

Empowering Learners: The Role of Project-Based Learning in Overcoming English Proficiency Challenges

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Abstract

Project-based learning (PBL) significantly enhances learners' academic performance when facing English language challenges. This paper examines the support that PBL provides to learners with limited English proficiency. Teachers who have implemented PBL emphasize the necessity of early planning, intervention, and ongoing support and guidance. The findings underscore the importance of equipping teachers with the necessary tools and strategies to support learners with limited English proficiency effectively. By fostering a collaborative and engaging learning environment, PBL enhances academic outcomes and empowers learners to overcome language barriers, ultimately reaching their full potential. Drawing on research conducted in schools around Johannesburg South, this paper offers valuable insights into the role of PBL in promoting educational equity and inclusivity in multilingual contexts. The study underscores the critical role of teachers in facilitating PBL and adapting it to meet the diverse linguistic needs of learners. The success of PBL in this context demonstrates its potential as a transformative educational approach that bridges gaps in language proficiency and equips learners with the skills and confidence needed to thrive in an English-medium educational setting. Ultimately, this research advocates for the broader implementation of PBL to support language development and academic achievement among learners with limited English proficiency, thereby fostering a more inclusive and effective educational system.

Keywords: inclusive education, language proficiency, multilingual classrooms, project-based learning, teacher training

Introduction

Learners with low English competence often struggle in bilingual classrooms, affecting their performance on standardized tests in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). Integrated classroom support, rather than external interventions, is crucial. Project-based learning (PBL) is a promising strategy, promoting self-directed learning,

critical thinking, and teamwork. PBL allows learners to engage with material through independent study and practical projects, integrating language skills and prior knowledge.

Ceronio (2024) highlights the need for empirical evidence on PBL's effectiveness for learners with limited LoLT proficiency. Addressing these challenges can enhance academic achievement and boost confidence and motivation. Inclusive education, structured teacher training, and stakeholder collaboration are essential. PBL can significantly improve outcomes for linguistically diverse learners, suggesting its integration into the curriculum for more inclusive learning environments. PBL benefits multilingual classrooms by allowing learners to work in their mother tongue and transfer knowledge to English. Based on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978) and Dewey's inquiry-based learning, PBL fosters deeper conceptual knowledge. It enhances communication skills, role negotiation, and conflict resolution, crucial for future employment.

PBL fosters intrinsic motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985), improving academic performance and lifelong learning habits. Teachers guide and assist learners, ensuring learning goals are met and fostering a positive environment. PBL improves material understanding and information retention, supporting language development and academic achievement in multilingual contexts.

Theoretical framework

The social constructivist theory, which holds that sharing and imparting socially acquired knowledge is a component of teaching and learning, serves as the foundation for this research (McLeod, 2019a). According to renowned social constructivist Lev Vygotsky, learning happens through social interactions and guidance from knowledgeable individuals, usually within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Learners work together and exchange ideas during project-based learning (PBL), which facilitates the acquisition of socially acquired knowledge.

A crucial element of Vygotsky's theory is scaffolded learning, which entails supervision from a teacher or other qualified individual who adapts to the learner's aptitude and performance level (McLeod, 2019a). Vygotsky emphasized the value of social interactions for learning, where learners first connect, internalize the information, and gain a deeper understanding. Learning takes place within the ZPD when learners engage with more experienced individuals, such as family or peers, who help them complete assignments.

Because PBL encourages learner-centered, collaborative learning, it is consistent with Vygotsky's ideas. Structured peer interactions help learners with limited proficiency in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) by promoting academic engagement and linguistic development. PBL promotes self-directed learning and cognitive growth by giving learners the freedom to take charge of their educational journeys (Creswell, 2014). By encouraging learners to build on their existing knowledge, a constructivist approach stimulates greater understanding and further research. Teachers serve as facilitators in this framework by tailoring instructional materials to learners' language proficiency, ensuring that all learners can access and successfully interact with the material.

Furthermore, PBL relies heavily on Vygotsky's idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD describes the gap between what learners can accomplish

on their own and what they can accomplish with help and guidance. By giving learners the chance to collaborate on projects that challenge their existing knowledge, PBL utilizes this concept to help them develop their cognitive skills. Learners can create meaningful learning experiences by bridging the gap between new concepts and their prior knowledge through peer cooperation and teacher facilitation (Vygotsky, 1978).

PBL fosters the growth of analytical and problem-solving abilities. Learners are encouraged to apply their knowledge in real-world settings through practical projects, which improves their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Additionally, PBL encourages intrinsic motivation by allowing learners to study subjects that interest them and apply them to their daily lives. Learners are more likely to engage deeply with the material and persevere through difficulties when they are passionate about their assignments. This intrinsic drive is essential for long-term academic performance and lifelong learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Teachers are essential to the effective application of PBL. They must establish a nurturing educational atmosphere that promotes experimentation and risk-taking. Teachers assist learners in navigating the challenges of their projects and gaining a deeper understanding of the material by offering prompt feedback and scaffolding. To ensure that all learners have access to the tools and support they need to succeed, teachers must also be skilled in differentiating instruction to meet the diverse needs of their learners (Tomlinson, 2001).

PBL is an effective teaching strategy that supports collaborative, learner-centered classrooms, consistent with Vygotsky's ideas. Learners gain language proficiency, cognitive skills, and intrinsic motivation through supervised peer interactions, practical projects, and teacher guidance. By embracing PBL, teachers can design inclusive and engaging learning experiences that set learners up for future success.

PBL as a support tool

Project-based learning (PBL) is a dynamic teaching approach that promotes learner cooperation and allows them to interact with and benefit from one another. PBL helps learners with low proficiency in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) by emphasizing content rather than language, thereby reducing the need to recite information word-for-word. This method fosters learner autonomy, motivation, and a sense of ownership over their education by tying classroom instruction to real-world situations and enabling learners to practice their English outside of the classroom (Friedman, 2020).

Through PBL, learners work together in groups, choose their methodology, and present their work while using their language skills to communicate effectively. Constructivist pedagogy, which stresses active learner involvement and knowledge-building through social interaction, is the foundation of this instructional technique. This strategy is further supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which contends that communication and cooperation with more experienced individuals promote cognitive development (McLeod, 2019b). In PBL, teachers serve as facilitators rather than direct instructors, guiding learners through a cyclical process that includes planning, active involvement, content reconstruction, presentation, and reflection. Interestingly, learners of all skill levels benefit from this instructional approach (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018).

PBL is also intended to improve learners' LoLT proficiency. Academic achievement depends on proficiency, which is the advanced acquisition of knowledge or skill.

Learners with inadequate language skills run the risk of misinterpreting the material. In classrooms where the LoLT is not the learners' first language, comprehension challenges arise, impeding effective teaching and learning (Shayne, 2020). Research indicates that PBL can significantly improve language proficiency by providing learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful, contextually relevant tasks that require the use of the target language (Hainline et al., 2021).

By incorporating PBL into the curriculum, teachers can establish a nurturing learning environment that enables learners to realize their greatest potential. Evaluating how effectively PBL improves material understanding and information retention among learners with minimal competency in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is crucial. This approach supports language development and academic achievement in multilingual educational contexts.

Challenges of multilingual classrooms in South Africa

South African multilingual classrooms face several issues that affect learners' academic achievement and self-esteem. As teachers, we have observed firsthand how language barriers can undermine learners' confidence and societal sense of self, leading to repeated underachievement. When the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is not a learner's home language, their self-confidence is often compromised, resulting in demotivation and underperformance (Owen-Smith, 2010).

Up until Grade 3, South African learners receive instruction in their mother tongue; after that, they switch to the LoLT, which is frequently a foreign language to them (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). Due to their weak English skills, learners who speak African languages at home may find this transition especially difficult. Many learners are compelled to transition to English-only instruction starting in Grade 4, which can impair their comprehension and academic performance, even though they have the constitutional right to receive an education in the language of their choice (Shayne, 2020).

Using multiple languages in the classroom, known as multilingualism, might benefit some learners while harming others. Code-switching does not always satisfy curriculum requirements, and not all are proficient in indigenous languages. Implementing language policies is challenging due to the complexity of indigenous languages, yet understanding multiple languages is necessary for community and economic development in South Africa (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019).

Educational achievement is continuously impacted by the historical divisions caused by the apartheid-era educational system. According to Van Staden et al. (2016), many rural schools lack teachers who are proficient in the preferred language and have inadequate resources. Up until primary school, black and colored learners received instruction in Bantu languages; in secondary school, they were compelled to transition to either Afrikaans or English (Lafon, 2009). Despite the objective to preserve home language education, the majority of National Senior Certificate exams are now only available in Afrikaans or English (Van Staden et al., 2016).

All South African learners can benefit from a more inclusive and equitable learning environment if these issues are addressed with integrated classroom support and an effective language policy.

Integrating PBL

Integrating PBL into educational practices offers numerous benefits for multilingual learners. By engaging in real-world projects, students can enhance their language acquisition, boost their confidence and motivation, and develop cognitive academic language proficiency. PBL also supports code-switching and multilingualism, addresses historical and resource challenges, and promotes inclusive and equitable learning environments. Guidelines for implementing PBL include:

- *Enhancing language acquisition:* PBL encourages active learning through real-world projects, which can help multilingual learners improve their language skills in context. By engaging in projects that require listening, speaking, reading, and writing, learners can develop their language proficiency more naturally and effectively.
- *Boosting confidence and motivation:* When learners work on projects that are meaningful to them, their motivation and engagement increase. This authentic engagement can help boost their self-confidence, as they see the relevance of their learning to their own lives and communities (Owen-Smith, 2010).
- *Supporting code-switching and multilingualism:* PBL can accommodate code-switching and multilingualism by allowing learners to use their home languages alongside the language of instruction. This approach can help learners bridge the gap between their home language and the LoLT, making the transition smoother and less intimidating (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019).
- *Addressing historical and resource challenges:* PBL can be adapted to fit the resource constraints of rural schools by focusing on locally relevant projects that utilize available materials. This can help mitigate the impact of historical divisions and resource inadequacies, providing a more equitable learning experience for all learners (Van Staden et al., 2016).
- *Promoting inclusive and equitable learning environments:* By valuing and incorporating learners' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds, PBL fosters an inclusive classroom environment where diversity is celebrated. This can help learners feel more accepted and valued, improving their overall academic achievement and self-esteem (Owen-Smith, 2012).

Conceptualization of PBL in the classroom to support learners with limited proficiency in the LoLT

To effectively adopt PBL as a support tool for learners with limited proficiency in the LoLT, several key strategies must be implemented. These strategies aim to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that addresses the unique challenges faced by these learners.

- *Early identification and accommodation:* Identify and support learners struggling with the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) early, using proactive measures and project-based learning (PBL) strategies.
- *Practical training for teachers:* Provide structured training in inclusive pedagogies, focusing on language barriers and PBL, with an emphasis on scaffolding and differentiated instruction.

- *Incorporation of PBL*: Encourage the integration of PBL to improve academic performance and language development, especially for learners with limited LoLT proficiency.
- *Support teams in schools*: Establish teams to assist teachers with resources and expertise, enhancing the implementation of PBL.
- *Parental involvement*: Engage parents in supporting inclusive education and PBL through regular communication and collaboration.
- *Effective policy implementation*: Translate policy into actionable steps with clear guidelines and resources to support PBL in schools.
- *Mentorship and continuous professional learning*: Provide ongoing mentorship and professional development for teachers to confidently use PBL and stay updated on best practices.

Several limitations impact the effectiveness of PBL as a support strategy for learners with limited proficiency in the LoLT. Teachers often face challenges in implementing PBL due to a lack of confidence, resources, and adequate training (Ceronio, 2024). This can result in inconsistent application and minimal progress in addressing language proficiency challenges. Additionally, a lack of institutional support negatively affects the success of PBL initiatives (Van Staden et al., 2016). Insufficient preparation and training for teachers further hinder the effective adaptation of PBL to meet the diverse linguistic needs of learners (Tomlinson, 2001). Moreover, effective collaboration among teachers, policymakers, parents, and community members is often lacking, which is crucial for creating supportive learning environments (Shayne, 2020).

To address these limitations, further research is recommended in several areas. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of PBL on learners' language proficiency and academic performance, providing deeper insights into the sustained benefits of PBL. Research should also explore the effectiveness of PBL in diverse educational settings, including rural and urban schools, to understand its adaptability and impact across different contexts (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). Investigating the effectiveness of structured teacher training programs focused on PBL and inclusive pedagogies can improve teachers' confidence and ability to implement PBL effectively (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, examining strategies for enhancing stakeholder collaboration, including the role of parents and community members in supporting PBL initiatives, can identify best practices for fostering a collaborative approach to education (Friedman, 2020). Finally, studying the practical implementation of government policies on inclusive education and their impact on PBL can help evaluate how policy frameworks can be translated into actionable steps to support language-inclusive education (Prinsloo et al., 2018).

Conclusion and recommendations

Many teachers struggle to implement PBL due to a lack of confidence, resources, and training, leading to minimal progress and poor learner outcomes. To bridge language proficiency gaps, structured interventions and collaboration among policymakers, teachers, and stakeholders are essential. Establishing support systems, ensuring adequate teacher training, and developing policies that prioritize language-inclusive education are crucial. These measures will foster equitable learning environments and improve academic outcomes for linguistically diverse learners.

Integrating PBL into the curriculum can create a more inclusive and effective educational environment. PBL promotes learner-centered, collaborative learning, allowing learners to engage deeply with content and develop language skills through meaningful tasks. With the right support and resources, PBL can transform educational practices and help learners overcome language barriers, achieving their full potential. A systemic approach focusing on active teacher training and stakeholder collaboration is necessary to create an equitable and effective educational system for all learners.

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