

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AS AN INNOVATIVE TOOL IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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Abstract:

This article explores Project-Based Learning (PBL) as an innovative and learner-centered approach in foreign language education. By engaging students in meaningful, real-world tasks, PBL promotes linguistic competence alongside essential 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. The article provides a comparative analysis of international and Kazakhstani experiences, highlighting successful PBL implementation in countries like Finland, the United States, Japan, and Germany, as well as in institutions such as Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. Challenges related to project design, teacher preparedness, and assessment are addressed, with recommendations for further integration of PBL through professional development and curriculum reform. The study confirms the transformative potential of PBL in enriching language learning environments and fostering communicative competence.

Key words: Project-Based Learning (PBL); foreign language teaching; language education; innovative pedagogy; learner autonomy; communicative competence; Kazakhstan; international practices; CLIL; 21st-century skills.

In recent years, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has gained increasing recognition as an effective and innovative pedagogical approach in the context of foreign language education. Unlike traditional teacher-centered instruction, which often emphasizes grammar drills, memorization, and passive learning, PBL engages students in dynamic, real-world tasks that require the application of language skills in meaningful ways. This learner-centered methodology fosters not only linguistic competence but also critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving—skills that are essential in the 21st century. By designing and implementing projects that are relevant to students' interests and real-life contexts, language teachers can create an immersive environment that simulates authentic language use, thereby enhancing both fluency and motivation.

Numerous studies have explored the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. Karyawati and Ashadi (2018) emphasized the use of PBL through English drama as a strategy to enhance students' creativity and engagement in the learning process [1]. Kavlu (2017) analyzed the implementation of PBL in EFL classrooms, highlighting its effectiveness in fostering learner autonomy and meaningful language use [2]. Pham (2018) discussed the transition from theoretical understanding to practical application of PBL in EFL classrooms, focusing on the development of communication and collaboration skills [3]. Somani and Rizvi (2018) conducted a quasi-experimental study demonstrating the superiority of PBL over traditional teaching methods in terms of student participation and learning outcomes [4]. Zaafour and Salaberri-Ramiro (2022) examined teachers' perspectives on cooperative project-based learning, underlining its role in promoting student motivation and deeper learning experiences [5]. Collectively, these studies affirm the growing relevance of PBL as an innovative and effective method in foreign language education.

In Kazakhstan, PBL is implemented at various educational levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary—particularly in schools with trilingual education programs and in universities that have adopted Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches. Institutions such as Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums, and ENU named after L.N. Gumilyov have incorporated project-based learning into their foreign language curricula.

In Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, students in English language classes work on interdisciplinary projects such as “My Green City,” which combines environmental education and English language use. Learners research ecological issues in their local context and present their findings through written reports, visual posters, and oral presentations in English. These projects are assessed using rubrics that focus on both content and language outcomes.

At the university level, project-based learning is actively promoted in language teaching departments. For example, at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, students in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses

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develop capstone projects such as research posters, simulated international conferences, or video essays on global issues. These tasks integrate the four key language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—within authentic academic contexts.

One of the central advantages of PBL in foreign language classrooms is its ability to contextualize language learning. When students work on projects—such as creating digital travel guides, filming short documentaries, or organizing cultural events—they naturally integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the target language. This integration promotes a more holistic acquisition of linguistic skills, as students must navigate different communication contexts and adapt their language accordingly. Moreover, PBL encourages repeated exposure to language forms and vocabulary in a meaningful setting, facilitating deeper cognitive processing and long-term retention. The communicative nature of projects also increases student talk time and fosters authentic interaction among peers, which is crucial for developing spoken fluency and pragmatic competence[6].

Despite its many advantages, the implementation of Project-Based Learning in foreign language classrooms also poses challenges. Teachers must be prepared to invest time in careful planning, project design, and continuous monitoring of student progress. They must also ensure that language objectives are not overshadowed by the content focus of the projects. Moreover, assessment criteria must be clearly defined and communicated to students, to maintain a balance between creativity, collaboration, and linguistic accuracy. Nevertheless, with appropriate training and institutional support, these challenges can be addressed, making PBL a highly rewarding methodology for both teachers and students. To address these challenges, several teacher training initiatives and methodological workshops have been launched, such as programs offered by the Center for Pedagogical Excellence under the "Nazarbayev Foundation."

Another significant benefit of Project-Based Learning lies in its potential to personalize the educational experience. Because projects are often student-driven, learners have the opportunity to explore topics that resonate with their own backgrounds, interests, and future goals. This sense of ownership increases engagement and intrinsic motivation, which are key factors in successful language acquisition. In multicultural and multilingual classrooms, PBL can also serve as a platform for students to share aspects of their culture and identity, thereby promoting intercultural awareness and empathy. From a pedagogical standpoint, this shift in responsibility from teacher to student transforms the educator into a facilitator or guide, who provides scaffolding and support while encouraging learner autonomy.

In the global context, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as an effective and innovative pedagogical approach, particularly in the domain of foreign language acquisition. PBL provides learners with authentic, meaningful tasks that require the use of a foreign language as a medium for communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Numerous studies have documented the success of PBL in enhancing linguistic competence, intercultural awareness, and learner autonomy across diverse educational systems.

In Finland, a country widely recognized for its progressive educational system, PBL is a cornerstone of the national curriculum. Foreign language learning is often embedded in cross-curricular projects. For instance, students learning English or German undertake projects such as "Cultural Exchange Blogs", where they collaborate with peers from partner schools in other countries to exchange experiences, produce multimedia content (videos, interviews, articles), and engage in online discussions in the target language. These activities are supported by the eTwinning platform of the European Union, promoting real-time communication and digital literacy.

Research by Niemi et al. (2018) highlights that Finnish students engaged in PBL show higher engagement levels, improved oral fluency, and better retention of vocabulary due to contextual learning and sustained use of the target language in real-world situations[7].

In the United States, PBL has been effectively used in programs for English Language Learners (ELL), particularly in multicultural urban schools. At High Tech High in California, an innovative charter school network, foreign-born students participate in community-centered projects such as creating bilingual podcasts, documentaries on migration, or public awareness campaigns on health issues in both English and their native language.

A notable project involved Spanish-speaking students creating a bilingual public health guide during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was distributed in immigrant communities. This project not only developed academic language skills but also fostered civic responsibility and cross-cultural competence.

In Japan, PBL is integrated into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum through initiatives like Super Global High Schools (SGH), funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Students participate in international collaborative projects on sustainable development goals (SDGs), with English serving as the working language. For example, students from Tokyo Metropolitan

Kokusai High School collaborated with peers from Southeast Asia to research marine pollution and presented their findings at international student conferences.

This approach is grounded in the concept of "glocal learning," promoting the development of both global competence and local relevance. The use of English in authentic academic contexts leads to increased motivation and advanced academic discourse skills (Yonezawa, 2020) [8].

In Germany, PBL is frequently combined with Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in secondary schools and vocational institutions. A typical example includes students completing a science or history project in English or French, such as building models of historical monuments or simulating international climate negotiations. These projects are designed to develop not only subject knowledge but also communicative proficiency in the target language.

The Europaschule network, consisting of schools that emphasize multilingual education and European identity, often hosts multilingual project weeks where students from different countries work in international teams, culminating in presentations and exhibitions in foreign languages.

The international experience clearly demonstrates that Project-Based Learning in foreign language classrooms promotes integrated skill development, intercultural communication, and 21st-century competencies.

Project-Based Learning represents a transformative approach in foreign language education in Kazakhstan, aligning with global educational reforms and the goals of the national trilingual policy. While there are implementation challenges, successful examples from leading schools and universities demonstrate that PBL can significantly enrich the learning process, preparing students for both academic and professional environments. Continued investment in teacher training, curriculum design, and research will further support the effective integration of PBL in language education across the country.

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