

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AS AN INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY FOR ENHANCING RESEARCH COMPETENCE OF PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Abstract. This article examines the potential of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as an innovative teaching method for strengthening research competence among pre-service English language teachers. PBL provides an active and inquiry-based learning environment that encourages critical reasoning, independent investigation, and problem-solving skills essential for educational research. Drawing on classroom practices and observation conducted at a teacher training institution in Uzbekistan, the study highlights the effectiveness of PBL in preparing future educators for evidence-based teaching and scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: project-based learning, research competence, teacher education, innovative pedagogy, English language teaching, higher education, research skills.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Uzbekistan has prioritized educational modernization, placing special emphasis on preparing highly skilled, creative, and research-minded teachers who can respond to global transformations. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in his address to the Oliy Majlis, emphasized that “Education and science must become the driving forces of progress and modernization.” This policy direction reflects the crucial importance of developing research competence in teacher preparation, especially in the field of foreign language education, where teaching practices must adapt to rapid changes in communication and pedagogy.

Research competence is a multifaceted quality that goes beyond writing academic papers. It encompasses the ability to recognize pedagogical issues, design inquiry-based tasks, analyze and interpret data, and implement solutions grounded in evidence. Yet, traditional teacher training programs often limit students to passive learning, depriving them of hands-on experiences in educational research. Consequently, many novice teachers enter the profession without sufficient skills to independently investigate classroom realities.

Project-Based Learning (PBL), rooted in constructivist theory, offers a promising response to these challenges. Through project work, students engage in authentic, collaborative, and problem-driven learning processes that reflect real-life educational contexts. PBL simultaneously promotes subject knowledge acquisition, language development, teamwork, and higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and reflection—all of which are integral to research competence. Within English language teacher education, the approach is particularly effective because it aligns with communicative and learner-centered methodologies while fostering both linguistic and research skills.

The present study seeks to demonstrate how incorporating PBL into pre-service teacher education programs in Uzbekistan contributes to the development of research competence. It argues that PBL bridges the gap between theoretical coursework and practical inquiry, motivates

students to take responsibility for their learning, and equips them with the skills necessary to contribute to the advancement of educational practice and research in line with the nation's vision for a knowledge-based society.

METHODS

This research builds on a wide body of scholarship on constructivist learning and innovative pedagogy. Project-Based Learning is recognized as a student-centered methodology that emphasizes authentic inquiry and problem-solving. According to Thomas (2000), effective PBL includes five defining features: the centrality of the project, constructive investigation, the presence of a guiding question, learner autonomy, and the use of real-world contexts [1]. Similarly, Bell (2010) highlights that PBL cultivates 21st-century competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, and communication, all of which are vital for developing research competence [2].

Kolmos and de Graaff (2014) demonstrate how PBL serves as a bridge between academic theories and professional practice. They note that learners exposed to PBL typically display stronger skills in inquiry, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving [3]. Likewise, Savery and Duffy (1995) argue that meaningful learning occurs when students construct knowledge through problem-solving contexts that challenge their prior understanding [4].

In language teacher education, PBL has proven particularly useful for enhancing methodological knowledge and research skills. Empirical studies indicate that embedding authentic research-related tasks—such as needs analysis, material evaluation, and classroom observation—within project work enhances teacher trainees' capacity to design and conduct research (Patton, 2012; Beckett & Slater, 2005) [5][6].

Guided by these theoretical insights, this study adopted a qualitative, PBL-informed design. The intervention was organized around structured project cycles in which pre-service teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry addressing real classroom problems. Data collection tools included classroom observations, reflective journals, and focus group interviews. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns in the development of research competence. This design, consistent with constructivist principles, ensured that learning outcomes were authentic, reflective, and context-sensitive.

RESULTS

The findings derived from classroom observations and student feedback point to several positive impacts of PBL on research competence development.

Formulating research questions. At the beginning, most participants faced difficulties in narrowing down research topics or identifying relevant classroom problems. By the fourth week, however, more than 70% of students were independently defining researchable questions and establishing practical objectives for their studies. This outcome reflects Thomas's (2000) perspective on the value of learner-driven inquiry [1].

Shift in perceptions of research. Students' reflections showed a transformation in their attitude towards research. Initially, many perceived it as an abstract academic exercise. Over time, they began to regard it as a practical means of addressing real teaching challenges. This change increased their motivation and sense of ownership, confirming Bell's (2010) argument that authentic contexts enhance learners' engagement with research [2].

Collaboration and peer learning. Working in diverse teams proved crucial. Students with different strengths—language proficiency, digital literacy, or writing skills—contributed to each other’s learning. Group discussions revealed that collaborative environments accelerated competence in designing research tools, analyzing qualitative data, and composing reports. This corresponds to Kolmos and de Graaff’s (2014) claim that team projects mirror professional research environments [3].

Metacognitive development. As students progressed through project phases, they exhibited increased self-regulation and reflection. They learned to plan systematically, set milestones, and evaluate their progress critically. Several students even applied these inquiry cycles in their practicum classes, using research tools to assess student needs or measure teaching effectiveness. This shows that PBL fosters sustainable skills applicable beyond the university setting (Patton, 2012) [5].

Overall, the results confirm that PBL not only enhances immediate research skills but also encourages the development of a long-term research-oriented mindset among pre-service English teachers.

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