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THE IMPORTANCE OF PROJECT BASED LEARNING IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE - A CASE STUDY FROM THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO

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ABSTRACT

This small-scale research paper analyses both teachers' and students' perceptions and their roles towards the use of Project Based Learning (PBL) in a research context in the Republic of Kosovo. The study was completed by sixty students of three lower-secondary private schools in Kosovo and eight English language teachers who work there. The aim of this study was to investigate teachers' perspectives on using PBL in their classes, the challenges they face while applying PBL, the most common benefits PBL implementation, the materials used with this method, and the impact of PBL on students' motivation to learn English as a Foreign Language. The data obtained from interviews with teachers highlight that teachers use PBL to a certain extent, though it works much effectively with lower-secondary and upper-secondary education. Teachers preferred to use Project Based Learning in their classrooms in general, although there appears to be some uncertainty between doing projects and Project Based Learning as a strategy. English language instructors have only seen themselves as facilitators of initiatives carried out in the classroom, resulting in a student-centered environment. In contrast to the past, it appears that teachers make extensive use of technology and involve students in a variety of activities to boost their learning and keep them engaged in PBL. Students on the other hand, through a very small

number, highlighted that PBL is a better teaching approach in comparison to the traditional textbook teaching and learning.

Key words: Project Based Learning, critical thinking, collaboration, creative thinking, English language.

INTRODUCTION

The utilization of classroom teaching methods and strategies by a teacher can have a significant impact on the learning of English as a Foreign Language. PBL is a student-centered, active learning approach that promotes students' autonomy, constructive inquiries, goal setting, teamwork, communication, and reflection in the context of real-world tasks. It has been examined in a number of situations and at many levels of schooling, ranging from elementary to post-secondary (Kokotsaki, 2016). What is more, "Project-based learning (PBL) is a model that organizes learning around projects" (Thomas, 2000, p.1). PBL seeks for a detailed organization of the overall application, thus it is not easy to be implemented. Not only that, but also there are a lot of teachers who misunderstand this method, as they confuse it with doing projects. In addition to it, Thomas explained what Project Based Learning method requires: Project-based learning (PBL) aims to ensure that students understand and apply the concepts and principles of a discipline. PBL projects are focused on questions or problems that drive students to encounter (and struggle with) the central concepts, principles and practices of a particular discipline (Thomas, 2012).

Also, Project-based learning can be challenging, but preparing to have student inquiry guide your lesson will help you keep everything in order. It takes a lot of time and work to plan for project-based learning. Every teacher who has ever organized a new project understands how much effort goes into making it a success. To concentrate the investigation, you must establish an intriguing driving question. You must choose and prepare for real audiences and goods while keeping voice and choice in mind. You must prepare a fantastic project launch.

You must ensure that the project adheres to gold standards. The list could go on and on (Miller, 2018). Hence, (Blumenfeld et al. 1991 as cited in Bas, 2008) Project-based learning has become increasingly popular in K-12 classrooms. A "leading question" is based on a real-world issue and, ideally, incorporates various topic areas. Cognitive tools include computer-based laboratories, hypermedia, graphing apps, and telecommunications. Furthermore, according to

Dornyei (2001, as cited in Tsiplakides, 2009, the implementation of PBL has an important role in enhancing students' motivation, fosters group work, and has a positive impact on the target language advancement. It also, reduces students' anxiety, and increases students' effort to achieve better results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a variety of approaches to teaching English as a Foreign Language nowadays. However, PBL has proved to be an effective approach to broaden students' general knowledge as well as their English vocabulary and communication in different discussions. Project-Based Learning is a new approach to education that teaches a wide range of skills that are critical for success in the twenty-first century.

Students utilize inquiry to guide their own learning and work together to research and create projects that demonstrate their knowledge. Students gain in a number of ways from acquiring new, practical technology skills to becoming excellent communicators and sophisticated problem solvers through this kind of teaching (Bell, 2010).

Project Based Learning is based on real-world difficulties that spark students' attention and inspire critical thought as they acquire and apply new material in a problem-solving situation. The instructor serves as a facilitator, collaborating with students to design relevant questions, set up meaningful assignments, coach both knowledge growth and social skills, and assess what students have gained from the experience (David, 2008 as cited in Efstratia, 2014).

Additionally, through PBL students can create a sense of belonging to the community. "Project based learning (PBL) provides opportunities for students to build qualities, as well as more deeply learn traditional academic content and understand how it applies to the real world" (Larmer, 2015, p. 2). The Kosovo system of education is in transition, but on a more positive note, PBL is cited as something that needs to be introduced in every curricular field The 'Languages and Communication' subject curriculum should address both cross-curriculum and cross-subject issues, such as civic education and education for human and child rights, among others (MEST, Core Curriculum for Lower Secondary Education in Kosovo, 2012).

As a result, it has been discovered that when the PBL is used in large classes, teachers have difficulty increasing student motivation, getting students to focus on learning tasks, assisting students in connecting new content to prior knowledge, and efficiently performing cooperative learning activities (Pham 2018, as cited in Blumenfield et al., 1991; Marx et al., 1997; Lee & Tsai, 2004). According to (Simpson, 2011 as cited in Kavlu, 2017), "the PBL approach opens the door to: communicative competence, authentic learning, learner autonomy, cooperative and collaborative learning, higher-order thinking skills, language proficiency, self-efficacy and self-esteem" (p.67).

Objectives of the study

- To identify teachers' and students' attitudes towards the use of PBL;
- To identify the benefits and challenges teachers face while implementing PBL:
- To make recommendations for further research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The researcher was interested to investigate whether English language teachers round Kosovo use PBL, what are the most important qualities leading and/or barriers to the implementation of PBL, what age PBL works best, what materials do teachers suggest and the role of PBL in students' motivation to learn English as a Foreign Language. Consequently, through ten survey questions the researcher sought to answer the following research questions:

(1) To what extent is Project Based Learning used among teachers at private English schools in Kosovo?

(2) What are the challenges and/or benefits of using Project Based Learning at teachers' sites at the pre-university level?

(3) How does Project Based Learning increase students' motivation in acquiring English as a foreign language?

PARTICIPANTS

The aim of the study was to investigate English teachers' and students' viewpoints related to the use PBL in their English classes. The study was conducted with English language teachers teaching at pre-university level in the Republic of Kosovo. The questionnaire was distributed to 60 English language students of three private studios 'London English School' Mitrovicë, English Language Corner in Kamenica, 'Oxford Studio'in Gjilan. Those schools actually have students who come from public schools, as such a better image of the use of PBL was visualized. The aim of the study was explained in the questionnaire. The survey was completed online on a voluntary basis due to the pandemic time. The researcher has known five teachers from the targeted schools and has reached to them easily. As such, the data were gathered through Google forms and further analyzed in JASP.

INSTRUMENTS

This section provides information related to the used instruments in obtaining the findings to the above-mentioned research questions.

The first research paper is answered through interviews with English language teachers. They have stated that they have a bit of background on PBL, but they still need additional trainings in order to implement it more frequently in their English classes.

The second research paper is answered through teachers' responses in identifying the challenges and/or benefits of PBL in the course of their work. Hence, the eight respondents have highlighted some of the most important benefits from their viewpoint. As such, they stated that PBL stimulated their critical thinking and creative skills, they get to communicate more in English, they collaborate better and so on. Among the most pressing challenges, the teachers have listed students' assessment as the biggest challenge followed by keeping them engaged and managing the classroom well constantly.

The third research question is answered through a Likert scale questionnaire responded by 60 students in total, though only 21 of them have used PBL before and answered the whole survey. The majority of those who have used PBL before stated that their motivation in acquiring English as a foreign language is increased due to exploring topics of students' interest. Also, they added that PBL keeps them constantly engaged into their own learning, it is considered to be a new

teaching method which is preferred among students and enhances the four English language skills due to various activities

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter deals with analysis and findings of this particular research. This was based on the data collected from the participants. Figures and tables are used for further visual explanations. The findings from the questionnaire are aimed to shed light from the teachers' perspective teaching in various cities/ towns around Kosovo. The overall research results will give more insights to EFL teachers on the use of Project Based Learning methodology in their teaching experience.

Findings from students' questionnaire

An online survey was sent to sixty students of the three targeted schools. They have completed it over the Internet due to the pandemic time. The data was firstly stored on a database and then the researcher evaluated all the responses as illustrated on charts and graphs below. The survey data was obtained from 8 English teachers who taught at private schools that are currently operating in Kosovo. Also, each school has sent the link to 20 of their students, forming the total number 60.

This section provides data illustrated in charts and tables for a better visualization. The overall questionnaire included 20 questions. It must be mentioned that 60 students participated in this questionnaire out of which only 21 had previous background on learning through projects, 39 of them did submit it since they have no previous background on the use of Project Based Learning among their English classes. The researcher has lower secondary schools as a target, thus some of the demographic data are shown below:

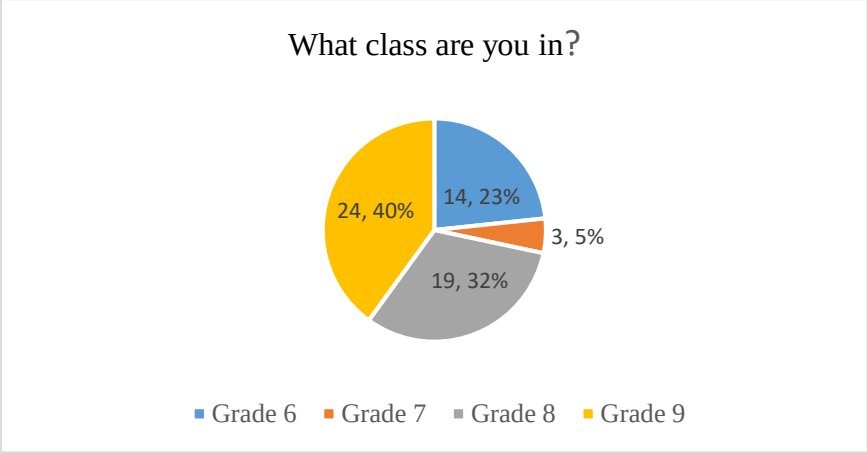


Fig 1. Demographic data related to the grade

Firstly, the students were asked to tell what grade they are in, as the focus to this research is lower secondary schools. As it can be seen from the chart, 60 students have participated in the survey. Out of which, 24 students or 40% of them were in grade 9, 19 students or 32 % were in grade 8, 23.3% of the respondents were in grade 6, and the smallest number of the students taking part in this survey were in the 7th grade.

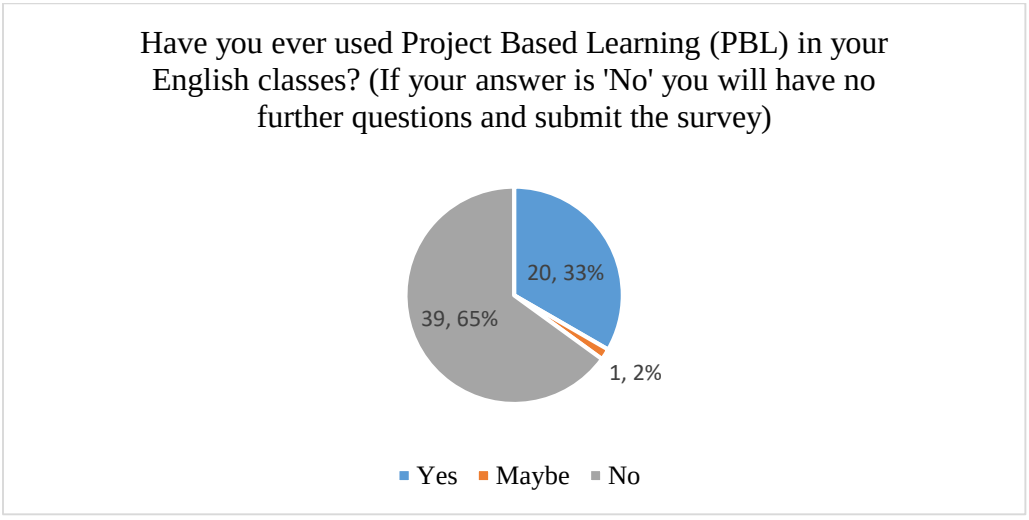


Fig 2. Have you ever used PBL in your English classes?

The students were provided with a paragraph and a video from Edutopia to know what PBL stands for and to give a better background on that what all these questions are about. As it is illustrated above only 20 students or 33 % of the students claimed to have used PBL in their English classes before. And to a much more negative note, 39 or 65% of them said ‘No’ and submitted the questionnaire immediately. To continue, the students were asked the following

question: 'What are some of the benefits when using PBL?' Hence, considering the fact that only 21 students out of 60 completed the survey, some of the elaborations from the students centered on the common themes as noted in the following table.

We are more engaged in our learning.
PBL stimulates our critical thinking.
We collaborate more with our friends.
We share our skills and talents through creativity.
We expand our English vocabulary.
We use technology more.
We become more responsible to our community.
We expand our general knowledge skills.

Table 1. Excerpts from 'What are some of the benefits when using PBL?'

Furthermore, the students were given a Likert-scale set of questions to give their opinion on ten statements as illustrated in the following table. As it can be seen, the majority of the students who have a background in Project Based Learning have a positive attitude to the given statements, as higher numbers outperform the negative options such as 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'.

Questionnaire Items	S/A	A	N	D	S/D
1. PBL allows me to explore on topics of interest to me.	7	13	0	1	0
2. I consider myself an expert on the explored topic when completed.	6	4	8	2	1
3. My curiosity grows while researching on various topics.	8	5	7	1	1
4. PBL keeps me engaged into learning.	11	8	1	0	1
5. PBL is better than traditional ways of learning.	5	8	7	0	1
6. I have improved my English-writing skills with PBL.	6	11	3	1	1
7. I have improved my English-speaking skills with PBL.	6	12	3	0	0
8. I have improved my English-reading skills with PBL.	8	7	7	3	0
9. I have improved my English-listening skills with PBL.	8	7	7	2	1
10. I love presenting my projects to the audience.	10	6	2	2	1

Table 2. Students' responses regarding their opinions and beliefs on the use of PBL.

Findings from teachers' interviews results

In the second phase of this particular small-scale research, 8 respondents were previously interviewed and admitted having used PBL in their teaching experience. They were English language teachers teaching at the three targeted schools for this research. They highlighted their

opinions regarding the use of PBL in English classes, the importance of PBL in increasing students' motivation in learning English, the enhancement of their critical and creative skills, the importance of projects in student collaboration and communication.

R= Researcher, P= Participant

The following are five excerpts out of five responses taken from teachers' interviews.

R1: How does Project Based Learning increase students' motivation in acquiring English?

P2: It allows them to explore real life topics and improve language skills by doing. So, most of the learning occurs outside of the classroom which makes them motivated without feeling the pressure to learn/memorize something.

P3: By ensuring learner autonomy and striving to push them to the edge of their current competence. It also helps develop their critical and creative thinking with hands-on activities.

P4: Working on topics that surround them makes them unconsciously get involved into the process of learning. Doing PBL helps them improve different English language skills such as speaking, writing, reading, and listening. They get to develop these skills by researching, discussing in groups about their findings, presenting their data, and so on.

P8: It allows students to choose, create authentic projects that demonstrate their understanding of a topic which connect their in-and-out of school experiences. In this way they put more effort into their learning because they like what they are doing, they have a sense of ownership, as they decide what kind of project they will create.

R2: What are some of the most important benefits of PBL in English classes?

P1: Project Based Learning stimulates students' critical thinking and creative skills.

P4: Students cooperate more by sharing various ideas and benefiting from each other.

P5: Students expand their general knowledge and are able to talk more on different topics.

P7: Every student will be on task, as all of the students have to do something related to the given driving question.

R3: What are some of the materials that you consider a teacher should need in implementing Project Based Learning in his/ her class?

P1: A teacher should have a clear assessment scheme, a clear plan on how to handle the classroom, clear and concise topics that fit the age group, technological equipment, etcetera.

P2: Basically, have a plan, organized steps and an assessment plan (rubric), other materials are easy to be found/ designed.

P3: Extra fun and creative materials for the class, such as: paper, plastic, realia, laptops.

P5: Schools should have a fond that can be used for projects including PBL, such as: different real-world textbook, internet sources, multimedia, worksheets, real life materials etc.

R4: What age works best with Project Based Learning? And why?

P 1/2/3/7/8: Lower secondary school students, grade 9. Because their English is better.

P 4/5/6: Lower secondary school students, grade 7 and 8. Because their English is better.

R5: What are the most pressing challenges in implementing PBL in English classes?

P3: Students' assessment: creating rubrics of assessment for each individual and group.

P5: Keeping students actively engaged in projects and the lack of materials.

P6: classroom management.

R5: Do English Language teachers need a special training of PBL? If yes, why? If not, why?

P1-8: Definitely yes. It is a completely new teaching method.

Based on the findings from the teachers' interviews, it is concluded that the majority of the respondents consider PBL to be a newly introduced teaching methodology that needs more attention and training.

The survey questions yield some very useful data related to students' enhancement in learning English through the implementation of Project Based Learning. Also, the second table shows only some excerpts from the participants' viewpoints regarding the importance of the supplementary materials a teacher should have to implement PBL in English. They have highlighted and recommended some of the materials that might be affordable to a teacher in public and private schools.

Based on the two instruments' results, PBL seems to be a completely new area for the majority of the students, as only 20-21 out of the total number 60 claimed to have ever learnt through PBL. Which means 39 students still stick to the old or other teaching methods.

In contrast, the students that already worked through PBL seem to have a positive attitude towards this learning method. As they have 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that PBL allows them to explore on topics of their interest, that they become experts on the researched topic, that PBL keeps them engaged into learning. Also, they consider it a better way of teaching, it improves their language skills, enhances their critical and creative thinking, and makes them more confident when having to speak in public to present their final product.

On the other hand, almost the same attitude and beliefs come from the teachers as well. They consider PBL to be of a great importance, however, it seeks a lot of work to be well-planned and implemented through the required steps and criteria. That is why, they have highlighted that there should be a special training for the teachers to understand how PBL works best.

CONCLUSION

Literature review was done by the researcher, to find out the gabs of the purpose of this particular research paper. All the data was collected through questionnaires with students learning at three private English schools. Also, eight interviews were utilized with English language teachers at the targeted schools. After the collection of data, further data analyses were made to find answers to the set objectives and research questions.

The overall study was focused on exploring the extent to which Project Based Learning is used. The researchers analyzed whether teachers teaching in private schools have experience in using it as well as to get a better image of the most pressing challenges that they consider while working with PBL. Also, the teachers were asked to highlight how PBL has a great impact in motivating students to learn English as a Second Language, and they have listed some of the materials that they recommend when implementing PBL in English.

The findings of the study reveal that a very small number of the participants have a background in and/or a positive attitude towards the implementation of Project Based Learning and there is a gap in Kosovo's education regarding the most contemporary teaching methods such as the lack of implementation of PBL in our case. The teachers have highlighted that there is a need for special training regarding the use of PBL. They stated that PBL brings a lot of benefits in English language acquisition as it advances the four language skills, and it motivates students to learn. In addition to that, PBL enhances collaboration, critical thinking, creative thinking, and better communication.

However, the researcher concluded that the teachers still have doubts on what PBL is in comparison to doing projects in class. The teachers have mentioned some of the most pressing challenges which are: classroom management, keeping all students engaged in the project, formative assessment and so on. Also, it must be asserted that the students, though only 21 out of 60 had a background in PBL, they claimed to have a positive attitude towards PBL as a teaching method.

The study proposes the following implications for teachers, teacher trainers, and curriculum designers:

- Studies suggest that PBL works through collaboration among teachers and core curricular fields. Having a positive attitude towards the new teaching methods means exploring and bringing the most viable teaching into our classrooms. That is why, PBL should be implemented not only from English teachers, but from every teacher of every curricular field.

- Research findings from the respondents suggests that the Ministry of Education should organize PBL trainings, workshops and/ or seminars to show the teachers how to implement PBL through their teaching experience.
- Finally, the school management should work on investing on materials, tools and technology within the school setting in order to make PBL a much easier and frequently used method.

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Appendix 1:

STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire Items	S/A	A	N	D	S/D
1. PBL allows me to explore on topics of interest to me.					
2. I consider myself an expert on the explored topic when completed.					
3. My curiosity grows while researching on various topics.					
4. PBL keeps me engaged into learning.					
5. PBL is better than traditional ways of learning.					
6. I have improved my English-writing skills with PBL.					
7. I have improved my English-speaking skills with PBL.					
8. I have improved my English-reading skills with PBL.					
9. I have improved my English-listening skills with PBL.					
10. I love presenting my projects to the audience.					

Appendix 2:

TEACHERS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How does Project Based Learning increase students' motivation in acquiring English?

2. What are some of the most important benefits of PBL in English classes?

3. What are some of the materials that you consider a teacher should need in implementing Project Based Learning in his/ her class?

4. What age works best with Project Based Learning? And why?

5. Do English Language teachers need a special training of PBL? If yes, why? If not, why?