

Case Report

FOSTERING COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS AMONG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AT HONG BANG INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims at discovering the impact of Project-Based Learning (PBL) on collaboration and communication skills among students learning English as a foreign language. Currently, educators tend to use interactive and student-centred approaches while PBL is recognized as one of the effective learning methods that significantly promote soft skills. This research also examines the theoretical-framework of PBL, focusing on learning theories that encourage active student participation. By integrating small projects into the curriculum, exploring the case studies from various educational environments, and combining the findings with results gathered from surveys with English language learners (ELLs) and interviews with instructors, initial results show that this approach not only enhances students to use the language that they have been learning practically, but also aids in developing effective collaboration and communication skills. Therefore, the researchers believe that this research will partly contribute to improving English teaching, aiming to enhance the foreign language proficiency of students today.

Keywords: PBL(PBL), English language learners(ELLs), collaboration, communication.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, proficiency in English is more crucial than ever, particularly for non-native speakers in developing countries striving to succeed academically and professionally. ELLs face challenges as they deal not only with the complexity of a new language but also the social and cultural dynamics of their learning environments. In addition, traditional instructional methods often fail in engaging these learners, leading to a growing recognition of the need for more interactive and student-centered approaches, and PBL has emerged as the one addressing the needs, promoting active engagement and collaboration among students. PBL is characterized by its emphasis on real-world projects requiring students to work together to solve problems, conduct research and generate tangible products. This method aligns closely with constructivist learning theories of knowledge constructed through social interactions and experiences. Furthermore, PBL not only offers opportunities to develop language skills but also stimulate their language usage in diverse contexts, fostering deeper understanding and retention. Additionally, collaborating with peers on meaningful projects encourages students to practice negotiating, exchanging ideas, and utilizing new vocabulary in authentic situations. By reviewing relevant literature, analyzing case studies, and presenting qualitative data from teachers and students engaged in initiatives. This research aims to illuminate multifaceted benefits of this approach, and the researchers believe that the findings will contribute to our understanding of how PBL can effectively support ELLs in overcoming linguistic barriers while enhancing their social skills, ultimately preparing them for success in diverse environments. Through this exploration, the paper advocates for broader implementation of PBL methodologies within English language education, emphasizing its potential to enrich the learning experiences of ELLs, especially at Hong Bang International university in Vietnam.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-Based Learning (PBL)

PBL is an instructional method engaging learners in active learning through completion of the real world (Thomas, 2000). This approach emphasizes the development of collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical-thinking skills because students work on meaningful projects that are relevant to their lives. PBL typically involves learners in investigating and working together to create real projects, presenting and showing these products for a real audience (Almulla, 2020). The theoretical underpinning of PBL is rooted in constructivist learning theories, which suggest that students learn best when they actively construct their understanding through collaboration and authentic experiences. This approach aligns with contemporary goals that prioritize student engagement and participation. Studies have shown that PBL can lead to improved academic outcomes and enhanced student engagement. In addition, the research findings indicate that students in PBL demonstrate greater retention of knowledge (Condliffe, 2017).

The PBL process typically includes several key phases: identifying a driving question, conducting research, planning and executing the project, and reflecting on the outcomes. By working on projects that have relevance to their lives and communities, students are more motivated and invested in their learning. According to Bell (2010), PBL helps students develop a variety of competencies, including planning, organization, time management. These skills are particularly beneficial for learners, who must navigate both the demands of language learning and the challenges of collaborative work.

The importance of collaboration and communication skills

Collaboration and communication skills are increasingly recognized as essential competencies in the 21st century. According to Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009), these skills enable

individuals to work effectively in teams, present ideas clearly, and engage in constructive dialogue. In today's world, teamwork and interpersonal interactions are vital across various sectors, the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively is paramount. This is particularly crucial for English language learners, who often face additional challenges in expressing themselves and understanding due to language barriers. In addition, developing collaboration and communication skills is critical not only for their academic success but also for their social integration. Effective collaboration allows students to share diverse perspectives, fostering a sense of belonging and community. Communication skills, on the other hand, facilitate the exchange of ideas and information, empowering students to participate actively in classroom discussion and group work. Research has shown that students who engage in a collaborative learning environment tend to gain higher levels of motivation, improved problem-solving abilities, and enhanced critical thinking skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Furthermore, the integration of collaboration and communication into language learning emphasizes the social nature of language acquisition. Vygotsky (1978) points that learning through social interactions underscores the importance of collaborative dialogue in developing linguistic skills. English language learners often benefit from peer interactions that provide opportunities to practice language in context. Therefore, fostering these skills is not only an educational goal but also a necessity for students to thrive in diverse academic and social settings.

The role of teacher facilitation in PBL

While PBL offers numerous benefits for English language learners, the role of teacher is critical in facilitating effective project-based experiences. Teachers must create an inclusive environment that encourages collaboration and communication among students. This includes providing clear instructions, establishing groups, and offering guidance throughout the project process. Research by Hmole-Silver (2004) emphasizes that effective teacher facilitation can significantly enhance the learning outcomes of PBL, particularly for students who may require additional support in dealing with language barriers. Teachers can integrate language objectives into PBL, involving teaching vocabulary and language structures relevant to the project, ensuring that students have the necessary English competency to participate fully. By embedding language instruction within the PBL framework, teachers can enhance both content knowledge and language proficiency. Additionally, ongoing assessment and feedback are essential components of PBL. This formative assessment approach allows educators to identify areas where ELLs have struggled and adjust their instructional strategies accordingly, and teachers can encourage students to view challenges as opportunities for learning and improvement.

Challenges and consideration in PBL

There are some challenges that educators must consider when implementing this approach for ELLs. One significant barrier is the potential for language proficiency disparities in diverse groups. For example, weak students may feel overwhelmed when working alongside excellent ones, which could hinder their participation and confidence. To address this, teachers should carefully consider each member in the groups, ensuring that ELLs are paired with peers who can provide support and encouragement to one another. Moreover, time management can be a challenge in PBL, particularly for ELLs may require additional time to process language and complete tasks. Teachers should build flexibility into the project timeline and provide clear time management strategies to help students stay organized and focused. This can include the use of visual schedules, checklists, and regular check-ins to monitor the whole progress (Othman, 2013).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research employs a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of PBL on collaboration and communication skills among ELLs, and enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. By employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study captures the actual experiences of ELLs while also measuring the effectiveness of PBL in promoting specific skills. The quantitative component involves the use of surveys to gather on students' self-perceived collaboration and communication skills. This aspect of the study aims to quantify changes in ELLs' skills before and after participation in PBL activities. Meanwhile, the qualitative component consists of semi-structured interviews with teachers, allowing for in-depth exploration of their insights and experiences regarding the implementation of PBL in their classrooms. This mixed method facilitates a richer understanding of how PBL affects ELLs, balancing statistical data with personal narratives that reveals the complexities and language learning in collaborative settings.

The project spanned a duration of eight weeks. During this period, students collaborated in groups to develop presentations in the form of posters, video clips, or a website utilizing Google Sites, focusing on their preferred topics. They collectively chose their subjects and organized their projects accordingly. Following guidance on effective planning and information gathering, students executed their projects and subsequently shared their work with other groups. Their presentations were evaluated by both educators and peers. The students expressed satisfaction in receiving constructive feedback to enhance future projects.

Participants

Participants in this study included 40 ELL students and 10 teachers from various educational institutions that have integrated PBL into their English language curricula. The selection of participants was purposeful, aiming to include a diverse range of backgrounds, proficiency levels, and educational contexts. This diversity is crucial for capturing a wide array of experiences and perspectives, thereby enhancing the generalizability of findings. The students ranged in age from 20 to 22 years and were enrolled in an English language course at Hong Bang International University. Their English proficiency varied, with some students being at the upper-intermediate level and others at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. The 10 teachers involved in the study were selected based on their experience and expertise in teaching English to English language students using PBL methodologies. These teachers had varying years of experience, from recent graduates to seasoned educators with over a decade of teaching in diverse classrooms. The diverse backgrounds of students and teachers provide a rich context of understanding the challenges and success of implementing PBL in English language education.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection for this study was conducted in two main phases: surveys for students and semi-structured interviews for teachers.

Surveys: Students completed a survey designed to assess their self-perceived collaboration and communication skills before and after engaging in PBL activities. The survey consisted of Likert-scale items measuring various aspects of collaboration such as teamwork, sharing responsibilities, and conflict resolution, and communication skills like clear expression, listening and ability to convey ideas. The pre-PBL survey aimed at establishing a baseline of students' skills

while the post survey evaluated any change after the completion of the projects. This quantitative data was analyzed using statistical methods to identify significant differences in students' self-assessment of their collaboration and communication skills. The surveys were administered in a controlled environment, ensuring that students understood the instructions and felt comfortable providing honest responses. To enhance the reliability of the data, the survey was piloted with a small group of ELLs prior to the main study in the future.

Interviews: Teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, which were designed to stimulate detailed responses about their observations and experiences with PBL in their classrooms. The interviews included open-ended questions allowing teachers to discuss their perception of how PBL influenced students' collaboration and communication skills. Questions focused on the teachers' experiences in facilitating PBL students, changes that they encountered, and specific examples of student interactions during the projects. The semi-structured format of the interviews provided flexibility, allowing interviewers to get deeper into the specific topics of interest as they arose during the conversation. Each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting to encourage open dialogue. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Improvements after PBL from survey data

Likert scale survey was conducted for collecting Pre-PBL data on collaboration and communication skills among ELLs. Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on scale from 1 to 5, where 1= Strong disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4= Agree, and 5= Strong agree. These are the findings of improvement after PBL.

Figure 1: Improvement after PBL from survey

Skill area	Pre-PBL average rating	Post-PBL average rating	Improvement
Collaboration skills	3.2	4.5	+1.3
Communication skills	3.0	4.6	+1.6
Confidence in speaking	3.0	4.4	+1.6
Engagement in group activities	2.8	4.7	+1.6

Figure 1 shows the average ratings show substantial improvements across skills, including collaboration, communication as well as confidence in speaking and engagement in group activities, after implementing PBL. The increases in average ratings(ranging from +1.3 to +1.6)suggest that ELLs not only developed better collaboration and communication skills but also gained confidence and became more engaged in group activities. This evidence supports the effectiveness of PBL as a pedagogical approach for enhancing key skills among ELLs.

Improvements after PBL from interview data

This part shows information collected from the interview. To collect and process interview data effectively, researchers began by defining clear objectives and developing open-ended questions that encouraged detailed responses from teachers. Also, researchers conducted the interview in a supportive environment, taking notes and transcribing their responses accurately. Next the transcribed data was coded to identify the themes and organized them in three sections in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Improvements after PBL from interviews

Findings	Description
Improvement in Collaboration	Significant enhancement in self-reported collaboration skills. Students learned to navigate group dynamics, share responsibilities, and appreciate diverse perspectives Increased willingness to engage in discussions and take on leadership roles during group work.
Enhanced Communication Skills	Increased confidence in speaking and presenting abilities. Opportunities to practice language in authentic contexts during project presentations. More frequent use of newly acquired vocabulary and grammatical structures in discussions and presentations
Teacher Insights	Importance of a supportive classroom environment for effective communication and collaboration Structured group activities with clear roles facilitated better group dynamics. Ongoing feedback and reflection helped reinforce learning and collaboration among students.

Improvements in collaboration skills

The results demonstrated a significant improvement in students' collaboration skills after participating in PBL. Teachers indicated that students working in diverse groups was a key factor in their development. They observed that collaborative experiences allow students to learn from their peers in ways that traditional classroom settings did not. Teachers also noted that being in groups of classmates from different levels and backgrounds enriched students' learning experience, and many students told them that they felt more equipped to solve problems when they could gain the diverse ideas and strengths of their teammates. Furthermore, teachers stated that sharing responsibilities within groups enabled students to take ownership of their learning. Teachers also observed that their students enjoyed the opportunity to contribute their unique skills and knowledge to the projects, which fostered a sense of responsibility and commitment to the group's success. The shared responsibility was particularly beneficial in building trust among team members as students felt more connected and invested in their collaborative efforts.

Teachers also observed that students were more willing to engage in group discussion and take on leadership roles within their teams. Many teachers noted a significant increase in student participation during collaborative activities. For instance, they observed that students who previously hesitated to speak up in class became vocal, confident, and assertive during group work. This shift was attributed to the supportive environment fostered by PBL, where students felt free to express their ideas without the fear of being judged. In addition, teachers reported that students began to show more effective problem-solving skills, demonstrating an ability to navigate disagreement constructively and maintain a focus on a shared goal.

Enhanced communication proficiency

In addition to improvements in collaboration skills, teachers reported increased confidence in their students' communication abilities, particularly in speaking and presenting. The project-based nature of the assignments encouraged students to practice their language skills in authentic contexts, which proved invaluable for their improvement, and the requirement to present their project to peers helped students overcome their initial anxiety about speaking English. Having a clear

purpose for their communication made them more motivated to practice and improve their speaking skills. The structured format of PBL assignments often required students to present their ideas clearly and persuasively. As a result, students used newly required vocabulary and grammatical structures more frequently during project presentations. Teachers reported that many students expressed pride in their ability to integrate language skills learned in the classroom into their presentations, highlighting the real-world relevance to their English learning. This emphasis on practical application not only fostered their confidence but also reinforced their understanding of the English language as a tool for effective communication. Also, teachers observed the growth of communication proficiency among ELLs. They noted that students were more likely to initiate conversation, ask questions, and provide constructive feedback to their peers during group discussions. Teachers found that the interactive nature of PBL created a dynamic learning environment where students felt encouraged to experiment with the English language without the fear of making mistakes. This supportive atmosphere was vital in fostering a sense of belonging, allowing students to express themselves more freely.

Teachers insights

Teachers emphasized the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment where students felt comfortable expressing their ideas. They recognized that the success of PBL in enhancing collaboration and communication skills largely depended on the classroom dynamics established by teachers. Many teachers reported implementing specific strategies to foster a positive group environment. They encouraged students to establish group rules and guidelines and the beginning of each project, which helped clarify expectations and promote mutual respect. Additionally, structured group activities played a vital role in facilitating effective communication and collaboration among students. Teachers noted that providing roles in the projects such as leader, presenter and note-taker helped students understand their responsibility and contribute to a more organized workflow. This structure not only minimized confusion but also allowed students to focus on their tasks while fostering teamwork. Teachers reported that when students had well-defined roles, they were more likely to engage actively and contribute meaningfully to the project. Furthermore, teachers highlighted the significant ongoing feedback throughout the PBL process. They implemented regular check-ins and reflections, which allowed students to discuss their experiences, challenges, and success. This practice not only promoted self-assessment but also encouraged students to support one another's growth. Teachers noted that these reflective discussions often led to deeper insights into collaboration and communication, reinforcing the skills students were developing.

The combination of diverse group work, authentic language use, and a supportive classroom environment contributes to students' confidence and competence in both collaborative and communicative contexts. Teachers play a vital role in facilitating these experiences, ensuring that students have the necessary support and structure to thrive in their learning journey. Through PBL, students not only improve their English skills but also develop interpersonal competencies that will serve them well in their academic and future professional lives.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings from this study strongly support the premise that PBL (PBL) fosters collaboration and communication skills among English language learners. By engaging in meaningful projects, students not only practice their language skills but also develop social skills

necessary for effective collaboration. The results indicate that PBL provides a rich environment for students to navigate group dynamics, resolve conflicts, and express their thoughts, aligning closely with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory, which posits that learning is inherently social and collaborative. According to Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is constructed through interactions with others, and language plays a crucial role in this process. The findings of this study illustrate how PBL creates opportunities for students to engage in dialogue with peers, allowing them to negotiate meanings and share ideas in social contexts. The projects required students to work collaboratively, which encouraged them to communicate effectively and resolve conflicts as they arose. In group settings, students had to articulate their viewpoints, listen to others, and come to a consensus on how to finish their tasks, and this process not only enhances English proficiency but also fosters communication and collaboration skills essential for their academic future and professional environment.

Teachers observed that students were more willing to engage in discussion about conflicts and were equipped to find solutions collaboratively. This is particularly important for ELLs, who may struggle with language barriers that complicate communication during disagreements. The PBL approach empowers them to practice these skills in a supportive environment, gradually building their confidence and competence in managing interpersonal conflicts. Educators are encouraged to design PBL activities that align with students' interest and different backgrounds, making projects more relatable and stimulating. This relevance can motivate students to participate actively in their learning, as they see the practical implication of their work. Additionally, projects that require collaboration among diverse groups can enhance students' appreciation for different perspectives, further enriching their educational experience.

To maximize the benefits of PBL, educators should provide clear guidance and structure throughout the project process. This includes establishing clear objectives, defining roles within groups, and setting deadlines. Teachers should support students with both the language and content aspects of the projects, ensuring that students have the necessary tools to communicate effectively. Furthermore, incorporating opportunities for reflection into the PBL process can significantly enhance learning outcomes. By encouraging students to reflect on their experiences, what they learned, the challenges they faced, and how they resolved the conflicts enhance their language proficiency and vital collaboration and communication skills. It is obvious that PBL could prepare students for success in their academic journeys and beyond.

CONCLUSION

PBL represents a valuable approach to teach students English as a foreign language, effectively enhancing collaboration and communication skills crucial for their academic and personal growth. Through engagement in meaningful real-world projects, students not only improve their language proficiency but also develop the confidence and competence essential to communicate effectively in diverse contexts. The focus on language acquisition and soft skills equips students with the tools they need to navigate the complexities in the modern world, where teamwork and clear communication are increasingly vital. As the findings of this study illustrate, the collaborative nature of PBL fosters an environment where students can interact with peers, share ideas while practicing their language skills in authentic contexts. The supportive atmosphere created through PBL encourages risk-taking, allowing students to make mistakes and learn from them, which is a critical aspect of the language learning process. PBL not only enhances academic

performance but also prepares them for future challenges in a globalized society. Additionally, there is a significant impact for integrating technology into project-based initiatives. As digital tools become increasingly prevalent in education and technology can help students' innovation and support language development and collaboration. This integration offers students more opportunities to engage with content and collaborate with peers both locally and globally. Looking ahead, future study should aim at exploring long-term impacts of PBL on students, particularly in terms of sustained language proficiency and the retention of collaboration and communication skills over time, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of PBL as a transformative pedagogical pathway.

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