

**INVESTIGATING THE INFLUENCE OF STUDENTS' PROJECT-BASED
ENGAGEMENT ON THEIR ACHIEVEMENTS AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARDS
THE ESP COURSE**

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Abstract

Research has shown that learner-centered classrooms are very effective. Engaging students in various classroom activities leads towards better learning outcomes. Moreover, project-based activities can have a positive influence on the students' engagement and dedication towards a language class. Accordingly, this study will investigate the influence of project-based language learning on students' achievements and attitudes towards the ESP course. The participants in this study were sixty students from the Faculty of Languages Cultures and Communication at South East European University (SEEU), in Tetove, attending ESP for Communication Sciences (1) and (2) courses. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were used for the data collection. The administered instruments were: group projects, student questionnaires, unstructured interviews with the students and process observation. The results confirmed that the students showed more positive attitudes towards ESP classes, after they participated in group projects. They became more motivated and more enthusiastic during their classes. The students improved their critical and creative thinking skills; they productively participated in teamwork and they were able to give constructive criticism. It can be hypothesized that engaging the students in group projects helps in lowering the affective filter, by which the students' input increases and they show greater academic achievements.

Key words: project-based, ESP, teamwork, affective filter, input.

1. Introduction

Learner-centered classes promote learner autonomy because they focus on making students independent by involving them directly in the learning process. This can be done by implementing PBL¹ in the curriculum. There is a number of studies related to PBL which shows that learning through projects is really effective. If students work with their projects more seriously and if the projects are well-implemented from the teacher and the students, this can help the students practice and improve their social and workplace skills. When students are engaged in project-based tasks they have to use their critical and creative thinking skills; they need to conduct research, they have to organize ideas and elements of the projects and they have to use their problem solving skills as well. By collaborating, sharing ideas, assisting each other in order to achieve their common aim (a well-structured project) they apply and develop the above mentioned skills.

2. Literature Review

There are many studies which conclude that PBL is very beneficial for the students. On the other hand, there are also studies which point out the disadvantages and difficulties of PBL. However, from the previous research it can be suggested that PBL helps students improve their social and workplace skills and prepares them for the job market.

According to Ciftci (2014):

Project-based learning is an implemented learning and teaching model developed in opposition to teach the curriculum as an irrelevant pile of unimportant little information in modern countries. This model focuses on one or more fields' basic concepts and principles and if possible it covers more than one learning target in a scenario of a lesson. (pp.1019-1020)

Barron & Darling-Hammond (2010) mention that teachers need to engage the students to the fullest and stimulate them to identify problems. They also state that: "students must be given opportunities to develop their skills in the context of complex, meaningful projects that require

¹ Project-Based Learning

sustained engagement, collaboration, research, management of resources and development of an ambitious performance or product” (p.200).

Other researchers, Musa, Mufti, Latiff & Amin (2010) conducted a study to analyze the influence of PBL on “the transference and inculcation of workplace related skills” where they share a very realistic idea that basic academic skills are not enough for the job market, but employers want to hire employees who have mastered “reasoning, creative thinking, decision making and problem solving” (p.187). Moreover, they state that through PBL students will practice language skills as well; and not only skills which are required in the workplace. In another study published in 2011 they say that the job market today is seeking for employees who possess skills which are practiced through projects. Then they say that the employees should know how to cooperate with each other and how to be constructive during conflicts, and they should also be able to come up with insightful ideas.

There are other researchers who agree that PBL has an influence on helping students improve their workplace skills and create a more positive attitude towards the content of the subject. For example, Kloppenborg and Baucus (2004) as cited in Musa, Mufti, Latiff & Amin (2010) say that PBL is crucial because students practice very important skills starting from collaboration, being able to solve problems or conflicts, etc. Another researcher, Bell (2010), states that if students are involved in PBL then they can practice their social and communication skills.

On the contrary, Efstratia (2014) mentions the disadvantages of PBL. She states that: “Teachers are discouraged of implementing this method, because sometimes they are not experienced, they lack motivation, or consider PBL as additional activity” (p.1259). She also concludes that PBL is problematic when it comes to respecting deadlines and that evaluation is difficult.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 60 students from the Faculty of Languages Cultures and Communication at SEEU, in Tetove. They attended ESP for Communication Sciences (1) and (2). During the academic year 2013/14 a pilot project was also conducted with 30 other students.

3.2 Approach

Qualitative and quantitative approaches were used for the data collection.

3.3 Instruments

The administered instruments which were used for the data collection were: group projects, student questionnaires, unstructured interviews and process observation.

3.4 Setting

Data collection lasted for two academic semesters, 2014/15 at the Language Center, in SEEU.

3.5 Procedure

During ESP (1) and ESP (2) courses, students were engaged in different projects. Their biggest projects were planning and recording a promotional video for the university. They also had to give short presentations and fill in the questionnaire related to PBL. Finally, unstructured interviews were conducted with the students.

3.6 Research questions

The following are the research questions designed to provide reliable data related to PBL approach.

1. Does PBL contribute towards greater academic achievement or performance?
2. What is the influence of PBL on students' attitudes towards the ESP class?
3. What are the students' attitudes towards integrating group projects in the curriculum?

4. Findings and Discussion

Only some representative answers from the student questionnaires were selected in order to analyze the students' attitudes and experiences with project-based approach

4.1 Have you enjoyed ESP (1) and (2) courses? (where PBL approach was implemented)

Student 1: *ESP courses have aroused my interest more than all the other courses until now. Despite the knowledge I gain, I love the space that is given to us to express our ideas, opinions and experiences.*

Student 2: *Yes of course. The courses were so good, I felt free to discuss, share ideas, learn new things and the very important thing was that our teacher made the classes more enjoyable by assigning us different task and projects.*

Students 3: *ESP 1 and 2 courses were very interesting, I enjoyed so much and I was looking forward to attending every single class.*

Student 4: *Yes, we have worked too much and we have learnt a lot. Very useful.*

Student 5: *Yes, we had a lot of fun.*

4.2 What did you enjoy the most during your ESP classes?

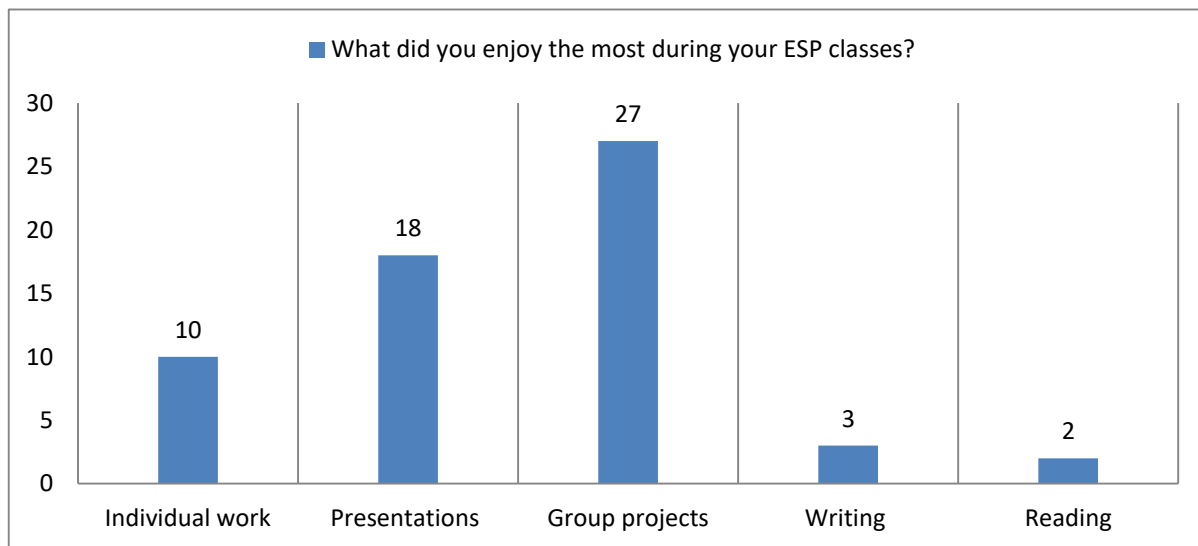


Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1. above, 27 students out of 60 enjoyed group projects the most. Eighteen students enjoyed delivering the presentations which were also part of their projects. Interestingly, only 10 students enjoyed working individually during the ESP course.

4.3 What was your favorite part from the group projects?

Student 1: *Organizing the group, dividing the tasks and preparing for it were my favorite parts from which I gained the most experience on learning new things and improving communication & organization skills as well.*

Student 2: *The part when we recorded the videos about multiculturalism in our university because we had to work with students from different cultures.*

Student 3: *Working together and getting to know each other better.*

Student 4: *Dividing the tasks for the video project and finding material for the posters.*

Student 5: *Discussion about the work, the way how we would organize the work and how to assess it.*

Student 6: *Recording the video. It was a good feeling “being an actor”.*

Student 7: *Exchanging ideas.*

Student 8: *Presenting the project and preparing the posters.*

4.4. Did you enjoy PBL? If yes, why? If not, why?

Student 1: *Working in a group project is always enjoyable and easier. But it requires a lot of responsibility.*

Student 2: *Yes I liked it. It is so important and less stressful for me because of sharing ideas. So, it's not like individual work where you have to give only your effort to have the work done.*

Student 3: *It's definitely more fun working with a partner than alone. More students share their ideas and the results are better.*

Student 4: *Yes, group projects helped me improve my multi-tasking skills, improvising and leadership skills.*

Student 5: *I love working in a group with projects because in this way we can have more discussion and then decide on the best answer. I like the moment when each of us presents his/her part of the work. However, it's very irritating for me if any student in the group shows no interest.*

Student 6: *Yes, because working in groups always has something special.*

Student 7: *Yes, because I like the fact that we all should contribute to do a good job.*

Student 8: *No, because boys are lazy and they don't work.*

Student 9: *Working in a group is not always my favorite because I can't express myself as much as I want because I have to be coordinated with the others and I have a limited time.*

4.5 How do you learn the most?

Which learning methods/styles are more effective for you?

Student 1: *Reading at home is one of the most effective learning methods, especially when you take notes, but for me it won't be effective if we don't discuss it in the classroom again.*

Student 2: *I learn the most when we read in class or do projects together.*

Student 3: *Interacting in class was a very good method. The videos that the professor played in class were very effective and well-thought. I liked it so much because the professor was only a facilitator.*

Student 4: *I must have someone to listen to me, to correct me and to help me. Firstly, I take notes and then I read them so I can memorize. If there is something I don't understand, I have to do some research or discuss it with my colleagues.*

Student 5: *I think that I learn more while working for a project because I enjoy it and I think the input is higher then.*

Student 6: *Participating in conversations and brainstorming as a class.*

Student 7: *Through group projects because if there is something I don't understand I ask the other members of the group.*

4.6. Are group projects stressful or difficult for you? Explain.

Student 1: *Group projects are not difficult at all when you know your task. For me they are stressful if not all the students in the group participate and I have to do the work for them. I love to help others, but not when they are not trying.*

Student 2: *Not that much because we separate the work and we take just one part of the project and we work only on it.*

Student 3: *It's difficult if there is any student who doesn't participate.*

Student 4: *They can be stressful because we have a deadline. Sometimes our colleagues aren't very responsible. Especially if we have to engage even students from other classes.*

Student 5: *The deadline makes me nervous. Not knowing if others will be on time or having that bad feeling that you can't be ready and you don't have the ability to work with the others.*

Also, the time when the group is separated, I really feel angry and so stressful until we have good results at the end.

Student 6: *Group projects for me are more stressful than difficult because I worry what if I can't finish my part on time and the project fails.*

Student 7: *Yes, because each student has a different personality and opinions and sometimes it's difficult to agree on one topic. Therefore, we should have a lot of discussion.*

Student 8: *They are difficult because we have to find and select good sources and material and to prepare a lot.*

Student 9: *They are difficult because they require organization and a lot of effort.*

4.7 What is your attitude towards the EPSP course (PBL approach)?

Student 1: *ESP is an essential course for improving the language in an academic level. It is a very effective course not only for improving our language but also for shaping our ideas, attitudes and personalities.*

Student 2: *ESP courses make me more self-confident.*

Student 3: *ESP courses are the best for me. I have gained a lot of knowledge and I wish we had more classes per week. In these classes we learnt the theory and brought it to life.*

Student 5: *It's one of my favorite courses and I've never missed a class. I learn a lot and I give my best just like my teacher does. This course has had a very big importance for my studies in general.*

Student 6: *Very relaxing and productive classes.*

4.8 Have you achieved good success at the end of the course?

Student 1: *In my opinion you can always feel the results of a course from the way it is taught. ESP has always been a very effective course and taking into consideration that I have worked hard, my final results were great.*

Student 2: *Yes, and I have learnt many things about life in general.*

Student 3: *Outstanding. And I am not happy that I got a good grade, but because I've learnt a lot.*

Student 4: *With a lot of work of course there will be good results. This is my biggest success ever.*

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusions for the 1st research question

Does PBL contribute towards greater academic achievement or learning outcomes?

From the analysis of the results it was concluded that students became more autonomous learners after they were engaged on projects. They showed better leadership skills, many of the students performed better in their next group projects and were able to lead the groups effectively. Their critical and creative thinking skills were improved because they had the chance to practice and apply creative and critical thinking while working on their projects. Also, students showed improved presentation skills and better intra and interpersonal communication.

Moreover, PBL helped the students with decision making process. Students were given topics or questions which required decision making or problem solving skills. Being involved in a decision making process they also practiced and improved their organizational skills. Majority of the students productively participated in a teamwork and they were able to give constructive criticism. Students showed lower affective filter, they were more relaxed, very positive, willing to come to classes and work. As a result their output was outstanding. It can be concluded that engaging the students in group projects helped in lowering the affective filter, by which the students' input increased and they showed greater academic achievements.

5.2 Conclusions for the 2nd research question

What is the influence of PBL on students' attitudes towards the ESP class?

The results confirmed that the students showed more positive attitudes towards ESP classes after they participated in group projects. They became more motivated and more excited during their classes. The students were very enthusiastic and as a result they contributed more productively towards completion of each of their projects. They were so happy and proud to see their final products getting promoted at university level and shared online. Moreover, after being engaged in group projects the students started to attend classes more regularly and they became more responsible. To finalize, students shared their experiences with students from other courses who always wanted to come and visit ESP classes. So, PB approach fostered curiosity and interest even on students from other English classes, working with different teachers and different methodologies.

5.3 Conclusions for the 3rd research question

What are the students' attitudes towards integrating group projects in the curriculum?

The results from the students' questionnaires, the unstructured interviews and from the process observation showed that students enjoyed working with projects and that they benefited from PBL approach. The following are some significant conclusions related to students' attitudes towards integrating group projects in the curriculum:

1. Majority of the students answered that they wish they had projects in their other subjects as well.
2. The students found working on projects as a very interesting and innovative method.
3. Even students from other classes were interested to come and attend ESP for Communication Sciences classes, just because they found the students' projects as a very interesting and attractive method.
4. Majority of the students didn't find the group projects stressful, but some of them said that projects are difficult because:
 - a) students should divide the parts of the project.
 - b) students are dependent on each other.
 - c) students sometimes have difficulties arranging meetings.
 - d) there might be students who think they know everything.
 - e) students might disagree with each other.
 - f) there are students who don't participate.
 - g) the projects are more time consuming and they worry about the deadlines.

6. Limitations and Conclusion

This study has its own limitations. The limited number of participants can be considered as a limitation. However, working during two semesters with 60 students and conducting a pilot project with 30 other students contributed to receiving reliable results. Another limitation might be that the course wasn't 100% based on projects.

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