TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE THROUGH PBL
AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract

Research has shown that language and culture are closely related (e.g., Brown, 2007; Kramsch, 1998; Kuang, 2007; Savignon & Sysoyev, 2005) and are best acquired together (Schulz, 2007). This paper aims to demonstrate how project-based learning (PBL), one of the main innovative approaches in the current educational landscape, can be useful for teaching culture in the English language classroom at the tertiary educational level. PBL is a teaching approach in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge (Kingston, 2018). According to different studies in the field (Kavlu, 2017), this approach can be more engaging and motivating for English language learners than traditional methods. First, the language is being used for an authentic purpose, which gives the language relevance. Further, learners develop content knowledge as well as critical thinking, creative thinking and communication skills. This study will focus on the implementation of PBL in the English language classroom in different degree programs: Primary Education, Infant Education, Hispanic Philology and Humanities. Students created an authentic final product that explored cultural aspects of English-speaking countries in combination with different subjects such as geography, history, literature and economy. The findings are based on a questionnaire that measures tertiary students' motivation levels and expectations in relation to this pedagogical framework.

Keywords: Project-based learning, English culture, English language, foreign language, tertiary education.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to integrate culture into the English language classroom at the tertiary educational level. With this purpose in mind, the project-based Learning (PBL) approach will be used in courses of different subjects. PBL is a pedagogic framework for learning and teaching a subject through a project (Thomas, 2000). In English language learning, this approach involves students completing a project by choosing a topic, solving problems, and generating products in the form of meaningful solutions (Sanatullova-Allison, 2015, p. 7). PBL can take place inside or outside the classroom. PBL has been chosen because "its utilization in EFL classrooms may serve as one of the appropriate methods to incorporate culture into language contexts" (Sanatullova-Allison, 2015, p. 1).

PBL has its origins in Dewey's initial proposal (1938), *Learning by doing.* PBL is described as students "driving their own inquiry, working collaboratively to seek viable solutions, using advanced technology, and communicating their findings to the related audience" (Bell, 2010, p. 40). This approach can be more engaging and motivating for English language learners than traditional methods. It is a learner-centred approach in which students acquire key knowledge and 21st-century skills – critical thinking, collaboration, communication and creative thinking – within a meaningful project.

The main objective of this paper is to implement the use of PBL as an innovative approach through which students in different fields create authentic final products that require exploring cultural aspects of English-speaking countries in combination with different transversal subjects such as geography, history, literature, music, economy, and so forth. This project seeks to increase the motivation of foreign language students and improve communication, participation, interaction, cooperation and collaboration among them. Didactic resources such as storytelling, songs, videos and materials produced using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) will be used in the foreign language university classroom to integrate culture into the subjects involved in this study: (1) Sociocultural

competence as an element of programming in the teaching of a foreign language (Degree in Primary Education), (2) English teaching as a foreign language in infant education (Degree in Infant Education), (3) English III (Degree in Hispanic Philology), (4) English II (Degree in Humanities) and (5) English for Academic Purposes (Degree in Hispanic Philology). To achieve this general objective, the following specific objectives have also been set: to promote the autonomous learning of students and the application of acquired knowledge in a transversal way; to promote the use of ICTs and their application in different contexts; to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of PBL in the university context, specifically in English as a foreign language subjects; and to assess the performance of PBL through a pre-questionnaire. This will measure students' motivation levels and expectations in relation to this pedagogical framework at the tertiary level. Finally, this study will make it possible to determine whether the use of PBL is equally applicable to different foreign language subjects at the university level or whether, on the contrary, it is more effective in a particular degree or subject.

2. Applications, advantages and disadvantages of teaching English language and culture through PBL at the tertiary level

Culture and language are intimately linked – they coexist and they nurture each other (Bryam, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001). Learning culture, therefore, is essential; otherwise, language learners may lack the necessary tools to fully understand the ways of thinking of native speakers of the target language: their ideas, customs and traditions (Gandía, 2012). Project-based learning is an interactive strategy that enables foreign language educators to teach culture through language and vice versa. PBL is based on constructivism, and it allows students to actively access and build new knowledge about a specific subject or topic related to the target language (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2005) while promoting creativity, autonomous learning and intrinsic motivation.

Active and inquiry-based learning are the foundations of PBL. Over an extended period of time, students must deploy knowledge and skills to inquire on a given question, problem or challenge. In its purposes and procedures, PBL pays special attention to what Bloom (1956) termed higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and subskills: applying (executing and implementing), analysing (differentiating, organising and attributing), evaluating (checking and criticising) and creating (generating, planning and producing). Thus, PBL contrasts harshly with paper-based rote memorisation and more traditional teacher-led instruction.

The major purpose of PBL is to ask students to design, plan and carry out a project that results in an authentic final product. The product is elaborated by investigating a problem, question or challenge. Students take the theoretical premises of different subjects of the curriculum as their starting points and base their investigations on previous schemata or knowledge. Therefore, PBL is an application of transversal teaching, as it establishes clear connections with different fields of study such as history, geography, arts, mathematics, economy, sociology, music or literature, to name just a few. The wide spectrum of approaches that appeal to students with different interests and tastes boosts students' motivation to investigate and share knowledge. The tasks and the final product consolidate and show evidence of the learning results, and student participation is enriched by the elaboration of the product and assessment of the work (Boyd, 2016).

Prieto (2006) comments that project-based learning represents an effective and flexible strategy that can improve the quality of university learning in many ways. First, PBL allows students to develop various skills, including problem resolution, decision-making and teamwork (de Miguel, 2015). Each student is part of a team that works together to put together knowledge. This activates students' deductive thinking as they discuss decisions and overcome the challenges that unfold while carrying out the project. Individual creativity, resourcefulness and communication skills are triggered. Since PBL integrates language skills, students increase their fluency and practice oral communication through argumentation, negotiation, presentation of information, discussion and refutation of peers' ideas and comments in the foreign language. These interpersonal and social abilities strengthen peer relationships, benefiting lessons and other group activities by improving the atmosphere and positively impacting class management and dynamics.

Moreover, PBL triggers the development of positive attitudes and values, such as critical thinking, thanks to the process of gathering information. In this way, it transforms students' ability to discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources, as they learn to make precise and selective choices and to condense information and display it for others. Furthermore, by reading, students assimilate new vocabulary and learn grammar in context, while written comprehension and production is improved by students' collaboration in presenting knowledge for the final product.

The disadvantages of this innovative approach are the same pitfalls common to learner-centred methodology in general. In the traditional class, students have to listen to the educator; in PBL, they have to communicate. While before, they received clear notions and explanations, now they have to investigate, look for information, evaluate its reliability and decide upon its inclusion in the final product according to relevance. Therefore, the first disadvantage is precisely this switch in the roles of teacher and learner, which may at times be problematic. In this learning panorama, the teacher is relegated to the role of mentor, guide and facilitator who provides instructions to help students find and understand information and process it into a final product. The teacher is also in charge of scaffolding the tasks while allowing students to study the possible use of authentic materials in the process. This is how sessions become learner-centred and how students achieve agency, leaving behind the role of mere receptors of knowledge and accepting responsibility for completing the assigned tasks and pursuing them with persistence. Nonetheless, it is precisely here where problems may occur since, if students are uninvolved or disoriented or if they lack proper guidance, learning will not occur and the method of PBL will not work.

Concerning the difficulties or disadvantages related to the figure of the educator, it is worth mentioning the significant amount of time one must invest to conceptualise a project that reflects a class's necessities, objectives, and contents. However, despite being time-consuming and tedious, this downside of PBL is somewhat mitigated by its dynamic nature. The produced materials are adaptable and reusable and can be extrapolated for other class activities and for groups of different educational levels. It is also relevant that PBL's transversality requires greater coordination between curricular subjects; otherwise, students might feel lost, as new knowledge has no foundation to build upon.

As for difficulties or disadvantages from the learner's perspective, it is important to mention that students may resist participation in many class and group activities. Moreover, because of its multi-layered nature, at the beginning of its implementation, students may have the impression that PBL requires an increase in their workload. The fragmentation of the content into different sessions represents a distribution of objectives and tasks that uses different premises to approach the content.

After evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of PBL at the tertiary educational level, the present article finds that the disadvantages fall short compared to the benefits offered by this valuable approach to language and culture. This affirmation of PBL is supported in the following pages.

3. Method

This study was conducted at a state-run university of Andalusia (Spain). The sample consists of 110 undergraduate students (20 male and 90 female) who volunteered to participate in this project. The students were enrolled in English language-related courses from the following degree programs: Infant Education, Primary Education, Humanities and Hispanic Philology. Out of the 110 participants, 62 (56.4%) were local (Spanish) students and 48 (43.6%) were international (exchange) students.

Data were gathered from the participants' responses to an anonymous online questionnaire completed at the beginning of the academic year 2021–22. The questionnaire was designed via Google Forms. It included items of demographic classification and up to 20 closed- and open-ended questions related to 1) students' previous experience and knowledge about PBL and 2) students' perceptions regarding the expected advantages and drawbacks of PBL in higher education.

Students' responses were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively through a frequency analysis of the close-ended items, including yes/no and Likert-based questions, and through categorisation and coding of the open-ended questions.

4. Results

Regarding students' previous experience and knowledge of PBL (Table 1), the majority of the participants recognised having previous experience with PBL in the EFL classroom and acknowledged knowing what PBL was. Indeed, some students provided relatively accurate definitions of PBL: "It is a teaching method that allows the student to acquire knowledge and skills through the development of a project that responds to a specific problem in real life" (Student 26); "It is a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to respond to an authentic question" (Student 34).

Table 1. Student responses about previous experience and knowledge of PBL.

Item	Students % (*N* = 110)	
	Yes	No
Previous experience with PBL in EFL	69.1	30.9
Knowledge about PBL	70	30

As for the students' perceptions regarding the expected advantages of PBL in higher education (Table 2), most students reported that PBL could help them better understand the course subject and that they could learn more practical and useful content through PBL than through traditional teaching methods. Additionally, the majority of them believed that this approach would allow them to be more autonomous in learning, show greater initiative and organise and plan their work more appropriately. Similarly, they deemed PBL a potential approach to becoming more actively involved in tasks and activities in their working groups and developing and improving their communicative skills in the foreign language. Furthermore, most students reported that PBL would allow them to use resources and materials differently from their habitual methods and help them improve their digital communicative abilities. Finally, most participants believed that this approach would enhance their critical-thinking and creative skills and provide an opportunity for higher levels of amusement while learning, thus increasing motivation.

Table 2. Student responses about potential PBL advantages.

Item	Students % (*N* = 110)				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Better understanding of practical and useful content	–	0.5	14.5	54.5	30.5
Being more autonomous and having better organisational and planning skills	0.5	1.7	14.1	51.8	31.9
Being more actively involved and developing communicative skills	0.5	0.7	9.4	55.4	34.0
Using different resources and materials and improving ICT skills	–	3.7	30.5	65.8	–
Thinking critically and being creative	–	3.6	20.0	76.4	–
Having fun and increasing motivation	–	3.6	23.6	72.8	–

Apart from the potential benefits described above, students reported further expected advantages, such as cultural enrichment and developing intercultural competence by working in groups with members from different countries and sociocultural backgrounds: "I think this will help me to know more about the culture of other countries while improving my intercultural and communicative skills" (Student 21); "This experience could allow people to learn more about other cultures" (Student, 67).

As for disadvantages, students reported few perceived shortcomings of the PBL approach. Students made only a few comments concerning potential working-group management issues and the expected higher workload compared to traditional teaching and learning approaches: "It can be complicated to work in [a] group when we don't know the other members. Moreover, it also can be difficult to work together when we have different schedules" (Student 44); "If somebody in your group doesn't work well you may find yourself doing all the work" (Student 59); "This methodology demands more much time than the traditional methodology" (Student 71).

5. Conclusions

PBL is an innovative educational approach in which students simultaneously achieve communicative skills and develop content knowledge, while learning to think critically and to be more creative by completing a meaningful project. This study has shown that PBL is useful in the English

language classroom at the tertiary level, demonstrating that learning through projects is more motivating, encouraging, and engaging for English language learners than traditional learning methods. This study has focused on the implementation of PBL for a total of 110 undergraduate students (local and international) from the degree programs of Infant Education, Primary Education, Humanities and Hispanic Philology. These students participated as volunteers mainly through a pre-questionnaire that measured students' motivation and expectations related to PBL in higher education.

The resulting data were obtained from the participation of these students through an anonymous online questionnaire. The responses were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. First, the responses showed students' previous knowledge and experience of project-based learning: students acknowledged knowing about and having prior experience with PBL in the EFL classroom. Second, the questionnaire showed students' perceptions of PBL and its expected advantages at the tertiary level. Most students reported that this approach would allow them to be more autonomous while learning, and they expected that PBL would help them plan and organise their work more appropriately. They also indicated that they would learn more useful content through PBL than through traditional teaching methods and that PBL would allow them to develop their communicative skills in EFL and improve their digital communicative abilities. Students showed further expected advantages such as cultural enrichment from working in groups with people from different countries and sociocultural backgrounds. Finally, comments about the disadvantages of using this approach were scarce and referred to potential working-group management issues and expected higher workloads compared to traditional approaches.

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