to relive memories, strengthen social bonds, and boost cognitive health, ultimately improving their well-being.

Find New Interactions Through DIY! (Group 2)
This project encourages elderly people to stay active and socially connected through DIY house renovations. Older adults and young volunteers work together to refurbish abandoned houses into community spaces. This hands-on activity promotes light exercise, social interaction, and a sense of purpose, helping seniors maintain both mental and physical health. Even after the renovations, these spaces will serve as gathering places for continued community engagement.

Anti-Dementia Sports (Group 3)
This project focuses on helping elderly people stay physically and mentally healthy through sports and community interaction. Many seniors want to maintain their health and independence while preventing dementia. Research shows that exercise improves mental health and reduces the risk of cognitive decline. To support this, the project introduces enjoyable and accessible sports like Mölkky and Boccia, which anyone can play. The plan includes community sports events where seniors can interact while staying active. Students will participate as receptionists, referees, and recorders, and a stamp rally system will add a fun incentive to participation. By combining physical activity with social engagement, this project encourages healthy aging and stronger community bonds.

Show and Share (Group 4)
This project promotes healthy aging by encouraging elderly people to share their hobbies, learn new skills, and interact with others. Inspired by "Show and Tell," it features monthly culture festivals, weekly practice sessions, online interactions, and intergenerational exchanges. By engaging in activities like haiku, tea ceremonies, and even science experiments, seniors can find their Ikigai—a reason to wake up with excitement—leading to a happier, more fulfilling life.

Application "Tinderderly" (Group 5)
This project addresses the need for social connections among the elderly by creating a matching app for people over 60. Many older adults want to make new friends, find people with similar hobbies, and enjoy life with others. "*Tinderderly*" is a safe and easy-to-use app designed exclusively for seniors, allowing them to meet and interact without stress. Unlike traditional matching apps, it's not just for romantic connections—it helps users find friends and activity partners based on shared interests. The app also organizes offline meetups in different regions, giving elderly people more opportunities to talk, hang out, and engage in fun activities together. By eliminating loneliness, reducing stress, and promoting enjoyable social interactions, this project supports healthy and fulfilling aging.

VR Horse Racing Using In-Facility Currency (Group 6)
This project combines exciting gaming with cognitive stimulation to improve the quality of life for elderly people in care facilities. Using virtual reality technology, seniors can participate in virtual horse racing—some as jockeys wearing VR headsets, while others place bets using a special

in-facility currency. This interactive experience actively engages the brain, encourages social interaction, and stimulates new cognitive activity, helping to prevent dementia. The project also considers potential challenges, such as introduction costs and possible conflicts within the facility, ensuring a well-balanced and inclusive experience. By making use of VR's immersive potential, this project promotes mental stimulation, community engagement, and fun competition, all of which contribute to healthy aging.

3.9.1 *Goals*
The ultimate goals for involving the students in creating their group projects were to investigate real-world issues related to healthy ageing through interviews with older people, then to simulate an interdisciplinary collaboration trough engaging in critical discussion with their university colleagues studying different fields of studies, and finally present their findings and innovative ideas to attentively listening audience.

3.9.2 *Reflections*
Listening to classmates' project presentations, students appreciated the creativity of their peers' projects and gained new perspectives on solutions for healthy aging: *"Other groups' project presentations were very interesting for me. There were catchy project titles, interesting projects, and good pronunciation."* (M1), *"One particularly interesting idea was using digital tools to help seniors connect online, which presented new possibilities for reducing isolation."* (M2), *"The most interesting one was meeting and talking with friends in the metaverse. It is not only novel but also reasonable. Those who cannot move far can communicate with friends without transportation barriers."* (M5), *"Listening to the presentation on using the Metaverse, I was reminded of the importance of working on a project as a group. Even those with physical disabilities can participate as long as they can use digital devices."* (M6), *"All the presentations by other groups were great. Group 1 had a unique idea, and I learned how to change viewpoints."* (M3)

4. Summative-Reflective Portfolios
Subheadings in the above section *3. Classwork and Homework Week by Week* were also parts in the portfolio master copy file which I uploaded to the Assignments on the Microsoft Teams. The students filled out their portfolio according to the instructions within. (See the screenshots in Appendix.)

The students were asked to copy their written online contributions (e.g., comments and suggestions for their classmates, answers to questions posted in class, etc.) from the individual channels on MS Teams and paste them into the assigned part in the portfolio file. They were also asked to write the following reflections: (1) on reading the book AGE by Suresh Rattan, (2) on their classmates' comments and suggestions for their group project and the group work done in weeks 09~12, and (3) on the whole course, what they experienced and how it contributed to their way of thinking about healthy ageing through 1. interviewing older people, 2. researching the relevant literature, 3. cooperating with people from different fields of study, and 4. listening to their classmates' presentations.

The portfolio also included students' general information, self-evaluation, evaluation of their group mates, simple statistics of total words of their comments and responses on MS Teams, and their three reflections, group project abstract, references in APA style, declaration of academic integrity, free message for the instructor and two open-ended questions/prompts: 1. Describe your feelings and first impressions of the course and expectations for the course in at least 70 words, and 2. When comparing yourself at the start of this project-based English course to where you are now, how have you gained knowledge both in terms of content and language? Only one student failed to submit their portfolio. While the absolute minimum for the word count of student writings collected, as well as directly written in the portfolio was 1300 words, students on average wrote 2187 words. The raw qualitative data from the portfolios thus resulted in 41,562 words.

5. Evaluation
Students were evaluated in five categories: 1. their classroom participation/learning engagement (15%), 2. their comments and posts on MS Teams (15%), 3. report/reflections (15%), 4. portfolio (25%), and project presentation (30%). The average points for these categories were as follows: 1. 13.0/15 points, 2. 11.1/15 points, 3. 11.1/15 points, 4. 19.1/25 points, and 5. 24.7/30 points. The

average total score was 78.9 points.

Interestingly enough, regarding students' self-evaluation, they tended to under-evaluate themselves compared to my scores based on my class notes, observations, and evaluations of the presentations and the levels/depths of their portfolios.

6. Reflections on the Whole Course

Although as an instructor and designer of this course, I might be seen as positively biased towards my students, I can proudly insist that they worked hard, and from my pedagogical point of view, achieved the goals set so highly in this course.

Finally, the students reported that they felt they gained valuable insights that changed their perspective on ageing and on collaboration, showing thus their personal growths. They wrote: *"Throughout this class, I have been thinking about healthy aging, and I thought that the most important thing is how much fulfillment, accomplishment, and satisfaction I can get from my own daily life."* (M7), or *"Unlike other classes, in this class, after the mid-term presentation, we had the same members present again after receiving comments and reviewing, which gave us a good opportunity to incorporate others' opinions and improve our work."* (M8), and *"I learned how to deal with difficult problems, how to explain solutions, and how to get older in a healthy way."* (M5)

These reflections highlight the course's impact in broadening students' perspectives on aging, encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration, and fostering critical thinking about solutions for promoting healthy aging.

7. Summary and Afterthoughts

This paper has reflected on the structured yet flexible learning process that guided students through a project-based English language course, integrating theoretical inquiry with practical engagement. Throughout the course, students read a book on aging, conducted interviews with older individuals, and analyzed their findings in relation to older people's beliefs, experiences, and needs concerning healthy aging. They then explored relevant academic literature and collaborated on interdisciplinary group projects addressing aging-related challenges in Japan. Through their group presentations and the feedback that they received from their peers, students gained valuable experience in effectively communicating their ideas.

The six group projects, as briefly introduced in the section *Weeks 13–15: Group Project Presentations*, clearly demonstrate that students engaged deeply with the challenges of aging they encountered through their interviews and research. They recognized the importance of cognitive health, social connections, active engagement, and overall well-being in the aging process. While the feasibility of their proposed projects may not be entirely realistic, the primary goal was for students to develop an awareness of key aging issues and apply their knowledge creatively and critically.

Beyond the development of English proficiency, the course aimed to cultivate research skills, teamwork, and public communication abilities. Additionally, implicit pedagogical goals included fostering lifelong learning habits, promoting awareness of healthy lifestyles, increasing sensitivity to societal challenges, and equipping students with essential collaboration skills for their future careers. Based on informal discussions with students toward the end of the semester, I also observed a shift in their attitudes toward aging, as they expressed greater empathy and consideration for people of all ages. As an educator, I consider this outcome to be one of the most meaningful achievements of the course.

Appendix
Illustrative Screenshots and Snapshots
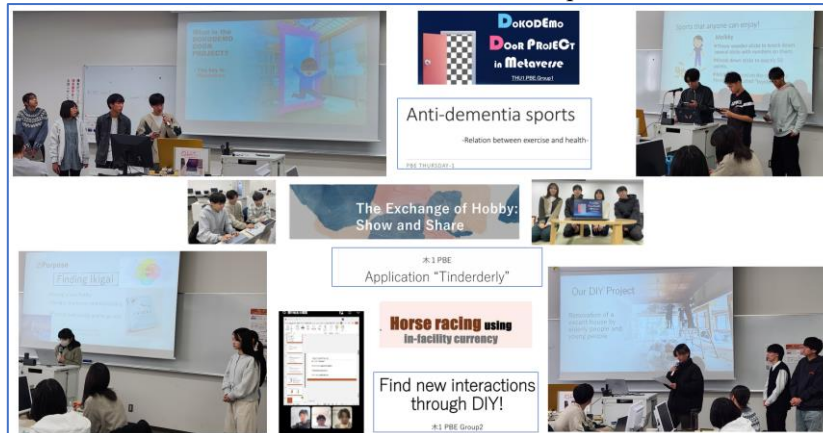
Screenshots of presentation title slides and snapshots of students engaged in practicing and presenting their projects.

Screenshots from the portfolio master copy with color-coded instructions.

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