

CREATING EFL ACTIVITIES FOR MILITARY STUDENTS: A PROJECT-BASED LEARNING APPROACH

Corina Mariana MITRULESCU

“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
mitrulescu.corina@armyacademy.ro

ABSTRACT

Project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching approach that centers around students working on real-world situations. It is a highly effective way to teach English language learners, as it allows them to practice their language skills in a meaningful and contextualized way. PBL is also an excellent method for teaching military students since it assists them in developing the skills and information required for success in their careers. PBL fosters teamwork and collaboration. Students work together on projects, learning how to communicate, delegate tasks, and resolve conflicts – skills that are vital in the workplace. PBL is hands-on and interactive, therefore when students apply concepts to solve real problems, they are more likely to retain the information and the knowledge becomes more memorable and meaningful. The present paper provides practical examples and arguments in favor of using project-based learning in EFL military classrooms as a means of enhancing language acquisition and fostering critical thinking skills.

KEYWORDS: critical thinking, English for the military, English as a foreign language, project-based learning

1. Introduction

Project-based learning (PBL) is a student-centered instructional approach that engages learners in real-world problems and challenges. Students research, plan, and implement solutions, and then present their findings to an audience. According to Barrows (1996), this type of instructional approach emerged in the 1960s in medical schools, as a response to the idea that traditional teaching methods (such as lecture and memorization) had little impact on medical students' performance during residency. As a result, PBL was developed as a method that centered around the notion that students learn best when they actively engage in meaningful real-world problem-solving scenarios. Ferreira and Trudel

(2012) argue that this method reflects how issues are addressed in the real world and necessitates a transition from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction.

PBL is an effective way to teach English as a foreign language (EFL), as it provides English language learners (ELLs) with opportunities to practice their English skills in a meaningful and authentic context. PBL is typically designed to be collaborative, which provides ELLs with opportunities to practice speaking and listening to English in a variety of contexts, including group discussions, presentations, and interviews.

Researchers studying the influence of project-based learning on student outcomes (Gallagher, et al., 1995; Harris, Marcus,

McLaren, & Frey, 2001; Michael et al., 2002) discovered that when done properly, PBL may lead to increased problem-solving abilities and conceptual knowledge. Through project-based learning, students learn how to learn in order to discover answers to real-world problems which, in turn, fosters the development of analytical and reasoning abilities. Other studies (Kumar & Natarajan, 2007; Schmidt, VadenDerMolen, TeWinkel & Wijnen, 2009) have shown that because students collaborate to solve a problem, they develop interpersonal skills which is one of the most significant outcomes of this instructional approach. Project-based learning entails more than just “doing a project”, as all of us might recall from our own school days. PBL requires students to research and find solutions to authentic problems and challenges.

When using PBL, teachers should choose topics that are relevant to students’ interests and needs since this motivates them and makes the learning experience more meaningful. Language instructors should also provide students with scaffolding and support. ELLs may need additional help with understanding the project requirements, researching the topic, and presenting their findings. The teacher’s responsibility is to provide students with opportunities to collaborate with their classmates; as a result, they will practice their speaking and listening skills in a communicative context. Students should be encouraged to use English in all aspects of the project, including brainstorming, planning, discussing, and presenting.

Students’ progress should be assessed throughout the project, not just on the final product, both on their language skills, and their content knowledge. This will ensure that ELLs are making progress in both areas and will help the teacher identify any areas where they need additional support.

Overall, PBL is a valuable teaching and learning approach in EFL education.

It can help students to develop their English language abilities, as well as other important skills such as cooperation, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication. By providing them with opportunities to work on authentic and engaging projects, students become more confident and capable English learners.

2. Implementation of Project-Based Learning in EFL Classes

Project-based learning typically encompasses the following steps or phases:

1. identifying a problem
2. developing a solution to the problem
3. designing a model solution
4. improving the solution in response to teacher and/or peer input

The success of a project-based learning activity is determined by how well teachers can understand their students, in terms of both language proficiency and students’ interests. Determining the correct proficiency level of the students involved in the project helps teachers design projects that are suitable for their language abilities, while the projects based on students’ interests generate higher engagement.

When it comes to selecting the *topic* that the project is going to address, language instructors should take into consideration its real-world relevance, the interest and engagement it could spark in students, and interdisciplinarity.

Planning the project represents an important step because the teams are formed now, and the timeline is drafted. To encourage collaboration and mutual learning, teams should be diverse and not necessarily based on students’ personal preferences. The timeline should set clear project milestones and deadlines to ensure timely progress. Planning also refers to setting the goals of the project and the language skills that the students should develop.

The *implementation phase* should be built around both research activities and hands-on activities. The research allows students to conduct in-depth analyses to understand the problem and create possible solutions. Teaching English as a foreign language through project-based learning is about empowering students to actively engage with the language and the world around them, therefore the hands-on activities (such as simulations or practical drills related to the project) offer a better understanding of how the problem should be dealt with. During the implementation phase, regular meetings are necessary because they help teams to update on progress and challenges. The teacher should introduce the project theme and goals clearly and discuss the outcome students will be working towards.

The *presentation* of the project requires students to present their findings and solutions to peers and the teacher. During the presentations, students practice speaking and listening skills, thus questions from classmates should be encouraged. According to *Science Scope* (2018), the end result of a project-based learning activity should not be a “cookie cutter” project, but it should be different for each group involved in the activity. Lowrie (2002) suggests that it is important to help the students “*understand that some problems have multiple possible answers*” which “*can support them in framing more open-ended problems*”. This means that students are required to use their critical thinking skills by exploring multiple perspectives and by developing their ability to handle ambiguity.

At the end of the presentation, the teacher should provide constructive *feedback* to help students improve their projects and presentation skills. Holistic evaluation should be employed as it assesses not just the final product but also collaboration, research skills, and language development. A peer evaluation could also

be included as a means of assessing the project since such a component encourages students to become more aware of each other’s contribution.

A project-based learning activity should always be concluded with a *reflection and learning session* to discuss the lessons learned and to encourage students to document their experiences and challenges faced, as well as to share the methods used to overcome them. Cadets should be able to assess their own performance and identify areas that need improvement.

There are several *advantages* to project-based learning. In the first place, PBL is engaging and motivating. Students are more likely to be motivated to learn when they are working on projects that are relevant to their interests and needs. Secondly, PBL provides opportunities for language practice since it requires students to use English in a variety of ways. Students work together to research and understand the problem they are trying to solve, they develop and present solutions, and they reflect on their learning process. This provides students with ample opportunities to practice their English skills in a meaningful and authentic way. Additionally, PBL helps students to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. PBL requires students to think critically about the problems they are trying to solve and to develop creative solutions. Students also learn how to collaborate with others, manage their time, and overcome challenges. These skills are essential for success in both the military and the civilian world.

2.1. Classroom Strategies

The following is an example of a project-based learning activity tailored for intermediate level EFL students, that can prove highly effective for language acquisition and skill development:

Project Title: “Cultural Exchange Exhibition”

Aim: To enhance EFL students’ language proficiency, cultural understanding, and presentation skills

Project Phases:

1. Introduction to Cultures

– Research: Students are divided into groups, each focusing on a different English-speaking country or culture. They research aspects like varieties of English, traditions, food, festivals, and etiquette.

– Language abilities include vocabulary development and enhancing reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

2. Cultural Exchange Fair Planning

– Project proposal: Each group creates a proposal outlining what they will present: traditional foods, cultural artifacts, varieties of English basics, etc.

– Budgeting: Each group will manage a hypothetical budget for the exhibition (this activity aims to enhance language skills).

3. Preparation and Language Practice

– Language workshops: The teacher should conduct workshops focusing on specific language skills needed for presentations, such as public speaking, vocabulary enhancement, and grammar practice.

– Presentation practice: The teacher should ensure regular rehearsals for group presentations, emphasizing pronunciation and fluency.

4. Cultural Exchange Exhibition

– Exhibition setup: Students set up booths representing their assigned cultures, displaying traditional items, posters, and food.

– Interactions: Students interact with “visitors” (peers from other groups), explaining cultural aspects in English, practicing speaking, and listening skills.

– Feedback: Visitors provide feedback, allowing students to engage in conversations, enhancing their conversational skills.

5. Post-Exhibition Reflection and Presentation

– Reflection Essays: Students write reflective essays about their experiences, lessons learned, and challenges faced during the project.

6. Assessment

– Peer evaluation: Students assess their peers within groups based on participation, teamwork, and language proficiency.

– Teacher evaluation: The teacher evaluates individual student performances, focusing on language use, presentation skills, and cultural understanding.

7. Follow-up Activities

This phase of the project should include discussions about students’ favorite cultures and/or any cultural misconceptions they had before the project.

A writing assignment could also be employed in which students write an essay about how their perceptions of different cultures have changed as a result of the project.

2.2. Enhancing English Language Proficiency in Military Students through Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning is an effective educational approach that can be adapted for military cadets to enhance their English language skills, knowledge, and leadership abilities. PBL offers opportunities for language acquisition, development of students’ collaboration and communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, building their confidence, self-esteem, and cultural understanding.

The immersion in authentic, real-life situations, the opportunities for meaningful language practice, and the integration of multiple language skills encourages language acquisition, while collaboration, teamwork, and creativity involved in PBL activities stimulate the development of critical thinking skills.

PBL allows for exposure to diverse perspectives and worldviews, thus promoting cultural understanding. Thus, military students can improve their appreciation of different cultures and traditions which, in turn, leads to the development of empathy and global citizenship.

Project-based learning can be used to teach English to military students using a variety of topics such as:

- military terminology and procedures;
- design a training program for new recruits, including topics such as basic military skills, English language skills, and cultural awareness;
- create a presentation on the history and culture of an English-speaking country in which students research and create a presentation, including information on the country's military, language, and customs;
- develop a plan for responding to a natural disaster, such as a hurricane or earthquake;
- create a presentation on the history of the military in Romania;
- create a podcast or video about a military topic;
- research and create a presentation about a famous military leader or battle, such as the Battle of Hastings or the American Civil War;
- write and perform a skit or play about a military topic;
- develop a plan for improving the quality of life for military families;
- write a report on the impact of climate change on military operations;
- write a report about the latest military technologies;
- create a video about military culture.

When designing PBL projects for military students, it is important to consider their language needs and to provide them with the support they need to succeed. Teachers should choose projects that are relevant to the students' interests and experiences while providing them with

clear and concise instructions. To make the tasks more manageable, the teacher could break down the project into smaller parts. During the project, students should be encouraged not only to collaborate with each other but also to use resources outside of the classroom, such as first-hand accounts and testimonials from those who have been involved in military operations. The assessment should focus both on language skills and content knowledge.

Implementing project-based learning in an ESL classroom for military cadets can provide a valuable and engaging learning experience, while also fostering leadership and teamwork abilities. The following is an example of a project-based learning activity tailored for EFL military cadets:

Project Title: “Communication and Cultural Competence during Peacekeeping Missions”

Aim: To enhance military cadets' English language proficiency and military-specific vocabulary, teamwork, communication, leadership, problem-solving skills, and cultural competence in the context of a simulated international peacekeeping mission.

Project Phases:

1. *Introduction to Peacekeeping Missions*

– Research: Students explore historical and current peacekeeping missions, understanding their roles, challenges, and the importance of effective communication and cultural understanding.

2. *Simulated Peacekeeping Mission Planning*

– Assignment: Cadets are divided into international peacekeeping units, each assigned to a specific country. They research their assigned country's history, culture, and current issues.

– Mission briefing: Each unit receives a fictional peacekeeping mission scenario, including objectives, potential conflicts, and cultural context.

– Team formation: Cadets within each unit are assigned certain roles (e.g., commander, translator, liaison officer) and plan their mission strategy.

– Language workshops: The teacher should conduct workshops focusing on specific language skills needed for military communication, mission planning, negotiation, and conflict resolution, practice military jargon, polite requests, and emergency situations language.

3. Cultural Awareness and Language Immersion

– Cultural research: During this activity, students research about the cultures and customs of the countries their teams represent, focusing on aspects that are crucial for effective communication.

– English language immersion: Students converse, negotiate, and collaborate using English as the common language and specific military vocabulary and phrases used in peacekeeping missions.

4. Simulated Peacekeeping Mission Execution

– Role-playing: Teams participate in a simulated peacekeeping mission where they must collaborate, communicate effectively, and resolve conflicts in a multicultural environment.

– Debriefing: After the simulation, the teacher conducts debriefing sessions where teams discuss their experiences, challenges faced, and strategies employed to overcome language and cultural barriers. Each team writes a comprehensive mission report in English, detailing their strategies, successes, and areas for improvement.

5. Project Presentation and Reflection

– Presentation preparation: Each team prepares a presentation outlining their mission, challenges faced, successful communication strategies, and lessons learned.

– Presentation: Teams present their experiences to the class.

– Reflection essays: Students write reflective essays on how the project

enhanced their language skills, teamwork, and understanding of cultural differences in military contexts.

6. Assessment and Evaluation

– Peer evaluation: Cadets evaluate their peers based on language proficiency, teamwork, and cultural sensitivity during the simulation and presentations.

– Teacher evaluation: The teacher should evaluate individual and team performances, focusing on language use, communication skills, and cultural understanding.

7. Follow-up Activities

– Discussion: Students should be engaged in a class discussion about the importance of effective communication and cultural competence in military operations.

– Writing assignment: Students write an essay in which they analyze the importance of English language skills in military peacekeeping operations and how their experiences relate to real-world scenarios.

This project-based learning activity not only enhances military cadets' English language skills, but also immerses them in a realistic and challenging scenario, promoting teamwork, leadership, and cross-cultural understanding – all vital skills in military contexts.

3. Conclusions

This paper explored the effectiveness of project-based learning as a pedagogical approach in enhancing military students' engagement, critical thinking skills, and overall learning outcomes. This approach promotes a deeper understanding of the subject matter, as students are required to apply knowledge and skills to real-world situations.

Project-based learning, in essence, provides a platform for students to apply critical thinking in a real, relevant context. Through PBL, students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills mainly because they learn to analyze information,

evaluate different solutions, make informed decisions, and solve real-life challenges.

In conclusion, by integrating PBL into educational practices, educators can continue to enrich the learning experiences of students; project-based learning emerges

as a promising educational approach that not only enhances student engagement and critical thinking skills but also prepares learners for the challenges of the 21st century.

REFERENCES

***Tips for project-based learning. (2018). *Science Scope*, Vol. 41, No. 6, 1-3. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26553385>.

Barrows, H.S. (1986). A taxonomy of problem-based learning methods. *Medical Education*, Vol. 20, Issue 6, 481-486.

Ferreira, M.M., & Trudel, A.R. (2012). The Impact of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) on Student Attitudes toward Science, Problem-Solving Skills, and Sense of Community in the Classroom. *The Journal of Classroom Interaction*, Vol. 47, Issue 1, 23-30. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43858871>.

Gallagher, S., Sher, B., Stephen, W., & Workman, D. (1995). Implementing problem-based learning in science classrooms. *School Science and Mathematics*, Vol. 95, Issue 3, 136-146.

Harris, K., Marcus, R., McLarean, K., & Frey, J. (2001). Curriculum materials supporting problem-based teaching. *School Science and Mathematics*, Vol. 101, Issue 6, 310-318.

Kumar, M., & Natarajan, U. (2007). A problem-based learning model: Showcasing an educational paradigm shift. *Curriculum Journal*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 89-102.

Lowrie, T. (2002). Designing a framework for problem posing: Young children generating open-ended tasks. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, 354-364.

Schmidt, H.G., VanDerMolen, H.T., TeWinkel, W.W.R., & Wijnen, W.H.F.W. (2009). Constructivist, problem-based learning does work: A meta-analysis of curricular comparisons involving a single medical school. *Educational Psychologist*, Vol. 44, Issue 4, 229-249.