
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unlocking the Potential of Project-Based Learning in English Language Education: A Systematic Review of Benefits, Challenges, and Implementation Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a systematic review of the efficacy of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) as a pedagogical approach in English Language Learning (ELL). Given the increasing need for communicative competence in English amidst global demands, conventional grammar-focused methods fall short of fostering practical language skills. PjBL, emphasizing real-world project engagement, offers an alternative that aligns with communicative and student-centered principles. This review synthesizes findings from recent literature published between 2000 and 2024 to evaluate PjBL's impact on language proficiency, student engagement, and the development of 21st-century skills. Evidence suggests PjBL effectively enhances students' communicative competence, boosts motivation, and fosters critical thinking. However, challenges related to group dynamics, curriculum integration, and assessment complexities remain. The study concludes with recommendations for improving PjBL's implementation in language education, advocating for enhanced teacher training and adaptable assessment methods. This research underscores PjBL's potential to reshape ELL practices, though ongoing empirical investigation is essential to optimize its application in diverse learning contexts.

KEYWORDS

Project-Based Learning, English Language Learning, Educational Pedagogy

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1. Introduction

English has emerged as the lingua franca in the globalization era, serving as the primary medium of communication in international business setting, academia, and technology. Possessing the competence to proficiently communicate in English is no longer a mere advantage but a necessity as it influences both personal and professional success. According to Crystal (2003), around 1.5 billion people worldwide speak English, with many more learning it as a second or foreign language. This global demand accentuates the pivotal importance of effective English language education. However, conventional methods of English language learning, which often emphasize repetition, memorization, grammar drills, and standardized testing, have been increasingly criticized for their limitations in developing communicative competence. As Brown (2007) mentioned, these traditional approaches can lead to disengagement among learners, which results in a lack of practical language skills despite years of study. The main challenges in conventional language learning methods include a lack of contextualized practice, insufficient opportunities for authentic communication, and an overemphasis on passive learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

To overcome these challenges, educators have been probing more dynamic and interactive teaching methodologies that better align with the communicative needs of learners. One such approach is Project-Based Learning (PjBL), which has gained traction as an innovative method in language education. PjBL shifts the focus from teacher-centered to student-centered learning, where students participate in meaningful projects that require the language skills application in real-world situation. As Beckett and Slater

(2005) noted, PjBL encourages active learning, collaboration, and critical thinking, all of which are important for fostering language proficiency in a more holistic manner.

This study aims to examine Project-Based Learning in improving English language proficiency, especially in comparison to traditional language learning methods. By investigating the outcomes of PjBL in diverse educational settings, this research seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature advocating for innovative pedagogical practices in language education. Even though English has received global recognition as a critical skill for communication and success in various fields, conventional methods of English language teaching continue to dominate educational settings worldwide. These methods, often characterized by a focus on grammar instruction, rote memorization, and standardized assessments, have exhibited limited effectiveness in fostering learners' communicative competence. Richards and Rodgers (2014) mentioned, while these approaches may equip students with primary language knowledge, they often fail to foster the practical language skills necessary for real-world interactions.

One essential gap in traditional English language teaching methods is their inability to engage students in meaningful, context-rich learning experiences. Studies have shown that learners often have difficulty applying their language skills in authentic situations, which is a critical aspect of language proficiency (Brown, 2007). Additionally, the overemphasis on passive learning, where students are mere recipients of information, leads students' low motivation and engagement (Nation & Macalister, 2010). These challenges suggest a disconnection between the skills being taught and the communicative skills the learners need in a globalized world. Facing these challenges, there is a growing interest in innovative teaching methodologies that advocate active learning, collaboration, and the application of language in real-world contexts. Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has developed as a promising alternative, offering a student-centered method that integrates language learning with the advancement of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Nevertheless, despite the theoretical advantages of PjBL, apparently there is a lack of empirical research that systematically evaluates its effectiveness in English Language Learning (Thomas, 2000).

This gap in the literature highlights the need for further empirical studies to evaluate the impact of PjBL on language acquisition, especially when it is compared to traditional teaching methods. Such research is important to provide educators with evidence-based insights into the potential benefits of PjBL and to inform the development of more effective language teaching practices. This study aims to address this gap by examining Project-Based Learning in improving English language proficiency, with the goal of supporting the current discourse on innovative pedagogical approaches in language education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definitions of PjBL

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is one of the teaching methods that is categorized as an instructional methodology. As an instructional methodology, PjBL focuses on encouraging the student to obtain and practice the knowledge and skills directly from interesting projects based on actual problem. Compared to traditional education methods that prioritize memorization and examinations, PjBL highlights active exploration, teamwork, and the practical implementation of knowledge (Thomas, 2000). As stated by Bell (2010), PjBL is a student-focused pedagogical approach in which students actively participate in projects that circulate actual problems and individually substantial tasks. These projects usually consist of complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems, which require students to participate in design, problem-solving, decision-making, and inquiry activities.

Becket and Slater (2005) describe the essential rules of PjBL that involve Inquiry-Based Learning, which means persuading students to be critical, ready to embark on research, and able to draw informed conclusions; Student Autonomy, which means authorizing students to lead their education, enhancing self-directed learning; Collaborative Learning, which means honing communication and teamwork skills while working together on tasks; Integration of Knowledge and Skills, which means connecting different academic areas and adopting them in actual situations; Authentic Assessment, which means observing students based on their work instead of conventional evaluation. These ground rules make PjBL an attractive way to foster further learning, critical thinking, and the ability to apply knowledge in current circumstances (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006).

2.2 Historical Development of Project-Based Learning

The idea of PjBL was embedded in the early 20th century through the work of educational thinkers such as John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick. By 1938, Dewey pointed to the value of experience-based learning, where students acquire information through action and reflecting on their own experiences. Kilpatrick advances this concept further through the "Project Method", which suggests that learning needs to engage in activities that are purposeful and meaningful to students.

PjBL started to gain broader recognition in the 1960s and 1970s as educators explored viable alternatives to the conventional method, teacher-centric instruction. The emergence of the constructivist approach to learning, which promotes learning as an interactive and constructive process, increasingly supports the adaptation of PjBL in the classroom (Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978). The ability to deal with problems, cooperation, and critical analysis experiencing an increase in demand in the 21st century—usually known as “21st-century skills”—has caused a revival of interest in PjBL. As pedagogues and scientists have recognized the potential of PjBL to fulfill these needs, PjBL can be applied in a variety of educational settings, ranging from elementary school to higher education (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

2.3 Applications of Project-Based Learning in Various Educational Contexts

Project-based Learning (PjBL) has been used in a variety of academic program settings, all the way from elementary school to college, and in a broad range of discourse areas, including science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), social sciences, and language studies. Also, it is widely used to improve the exposure level and learning outcomes in STEM subjects especially in K-12 education. For example, research conducted by Holthuis et al. (2018) found that secondary school students engaged in STEM-focused PjBL sections showed extensive growth in knowledge and range.

At the higher education level, PjBL has been successfully integrated with engineering and medical-related programs. The discussion by Hmelo-Silver (2004) on the use of PjBL in medical education, where students work on complex cases and actual cases, shows the successful progression of their clinical reasoning and communication skills. On the other hand, as noted by Mills and Treagust (2003) engineering education emphasizes how PjBL helps students develop real-world problem-solving abilities and prepares them for work. In the case of English language learning, PjBL has demonstrated the improvement of students' English language skills by enabling them to use English authentically. According to Beckett and Slater's (2005) description, PjBL can link language study to core content and skill growth that supports both linguistic and cognitive progress in students. Behind all the success, the implementation of PjBL is not free of challenges. The usage of PjBL needs a proper plan, the teachers' support, and the dynamic turnover of conventional classes. Moreover, as Thomas (2000) emphasizes, there is still a huge demand for more in-depth empirical research to comprehend the impact of PjBL in various academic conditions.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a systematic review, to explore the existing literature on Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in English Language Learning (ELL). A systematic review is an effective method for synthesizing research findings from multiple studies, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of trends, outcomes, and gaps in the literature. The qualitative approach focuses on understanding the depth and context of PjBL's implementation and effectiveness in ELL settings, providing a nuanced perspective on its pedagogical implications. The systematic review process was guided by a clearly defined research question: “What are the impacts of Project-Based Learning on English Language Learning outcomes, and what challenges and limitations have been identified in its implementation?” The review included peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and relevant books published in the last two decades, ensuring that the analysis was based on current and authoritative sources.

A comprehensive literature search was performed in a wide range of educational databases, such as ERIC, JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The key terms such as “Project-Based Learning”, “English Language Learning”, “language acquisition”, “PPA in ELLs”, and “educational challenges in PjBL” are the main focus of the search. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were utilized to prioritize the findings and guarantee that only relevant studies were captured. The entry points for this study were studies published in peer-reviewed journals or conferences; studies that exclusively examined the implementation of PjBL in ELLs; articles produced between 2000 and 2024; and studies that were accessible in English. The titles and abstracts of detected papers were filtered to eliminate articles that were irrelevant or duplicates after the preliminary search. The articles that were retained underwent a full-text review to determine if the article met the criteria for inclusion. It generated a final set of studies that was considered for inclusion in the comprehensive systematic approach.

A standardized data extraction form was used to collect relevant information details from each study from the study's author(s), research context, year of publication, sample attributes, PjBL implementation techniques, language learning goals, difficulties faced, and the authors' conclusions. On the other hand, a matrix was used to arrange the retrieved data to make comparison and analysis easier. Meanwhile, the data analysis in this systematic review was conducted through a thematic analysis of the extracted data. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), the process of thematic analysis is a method for the identification, analysis, and presentation of patterns (themes) in qualitative data. The resulting analysis was executed through the subsequent steps, such as data recognition, preliminary coding, finding themes, revisiting themes, determining and naming themes, and composing the final report.

As elaborated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), to enhance the credibility of this work, the project complies with the principles of trustability, transferred reliability, dependability, and verifiability. A structured and clear approach to data mining and categorical

analysis will be recorded so that it can be repurposed by other investigators. To ensure the trustworthiness of the review, the study adhered to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The systematic and transparent approach to data collection and analysis were documented to allow for replication by other researchers. Additionally, ethical considerations included proper citation of all sources and ensuring that the review process was unbiased and free from any conflicts of interest. As this study involved secondary data, there were no direct ethical concerns related to human subjects.

This study is limited by its dependence on existing literature, which may not apprehend the varied contexts of PjBL implementation in English Language Learning comprehensively. The generalizability of findings is also limited due to diversities in cultural, institutional, and resource settings across the reviewed studies. Moreover, challenges in evaluating long-term outcomes with traditional assessment methods inhibit a complete understanding of PjBL's impact. Additionally, the study does not provide detailed insights into particular strategies or frameworks for effective application, which could improve its implementation in various learning environments.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The systematic review of the literature generated several key findings in regard to the use of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in English Language Learning (ELL). These findings are arranged into the following themes:

a. Enhanced Communicative Competence

A foremost theme across the studies was the positive influence of PjBL on students' communicative competence. Several studies (e.g., Alan & Stoller, 2005; Fragoulis, 2009) emphasized that PjBL yields authentic contexts for language use, encouraging students to be involved in meaningful communication. These studies revealed that students participating in PjBL activities displayed notable improvements in their speaking and listening skills. Also, their level of confidence has increased in using English in real-life situations. This enhancement of communicative competence was particularly apparent in collaboration and problem-solving tasks, where students were required to negotiate meaning and use language in a functional manner.

b. Increased Student Engagement and Motivation

The review also found potent evidence supporting the idea that PjBL enhances student engagement and motivation in ELL contexts. Studies by Beckett and Slater (2005) and Fragoulis (2009) reported that the student-centered nature of PjBL, together with its focus on real-world applicability, brought student interest and participation to higher levels. Students reported feeling more invested in their learning when they were able to work on projects that were meaningful to them, which in turn stimulated a more positive attitude toward language learning. This finding is consistent with the principles of self-determination theory, which hypothesizes that learners are more motivated when they have autonomy and can see the relevance of their tasks (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

c. Development of 21st-Century Skills

Another significant finding was the role of PjBL in developing 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving. Studies by Bell (2010) and Beckett and Miller (2006) highlighted that PjBL not only sharpens language skills but also prepares students for the demands of the modern world by encouraging them to think critically and work collaboratively. These studies found that students involved in PjBL were better equipped to overcome complex problems and navigate diverse perspectives, skills that are increasingly important in this current era with globalized and multilingual contexts.

d. Challenges in Implementation

Despite bearing many benefits, the review also identified several challenges in the implementation of PjBL in ELL classrooms. A recurring issue was the complication in managing group dynamics and ensuring balanced participation among students (Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins, 2016). Teachers expressed that some students, especially those with lower language proficiency, struggled to contribute purposely to group projects. Furthermore, educators found it difficult to equate the open-ended nature of PjBL with the need to cover specific language curricula. These challenges were intensified by insufficient teacher training and resources, which hindered the effective execution of PjBL in some contexts (Thomas, 2000).

e. Assessment Difficulties

The final theme emerging from the review was the challenge of assessing student performance in PjBL. As noted by Mills and Treagust (2003), traditional assessment methods are often inadequate for grasping the skills developed through PjBL. Many studies emphasized the need for more holistic and formative assessment strategies that can evaluate the student's learning process and

outcomes. Teachers expressed concerns about the potential subjectiveness of such assessments and the time required to apply them effectively.

4.2 Discussion

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has been increasingly popular as an effective pedagogical approach in language education. Numerous studies have explored the impact of PjBL on language acquisition, showing that it can substantially enhance both linguistic proficiency and learner engagement. One of the essential advantages of PjBL in language learning is its alignment with the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), which highlights meaningful communication as the main goal of language education (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In a study conducted by Alan and Stoller (2005), it was found that PjBL fosters communicative competence effectively by providing students with authentic contexts in which to use the target language. The study showed that students engaged in PjBL activities demonstrated improved fluency and confidence in using the language, as they were required to interact, negotiate meaning, and collaborate with peers.

Additionally, research by Fragoulis (2009) supports the notion that PjBL enhances learners' motivation and interest in language learning. The study discovered that PjBL projects, which were centered around real-life topics in students' lives, led to increased enthusiasm and willingness to participate in language tasks. This motivational boost was attributed to the sense of ownership students felt over their learning process and the opportunity to produce tangible outcomes that they could present to others. Moreover, a study by Beckett and Miller (2006) investigated the use of PjBL in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses and found that students have improved their ability to apply language skills in professional contexts. The researchers concluded that PjBL not only helps in language acquisition but also prepares learners for real-world communication challenges by incorporating language learning with content and skills that are relevant to their future careers. These studies propose that PjBL is an effective method for stimulating active language use, boosting motivation, and promoting the development of communicative competence. However, some challenges can still be found in the successful implementation of PjBL in language, which is discussed in the following section. Even though the benefits of PjBL in language education are well-documented, there are also several challenges and limitations that educators may encounter when applying PjBL, particularly in the context of English Language Learning (ELL).

One of the main obstacles is the need for extensive teacher preparation and support. As mentioned by Thomas (2000), successful PjBL requires teachers to shift from a traditional role to a more facilitative role, guiding students through complex, open-ended projects. This shift can be challenging for educators who are accustomed to conventional teaching methods and may lack the essential training or resources to implement PjBL effectively. Research by Kokotsaki, Menzies, and Wiggins (2016) emphasizes that teachers frequently struggle with managing the dynamics of PjBL classrooms, including facilitating group work, assessing student progress, and providing proper feedback.

Another significant limitation is the potential for unequal participation among learners. Bell (2010) points out that PjBL's reliance on group work can lead to discrepancy in student participation as some students take active roles while others take passive ones. This can be a problem in ELL contexts, where learners with different levels of language proficiency may experience difficulties in participating equally in group tasks. Moreover, PjBL may become challenges for students who are accustomed to more structured, teacher-directed learning environments and may have a hard time with the autonomy required in PBL projects (Beckett, 2006).

Additionally, assessing student performance in PjBL can be difficult and require more time. Standardized tests or other traditional assessment methods, are often insufficient for evaluating the students' diverse skills and knowledge developed through PjBL. As Mills and Treagust (2003) mention, educators should adopt more holistic assessment strategies that consider the student's work process and the final product. However, designing and enforcing such assessments can be complex, especially in large classrooms.

Despite these challenges, the potential of PjBL to reconstruct language education remains substantial. Ongoing research and professional development are pivotal to address these difficulties and how to optimize the implementation of PjBL in ELL settings. By comprehending both the strengths and limitations of PjBL, educators can generate informed decisions about how to incorporate this approach into their language teaching activities.

The findings of this systematic review highlight the potential of PjBL as a transformative approach in ELL. The positive impact of PjBL on communicative competence, student engagement and motivation, and the development of 21st-century skills are in line with the goals of modern language education, which progressively underscores functional language use and learner autonomy. However, the challenges related to implementing PjBL, especially in terms of group dynamics, curriculum integration, and assessment, show that further research and professional development are necessary to optimize the use of PjBL in ELL contexts.

The topic of improving communication skills suggests that PjBL features a structure for learning a language that is more genuine and meaningful. By exposing students to coursework that is based on real cases, PjBL can minimize the differences between

language learning in the classroom and actual language usage, as this is crucial for language learning. This observation becomes particularly applicable to circumstances with multiple cultures and languages, as students must continue strengthening their intercultural and linguistic abilities.

The elevated motivation and involvement related to PjBL emphasizes the significance of independence and its relevance in language learning. These components are crucial for maintaining learners' interest, especially in situations when language acquisition can be seen as difficult or unnecessary. The improvement of the 21st century provides additional support to the claim that PjBL offers students the required abilities for a worldwide society where problem-solving, teamwork, and communication are crucial.

However, the challenges presented in the review, particularly in regard to group dynamics and assessment, point to the significance of careful planning and support in PjBL implementation in learning activity. Teachers must be equipped with strategies to manage various student groups and to create proportion projects that cater to varying levels of language proficiency. Furthermore, there is an urgency for more robust assessment equipment that can apprehend the multifaceted nature of PjBL outcomes without overwhelming educators.

Overall, the findings of this review suggest that while PjBL is very promising for ELL, its successful implementation demands a supportive infrastructure, including teacher training, resource allocation, and continuing research into best practices. Future studies should focus on developing and assessing specific strategies to tackle the challenges identified, particularly in diverse and resource-limited settings.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review of the literature on Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in English Language Learning (ELL) has emphasized the substantial potential of PjBL as one of the innovative and effective approaches to language education. The findings consistently highlight that PjBL improves communicative competence, boost student engagement and motivation, and stimulates the development of important 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving. These benefits align well with the current goals of language education, which prioritize real-world language use and the holistic advancement of learners.

However, the review also disclosed several challenges correlated with the implementation of PjBL in ELL contexts. Issues such as managing group dynamics, ensuring balanced participation, combining PjBL with the curricula, and developing relevant assessment strategies show significant challenges for educators. These hurdles suggest that while PjBL is promising, its successful adoption in ELL requires meticulous planning, sufficient teacher training, and support.

There are two implications of these findings. First, educators and policymakers should consider PjBL as an important pedagogical approach in ELL that can address the limitations of a traditional approach. Second, there is an urgent need for further research to develop more effective strategies to tackle the challenges discussed in this review. Future studies should focus on creating frameworks for PjBL implementation which are practical and adaptable to various educational contexts, particularly those with insufficient resources.

In conclusion, PjBL represents a robust tool for developing English language learning, but its full potential can only be released through a joint effort to address the challenges related to its implementation. By continuing to explore and polish PjBL practices, educators can better prepare students for the needs of a globalized world, where language proficiency and critical skills are pivotal to success.

Future research should focus on conducting empirical studies in various educational and cultural contexts to better apprehend how PjBL can be adjusted to meet diverse learner needs. It is essential to develop specific frameworks so that the PjBL implementation, along with innovative, holistic assessment methods can be successful for measuring linguistic outcomes as well as 21st-century skills. Longitudinal studies are advocated to assess the PjBL sustained impact on language proficiency and other competencies. Furthermore, research on teacher training, resource accommodation and allocation, as well as the technology integration in PjBL can further enhance its effectiveness and scalability in English Language Learning.

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