

A STUDY ON PROJECT-BASED LEARNING TO ENHANCE READING WITH A FOCUS ON CULTURAL AWARENESS AMONG BEGINNER EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract. This article investigates the application of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a pedagogical strategy to enhance reading skills and promote cultural awareness among beginner English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Through classroom-based projects centered on culturally relevant content, students were observed to improve both their reading comprehension and cultural sensitivity. The findings suggest that integrating PBL into language instruction not only boosts language acquisition but also enriches intercultural competence, fostering a more holistic language learning.

Key words: project-based learning, English language, cultural awareness, reading, beginner level

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqola boshlang'ich darajadagi ingliz tili o'rganuvchilari orasida o'qish ko'nikmalarini rivojlantirish va madaniy xabardorlikni oshirish uchun loyiha asosidagi o'qitish (Project-Based Learning, PBL) strategiyasining qo'llanilishini o'rganadi. Madaniy jihatdan dolzarb mavzular asosida tuzilgan sinf ichidagi loyihalar orqali talabalarning o'qish tushunchasi va madaniy sezgirligi yaxshilanganligi kuzatildi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, PBLni til o'qitish jarayoniga integratsiya qilish nafaqat til o'zlashtirishni kuchaytiradi, balki intermadaniy kompetensiyani ham boyitadi, bu esa yanada to'liqroq til o'rganish muhitini shakllantiradi.

Kalit so'zlar: loyiha asosidagi ta'lim, ingliz tili, madaniy xabardorlik, o'qish, boshlang'ich bosqich

Introduction

In today's globalized world, English language learners need more than just grammatical knowledge; they require intercultural communication skills and critical thinking abilities. Traditional methods often fall short in fostering these dimensions, especially for beginner EFL learners. Project-Based Learning (PBL), which involves learners in active, collaborative, and authentic tasks, offers a promising alternative. The current study aims to examine how PBL can be used to enhance reading proficiency and cultural awareness among beginner EFL students. This dual focus responds to the growing need for learners to become both linguistically and culturally competent in real-world contexts.

In an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world, the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries is not merely a linguistic skill, but a necessary life competency. As English continues to solidify its role as a global lingua franca, the demand for teaching strategies that foster not only language proficiency but also cultural understanding has become more prominent. Among

the four fundamental language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—reading plays a particularly crucial role in developing learners’ exposure to both language structure and diverse cultural contexts. However, traditional approaches to reading instruction, especially for beginner English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, often emphasize mechanical decoding of texts over meaningful interaction with authentic content. This approach can limit learners’ engagement, critical thinking, and their ability to understand the cultural nuances embedded in language. Project-Based Learning (PBL) emerges as an innovative instructional method that has gained increasing attention in language education due to its emphasis on student-centered learning, collaboration, real-world relevance, and interdisciplinary integration. Unlike conventional classroom activities, PBL invites learners to explore topics in depth, conduct research, and create tangible outcomes, such as presentations, posters, reports, or performances. Through such projects, learners are not only exposed to new vocabulary and grammatical structures in context, but also engage with content that promotes critical thinking and cross-cultural competence. For beginner EFL learners in particular, the use of PBL in reading instruction offers a way to transition from passive reception of information to active knowledge construction, supported by context-rich, authentic materials that are culturally meaningful. The necessity for fostering cultural awareness alongside language proficiency cannot be overstated, especially in the formative stages of language acquisition. Cultural awareness refers to the ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with cultures different from one’s own. In language learning, it involves recognizing cultural references, social norms, idiomatic expressions, and perspectives inherent in the target language. Reading is a powerful medium through which cultural awareness can be developed, as texts often contain culturally specific ideas, historical references, values, and worldviews. However, without instructional support and meaningful engagement, these cultural dimensions may be overlooked or misunderstood by beginner learners. PBL can bridge this gap by contextualizing reading within culturally significant themes and encouraging learners to explore and reflect on them through collaborative inquiry. This study aims to explore how PBL can be strategically implemented to enhance reading skills and promote cultural awareness among beginner EFL learners. It investigates the effectiveness of classroom-based projects that are anchored in cultural themes, such as festivals, traditions, daily life, and historical events of English-speaking countries and students’ native cultures. Through these projects, students not only read texts but also produce outcomes that demonstrate comprehension and cultural reflection. Moreover, PBL promotes the use of varied reading sources, including digital texts, stories, folktales, news articles, and interviews, thus exposing students to different text types and cultural registers. The implementation of PBL in beginner EFL classrooms also aligns with contemporary pedagogical principles that prioritize learner autonomy, collaboration, and authentic assessment. These principles are integral to 21st-century education and are particularly relevant in

the context of language learning. When students engage in projects that connect language to real-world contexts and personal interests, their motivation and confidence increase.

Literature Review and Methodology

A review of existing literature highlights the positive effects of PBL on student motivation, engagement, and deeper learning. Bell (2010) emphasizes the role of real-life tasks in promoting meaningful language use. Beckett and Slater (2005) assert that PBL encourages learners to integrate content and language skills effectively. For this study, a qualitative methodology was adopted, including classroom observations, student journals, and interviews. Participants were beginner-level EFL learners enrolled in a private language center in Tashkent. Over eight weeks, learners engaged in group projects such as 'Discovering World Festivals' and 'My Culture, Your Culture', which involved reading, summarizing, and presenting cultural texts. Literature Review

Over the last few decades, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has gained prominence as a dynamic instructional approach across various disciplines, including language education. Rooted in constructivist theories, particularly those of John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, PBL emphasizes active, contextual, and learner-centered learning. According to Thomas (2000), PBL is defined as “a model that organizes learning around projects,” where students engage in extended inquiry, problem-solving, and collaborative work to produce final outcomes. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), PBL has been identified as particularly effective in fostering meaningful communication, engagement, and deeper understanding of language use (Beckett & Slater, 2005).

One of the most widely discussed benefits of PBL is its potential to enhance reading comprehension through engagement with authentic, real-world materials. According to Stoller (2006), reading in PBL is not an isolated activity but an integrated process involving the gathering, interpreting, and presenting of information. Beginner EFL learners, who typically struggle with traditional reading comprehension exercises, benefit from PBL’s contextual support and purposeful reading. Research by Fragoulis (2009) showed that students involved in PBL projects improved their reading accuracy, retention of vocabulary, and ability to infer meaning from context.

In addition to linguistic benefits, PBL has been recognized for its contribution to cultural awareness. Cultural knowledge is a crucial part of communicative competence, as suggested by Byram (1997), who argued that intercultural understanding should be embedded in foreign language teaching. Cultural content in PBL is not limited to passive exposure; rather, it is actively constructed and reflected upon by students through discussions, comparisons, and presentations. This leads to a deeper and more personal engagement with the target culture. As highlighted by Kraemer (2008), culturally integrated PBL leads to greater empathy, tolerance, and motivation in language learners.

Numerous studies also highlight the motivational effects of PBL. It promotes learner autonomy, cooperation, and critical thinking—key components of 21st-century education. Research by Guo and Yang (2012) demonstrates that learners involved in project work reported higher satisfaction, reduced anxiety, and stronger personal investment in their language development. Furthermore, PBL supports differentiated learning, allowing students with varying proficiency levels to contribute meaningfully, especially in reading tasks.

Despite its advantages, PBL is not without challenges. Critics argue that it may be too time-consuming or difficult to implement, especially with beginner learners who have limited linguistic resources. However, when scaffolded appropriately—with carefully selected texts, structured group activities, and clear outcomes—PBL can be highly effective even at the early stages of language learning (Eyring, 2001).

In summary, the literature supports the integration of PBL into EFL contexts, particularly for enhancing reading skills and developing cultural awareness. However, further classroom-based research is needed to assess its specific impact on beginner learners, especially in settings where English is taught as a foreign rather than second language.

Results

The analysis of classroom data reveals significant improvement in students' reading fluency, vocabulary retention, and comprehension of culturally dense texts. Learners demonstrated increased confidence in discussing cultural themes and showed better engagement with reading materials. Projects stimulated interest and fostered a sense of ownership over learning. For instance, a group project on traditional Uzbek holidays resulted in students using authentic materials, which enhanced their connection to content and led to greater language retention.

Discussion

The results underscore that PBL supports beginner learners in multiple dimensions. First, it contextualizes reading tasks within meaningful cultural themes, which boosts motivation and comprehension. Second, by working collaboratively, learners gain exposure to diverse perspectives, thus enhancing cultural awareness. Third, PBL fosters autonomy and reflective thinking, which are critical for long-term language development. Despite some challenges such as classroom time management and unequal participation, the overall impact of PBL on learners' reading and cultural skills was positive and promising.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) significantly contributes to the enhancement of reading skills and the promotion of cultural awareness among beginner EFL learners. This section analyzes the results in relation to previous literature, the observed classroom outcomes, and the feedback from students. It also considers the

practical implications and limitations of applying PBL in beginner-level language classrooms.

Improvement in Reading Comprehension

One of the most notable outcomes of the study was the improvement in students' reading comprehension skills. Prior to the implementation of the PBL project, most students demonstrated limited ability in reading tasks such as scanning for information, making inferences, and understanding culturally specific vocabulary. However, post-intervention assessments showed measurable progress in these areas. This aligns with the findings of Fragoulis (2009) and Stoller (2006), who emphasize that PBL enhances learners' engagement with reading through context-rich, purposeful tasks. During the project, students engaged with simplified authentic materials that were directly linked to their group themes. This ensured that reading was not an isolated skill but rather an integral part of a broader learning goal. The task of researching cultural topics pushed students to read more attentively and critically. They became more adept at identifying key points, summarizing information, and connecting texts with visual or oral components of their final project. These activities naturally reinforced reading strategies such as prediction, contextual guessing, and paraphrasing.

Additionally, learners developed more positive attitudes toward reading. Many reported in their reflective journals that reading for a real-life project felt more meaningful and enjoyable than traditional textbook exercises. This supports the motivational benefits of PBL highlighted by Guo and Yang (2012), who argue that authentic, student-centered tasks can transform learners' perceptions of reading from a passive to an active, constructive activity.

Development of Cultural Awareness

The integration of cultural themes in PBL not only supported reading development but also fostered cultural awareness. By exploring holidays, customs, daily routines, and social practices from English-speaking countries, students began to develop intercultural competence. They compared these cultural practices with their own, engaged in classroom discussions, and expressed reflections in journals and presentations.

As Byram (1997) notes, language learning is incomplete without cultural understanding. This study confirms that cultural content in PBL allows students to go beyond memorization of facts. They actively analyzed, questioned, and related cultural phenomena to their own identities and experiences. For instance, one group explored the American Thanksgiving holiday. They read about its historical origins, compared it with their national traditions, and presented similarities and differences in a class discussion. Such activities promoted critical thinking, empathy, and respect for cultural diversity.

Moreover, the collaborative nature of PBL further enhanced this intercultural dialogue. Group work required negotiation, cooperation, and sometimes conflict resolution, especially when differing views about culture

emerged. This social interaction facilitated a deeper understanding of culture not just as a set of facts, but as lived experiences and perspectives.

Learner Engagement and Motivation

Another significant observation was the increase in learner motivation and classroom participation. Beginner EFL learners often struggle with self-confidence and fear of making mistakes. However, during the project, students showed increased willingness to take risks, share ideas, and use English communicatively, even if their language was limited.

Conclusion

This study confirms that Project-Based Learning is an effective strategy for enhancing reading skills and cultural awareness among beginner EFL learners. The integration of authentic, culturally rich projects into the language curriculum creates engaging and transformative learning experiences. Educators are encouraged to adopt and adapt PBL frameworks to promote deeper learning outcomes that extend beyond linguistic competence to include intercultural understanding. In conclusion, this study affirms the powerful potential of Project-Based Learning as a transformative tool in beginner EFL instruction. By linking reading with cultural inquiry and active collaboration, PBL addresses multiple dimensions of learning—cognitive, emotional, and social. It equips learners not only with the technical skills of reading in English but also with the curiosity, empathy, and confidence to engage with the wider world. For educators striving to create meaningful, motivating, and future-oriented language learning experiences, PBL offers a valuable framework. When implemented thoughtfully, it can turn the language classroom into a vibrant space of discovery, dialogue, and personal growth.

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