The Role of Project-Based Learning in Motivation, Collaboration, and Achievement in Second Language Acquisition

Anita Muho
Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Education
University "Aleksandër Moisiu" Durrës
Kampusi Universitar, Spitallë, 2000, Durrës, Albania
E-mail address: anitamuho@uamd.edu.al
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8965-9714

Klodiana Leka
Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Education
University "Aleksandër Moisiu" Durrës
Kampusi Universitar, Spitallë, 2000, Durrës, Albania
E-mail address: klodianaleka@uamd.edu.al
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4557-449X

Ramaraj Sivakumar
Department of Education, Annamalai University
Annamalai Nagar, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu – 608002, India
E-mail address: rsk_edutech@yahoo.co.in
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4305-1628

Colomba La Ragione
Centre for Language Studies, Pegaso University
Piazza Trieste e Trento, 48, 80132 Naples, Italy
E-mail address: laragionecolomba@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2330-6382

Ervín Weiss
Department of Romance and German Studies, Faculty of Arts
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
Štefánikova 67, 949 74 Nitra, Slovakia
E-mail address: eweiss@ukf.sk
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0064-0409

ABSTRACT

Aim. This study aims to explore how project-based learning (PBL) influences student motivation, collaboration, and academic achievement in second-language education. In particular, the study aims to examine whether PBL enhances students' language abilities by promoting a more engaging learning environment and fostering improved classroom management.

Methods. The quantitative part of the study involved a sample of 250 students from six high schools in Albania, specifically located in Tirane, Elbasan, and Shkoder. The qualitative aspect involved conducting interviews with 16 teachers who were from the same schools. A combination of student surveys for quantitative data and teacher interviews for qualitative insights was employed using a mixed-method approach. The analysis focused on the effects of PBL on student motivation, collaboration, and academic performance, particularly among students in the lower percentile group.

Results. The findings revealed that while the overall academic achievement in second language acquisition was not significantly improved, students in the lower percentile group showed a notable increase in motivation and achievement, particularly in collaborative tasks. The study also found that PBL encouraged a more dynamic classroom environment and enhanced student engagement, even in cases where academic performance remained unchanged.

Conclusion. Despite the lack of a significant impact on overall academic achievement, project-based learning has the potential to improve student motivation and collaborative skills in second language acquisition. The research proposes practical suggestions for teachers to include more collaborative activities in their instruction and encourages more investigation into how various forms of PBL impact language learning results.

Keywords: project-based learning, second language acquisition, student motivation, collaboration, academic achievement

INTRODUCTION

Project-based learning (PBL) is gaining more significance in different educational sectors by emphasising hands-on, practical problem-solving to boost student engagement and motivation, as a teaching approach (Thomas, 2000). In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), PBL is seen as a promising approach to making learning more interactive, promoting teamwork and involvement, and ultimately improving language abilities (Stoller, 2006). Different from old language teaching techniques focusing on memorisation and individual tasks, Project-Based Learning promotes engagement through group work on projects requiring real-life language skills application. In Albania, implementing PBL could address problems with

student motivation and collaboration, especially for those struggling with language proficiency, in the current language education system that relies on memorisation (Zenelaga et al., 2024).

This research aims to investigate three key questions about the importance of PBL in SLA: (a) How does PBL influence student motivation in second language learning? (b) What is the impact of PBL on collaborative skills in SLA settings? and (c) Is there a discernible change in academic achievement among lower percentile students in SLA due to PBL integration? Prior research indicates that PBL can boost motivation through heightened engagement and relevance of language tasks (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006), while also improving essential teamwork skills required for language development (Ellis, 2015). However, studies have shown mixed findings on the impact of PBL on academic achievement in SLA, particularly for students with lower levels of performance (Beckett & Slater, 2005). This research examines the potential effects of PBL on language learning results in Albanian secondary schools, offering valuable information for teachers interested in integrating student-centred methods in SLA lessons.

Literature Review

Integrating PBL in second language acquisition (SLA) is considered an innovative method to enhance student motivation, teamwork skills, and academic advancement, particularly for students who are not meeting academic expectations. Unlike traditional approaches centred on instructors, PBL emphasises hands-on, authentic tasks that inspire students to engage deeply with the material, fostering a more dynamic and interactive educational setting (Muho & Leka, 2022; Thomas, 2000). This adjustment aligns with social constructivist beliefs that knowledge develops through social interaction and working together (Vygotsky, 1978). In Albania, conventional memorisation techniques are common, making the educational method of PBL a hopeful solution for addressing challenges with student motivation and involvement (Roseni & Muho, 2024a).

Influence of PBL on Student Motivation in SLA

Motivation is essential in SLA and influences student engagement and dedication to language learning, according to Zoltán Dörnyei (2001). Research indicates that PBL can significantly boost motivation by involving students in practical, real-life projects that relate to their interests and empower them to succeed (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Students tend to be more interested and motivated to learn when engaging in activities that simulate real-life scenarios. Anita Muho and Klo-

diana Leka (2021) found that students perceive PBL tasks, such as portfolio-based assessments, as motivating because they encourage active engagement and allow for improvement over time. Additionally, Muho and Taraj (2022) emphasise the importance of formative assessment in maintaining motivation in language learning, highlighting how continuous feedback and clear learning objectives, which are essential elements of PBL, help to keep learners engaged by demonstrating their advancement and offering rewards (Pidbutska et al., 2022). PBL's focus on achievable, incremental goals may provide a motivational edge to students in the lower tier when compared to conventional methods (Khonamri et al., 2024; Stranovská & Szabó, 2024).

Moreover, the addition of interactive and gamified elements to PBL, as researched by Emilda Roseni and Muho (2024a), has shown significant motivational benefits, leading to higher levels of student engagement in language tasks. Their study found that incorporating gamified platforms in PBL assignments led to increased motivation and language proficiency, especially in students who typically struggle to stay engaged in traditional classroom settings. This study indicates that PBL's emphasis on engaging, practical tasks foster a favourable and proactive approach to learning, particularly beneficial for students in environments where conventional approaches have led to lack of interest (Muho & Leka, 2022). PBL provides students with a framework for second language acquisition that enhances internal motivation with purposeful, goal-driven tasks, essential for sustained language acquisition.

Impact of PBL on Collaboration Skills in SLA

Collaboration is important in SLA as language learning entails students participating in meaningful communication and interaction with others, making it a social activity (Ellis, 2015). PBL promotes collaboration in team activities, offering students chances to improve their language skills in engaging settings (Stoller, 2006). Working together towards shared goals inspires students to improve crucial communication and social skills. Muho et al. (2024) found that PBL improved the ability of students to work together, which is particularly helpful for underachieving students struggling in traditional classroom conversations. These students participated in collaborative PBL tasks without the pressure of working alone, leading to increased confidence and a stronger feeling of belonging within the learning community.

Leka et al. (2024) and Adriana Dervishaj and Olivera Presi (2024) demonstrate the importance of inclusive online learning communities, showing that this approach is beneficial for creating inclusive educational environments. In a collaborative PBL setting, students with varying language skills can contribute in diverse ways, benefiting from a team dynamic that values different abilities. The collaboration in PBL aligns well with Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development,

allowing learners to engage in tasks with support from advanced peers, suggesting that PBL can be particularly advantageous for fostering teamwork and providing crucial assistance for students in SLA. The supportive and friendly environment is particularly beneficial in Albania's traditional education system, where collaboration skills may not be prioritised but are essential for real-world language use (Muho & Leka, 2021; Roseni & Muho, 2024b)

Effect of PBL on Academic Achievement in SLA for Lower-Performing Students

The impact of PBL on academic achievement in SLA is intricate, with research showing diverse outcomes, particularly among students with lower academic performance (Beckett & Slater, 2005). While traditional methods may align better with standardised tests in terms of language use and structure, project-based learning enables students to improve steadily in their academic skills, especially those who struggle in test-oriented environments. John W. Thomas (2000) proposes that PBL's emphasis on gradual skill enhancement and practical application allows students to engage with language content at a feasible pace, supporting those who face challenges in conventional assessment-driven schooling.

Lindita Lutaj et al. (2024) support this view as well, noting that PBL reduces job stress and encourages continuous, practical engagement, crucial for students at lower levels. Less proficient students often experience enhancements through group work and emphasis on the learning process in PBL, as it reduces the stress of individual success and underscores the significance of skill development over a period of time. Although PBL may not lead to notable improvements in test scores, it improves academic skills such as critical thinking, communication, and teamwork, which are beneficial for maintaining language proficiency over time (Muho & Taraj, 2022; Muho & Leka, 2022). Therefore, educators should consider PBL as more than just a tool for academic achievement on exams, but rather as a comprehensive method of learning that encourages motivation, collaboration, and language skills, specifically for students experiencing challenges in traditional settings.

In general, while PBL may not result in significant enhancements in test performance, it can enhance motivation, foster teamwork, and facilitate modest academic progress, especially for underperforming students in second language acquisition environments. PBL is a suitable approach for meeting the social and communicative requirements of language learners by creating a lively, inclusive, and inspiring learning environment (Muho & Leka, 2021; Roseni & Muho, 2024b). In the future, research should delve deeper into how different types of problem-based learning tasks impact various outcomes in second language acquisition to improve the effectiveness of problem-based learning in different educational settings.

Methodology

Participants

The study involved 250 high school students and 16 teachers from six urban high schools in Tirane, Elbasan, and Shkoder, Albania. Urban settings were chosen because they offered a varied sample for examining how project-based learning affects student motivation, collaboration, and academic success in learning a second language (Creswell, 2014). The student group included a range of academic achievers, with a focus on those in the lower percentile to explore the potential benefits of PBL for students who find traditional education challenging. The educators, who are well-informed in language instruction, provided important qualitative insights on how PBL can improve participation and teamwork skills in the classroom according to Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell's (2015) research.

Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used in a mixed-methods approach to thoroughly investigate complex instructional methods in educational research, as recommended by R. Burke Johnson and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie (2004). 250 students were surveyed in the quantitative portion of the study, with Likert-scale questions being utilised to assess motivation, engagement, and perceived improvements in language skills as a result of PBL (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Data on academic accomplishments, focusing on low-performing students, was gathered to assess the impact of PBL on language proficiency. 6. Open-ended feedback on the impact of PBL on classroom dynamics, student motivation, and behaviour was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 16 teachers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Educators talked about the influence of project-based learning on students' collaborative skills and engagement, considering varying skill levels.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was segmented into two phases, following the mixed-methods approach framework outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark in 2017. Statistical analysis was carried out on quantitative data to detect patterns in motivation, collaboration, and academic performance outcomes, including both descriptive and inferential methods. Descriptive statistics gave a summary of student feedback, while inferential analyses measured the importance of noted variations, especial-

ly among students with poorer academic performance (Field, 2018). Examining teacher interviews consisted of coding transcripts to identify recurring themes regarding the effects of PBL on student motivation, collaboration, and classroom engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This coding process focused on analysing teachers' feedback and its effect on students in the lower percentile, allowing for the comparison of data from different sources and providing a comprehensive evaluation of how PBL influences second language acquisition.

Findings

The results of this study are presented according to each investigation, providing a clearer insight into how PBL affects student motivation, collaboration, and academic achievement in SLA.

How Does PBL Influence Student Motivation in Second Language Acquisition?

The results suggest that PBL boosts student motivation, particularly for those in the bottom percentile. The students displayed more enthusiasm and involvement in language learning tasks with the use of PBL as opposed to traditional approaches.

Educators noted that PBL assignments boosted students' enthusiasm by enabling them to participate in meaningful, real-life projects. Students who usually have difficulty learning languages were more motivated because of the engaging and enjoyable environment created by PBL.

What Effect Does PBL Have on Student Collaboration Skills in SLA Contexts?

The research found that PBL significantly enhanced collaboration skills, as students demonstrated increased engagement in group projects and interaction with peers during PBL sessions. Teachers noticed a more dynamic and interactive classroom environment, where students worked together and helped each other achieve project goals. The collaborative effort was particularly beneficial for students in the bottom percentile group, who appeared to excel in a communal and more relaxed setting. The results suggest that PBL enhances both personal learning and collaboration, communication, and social engagement among students, which aligns with building collaborative skills in SLA.

Does PBL Significantly Impact the Academic Achievement of Students in the Lower Percentile Group in Second Language Acquisition?

While the overall academic performance did not significantly improve for all students, the results indicated that those in the lower percentile demonstrated enhancements, particularly in collaborative activities that effectively utilised language skills. These students demonstrated improved performance in assignments related to group work, suggesting that PBL may be particularly beneficial for enhancing the academic success of students with lower grades. Although overall test scores or formal evaluations did not show significant improvement with PBL, it did support gradual academic progress for students struggling with traditional language learning methods.

To sum up, the results show that while PBL may not have a significant impact on overall academic achievement, it does enhance motivation, teamwork, and specific academic outcomes for less successful students in SLA.

Conclusions

Research shows that PBL is beneficial for motivating students, particularly those in the lower percentile struggling in traditional language learning environments. PBL ignites internal motivation and maintains student interest in language learning by involving them in authentic, real-life projects within the classroom. This is especially advantageous for students who could otherwise feel swamped or unengaged in learning a new language. Based on these findings, educators should consider utilising PBL methods that prioritise student involvement and relevance, potentially attracting a broader range of students by connecting language learning to practical, real-world applications. PBL has shown potential in reducing disinterest and boosting participation, particularly benefiting low-achieving students who thrive in hands-on, interactive educational settings.

Research indicates that PBL enhances students' teamwork skills by fostering a more collaborative and socially interactive environment in the classroom. Effective collaboration among students participating in PBL activities is crucial in SLA as it helps improve language acquisition through communication and peer interaction. The environmentally minded students, when paired with the collaborative method of PBL, are enabled to provide meaningful input to a group, ultimately increasing their self-confidence and strengthening their sense of belonging. This finding shows that incorporating group-based PBL tasks in language classes can significantly improve teamwork skills, preparing students for language fluency as well as collaborative work in broader academic and professional contexts. Hence, educators are advised to integrate structured team tasks in PBL to enhance these important skills.

While PBL did not have a notable impact on the academic performance of all students, it did lead to significant improvements in the academic success of those in the lower percentile group, particularly in collaborative, project-based tasks. This suggests that while PBL may not lead to instant enhancements in test scores or conventional measures of achievement, it provides a path for steady academic advancement for students who excel in hands-on and cooperative learning approaches. PBL offers a supportive structure for students facing academic challenges, emphasising gradual skill development over immediate mastery, allowing them to progress at their own pace. Educators are encouraged to view PBL as a supplementary method that supports incremental progress and meets diverse educational needs, rather than just a way to achieve high marks.

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