

USING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING TO IMPROVE EFL STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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Abstract: *This paper explores the impact of Project-Based Learning (PBL) on the development of critical thinking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Through collaborative and student-centered learning activities, PBL fosters critical inquiry, problem-solving, and independent thinking. This study provides an overview of the benefits of PBL, discusses its implementation in the EFL classroom, and demonstrates how it can enhance both language proficiency and critical thinking skills. The findings suggest that PBL not only improves language acquisition but also equips students with vital cognitive skills for real-world problem-solving.*

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning, Critical Thinking, EFL, English as a Foreign Language, Language Acquisition*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern EFL classroom, fostering language proficiency is not enough; students must also develop higher-order thinking skills, such as critical thinking, to effectively navigate global communication. Critical thinking involves analyzing information, questioning assumptions, and forming well-reasoned judgments, making it an essential skill for language learners. One promising pedagogical approach to developing these skills is Project-Based Learning (PBL).

PBL is a learner-centered teaching method that encourages students to engage in real-world projects, promoting collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving. This paper investigates the role of PBL in enhancing critical thinking among EFL students and explores how project work can simultaneously improve language acquisition and cognitive skills.

2. Literature Review

The use of PBL in language learning has gained increasing attention in recent years, with research showing positive outcomes in terms of both language proficiency and cognitive development. According to Beckett and Slater (2005), PBL encourages students to use language in authentic contexts, fostering meaningful interaction and collaborative learning. Thomas (2000) further highlights that PBL shifts the focus from traditional teacher-centered instruction to a student-driven approach, where learners take responsibility for their own learning.

Critical thinking, as defined by Paul and Elder (2006), involves reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do. In the context of EFL, critical thinking enhances students' ability to evaluate linguistic input, assess communication strategies, and make informed decisions during language use. Previous studies, such as those by Kabilan (2000), indicate that PBL is an effective method for promoting critical thinking because it encourages active learning, problem-solving, and analytical reasoning.

However, while the benefits of PBL for language learning are well-documented, fewer studies have specifically addressed its role in developing critical thinking skills among EFL learners. This paper aims to fill that gap by examining how PBL can be used as a tool to foster critical thinking alongside language acquisition.

3. Methodology

This study focuses on implementing PBL in an EFL classroom to improve students' critical thinking skills. A class of intermediate-level EFL learners participated in a series of project-based activities over the course of one semester. Each project was designed to challenge students to research, plan, and execute tasks that required problem-solving, creativity, and critical analysis.

3.1 Project Design

The projects were structured around real-world problems, such as environmental sustainability, cultural diversity, and social responsibility. Students worked in groups to investigate these issues, develop solutions, and present their findings in English. This approach provided opportunities for authentic language use while encouraging students to critically evaluate information, collaborate with peers, and present well-reasoned arguments.

3.2 Assessment of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking was assessed through reflective journals, peer evaluations, and presentations. Students were asked to explain their decision-making processes, justify their choices, and critique the work of their peers. Additionally, language skills were measured through oral and written presentations, focusing on fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that PBL significantly enhances both critical thinking and language proficiency among EFL learners. Throughout the projects, students demonstrated increased engagement in critical inquiry and problem-solving. The reflective journals revealed that students were able to analyze complex problems, question assumptions, and propose innovative solutions.

For example, in one project on environmental sustainability, students critically examined various energy sources, weighed their pros and cons, and developed proposals for reducing carbon footprints. This process required students to think critically about the information they gathered, evaluate competing arguments, and present well-supported conclusions in English.

Furthermore, PBL encouraged collaborative learning, which also contributed to critical thinking development. Peer evaluations highlighted that students were able to provide constructive feedback, challenge each other's ideas, and engage in meaningful discussions. These interactions fostered a deeper understanding of both the language and the subject matter, as students were motivated to use English to articulate complex ideas and defend their positions.

The improvement in language skills was also evident. Students' oral and written presentations showed progress in fluency, accuracy, and complexity, as they were required to use English to explain their projects in detail. The process of working on real-world problems gave students a sense of purpose, making language use more meaningful and contextually relevant.

5. CONCLUSION

Project-Based Learning is a powerful tool for developing critical thinking skills in EFL students. By engaging in collaborative, real-world projects, learners are encouraged to think critically, solve problems, and communicate effectively in English. This study demonstrates that PBL not only improves language acquisition but also fosters higher-order thinking skills, preparing students for academic and professional success.

Future research should focus on exploring the long-term effects of PBL on critical thinking and language development, as well as investigating how different types of projects impact learning outcomes in diverse EFL contexts. However, the results of this study strongly support the use of PBL as an effective method for improving both language proficiency and critical thinking skills in the EFL classroom.

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