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Fostering communicative competence through project-based learning: A pathway to autonomous ESL development

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing communicative competence and promoting autonomous learning among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Kazakhstan. Despite being a core goal in ESL education, communicative competence remains challenging to develop, particularly in contexts with limited learner autonomy. To address this, the research integrates PBL into independent study practices across five Kazakhstani universities. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining literature review, cross-institutional case studies, and empirical data from pre-intermediate ESL students. The study focused on evaluating improvements in speaking, listening, and self-directed learning behaviors as a result of sustained PBL implementation. Results indicate that PBL led to a marked improvement in practical communication skills, particularly in oral fluency and active listening, while also fostering effective independent learning strategies. However, challenges such as inconsistent learner motivation and varying instructor preparedness were observed. The findings underscore PBL's transformative potential in fostering learner-centered, real-world engagement in ESL settings. This research provides a practical framework for integrating PBL into ESL curricula, offering insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers aiming to innovate and improve language instruction outcomes.

Keywords: Autonomous learning, Communicative competence, Educational innovation, ESL education, Independent study, Project-based learning.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape increasingly demands pedagogical models that not only develop linguistic proficiency but also promote independent learning capabilities among English as a Second Language (ESL) students. One such approach, Project-Based Learning (PBL), has garnered attention for its capacity to create meaningful, real-world contexts that support both language acquisition and learner autonomy. This study focuses on the integration of PBL into independent student work as a strategic means of developing communicative competence, a skill set vital for academic success and global interaction.

This empirical study was conducted over a period of three months with first-year undergraduate students from five higher education institutions across different regions of Kazakhstan, where the authors are currently teaching. The participating universities include L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University and K. Kulyzhanov Technology and Business University (both located in the capital, Astana), A. Saginov Karaganda Technical University (central region), and Sh. Ualikhanov Kokshetau University (northern region), and Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University (southern region, Almaty). All participants were native Kazakh speakers with a pre-intermediate level of English proficiency, as established through institutional placement tests conducted prior to the study. The deliberate selection of geographically diverse institutions aimed to ensure a representative sample and provide insights into the pedagogical effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) across different regional contexts. The central objective was to examine how PBL fosters communicative competence, particularly speaking and listening, at an early stage of English language acquisition. Participants: 25–30 first-year students from each of the five universities. All students are enrolled in an English language course as part of their general education or degree program. All have demonstrated pre-intermediate proficiency on placement tests.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly investigations by Bakar et al. [1] examine a quasi-experimental study and the effectiveness of using PBL activities as a teaching strategy to improve the oral communication skills of Malaysian learners of English. The results of these researchers showed significant improvements in the overall oral communication skills of students and a high perception of PBL by students. The study also examined the effectiveness of a science education model in improving students' character and scientific literacy. Their research demonstrated that a science education model incorporating Balinese local wisdom is effective for enhancing character and scientific literacy and is recommended as an innovative educational model. In the paper of Kovalyova et al. [2], PBL is considered an effective method for teaching English as a foreign language to engineering students at Russian technical universities. The study emphasizes the development of communication skills through interdisciplinary project work and concludes that PBL significantly improves oral and written communication skills. Empirical support confirms the success of the integrated model in developing statistical competence and collaboration skills, especially in the context of teacher education. The positive impact on statistical knowledge and collaboration skills highlights its potential for shaping future pedagogical practices, emphasizing the significance of this innovative approach in improving the skill set of future teachers. Researchers such as Becerra-Posada et al. [3] describe in their practical research the use of PBL by a future teacher with eighth-grade students learning English as a foreign language at a public secondary school in Colombia. Their research findings show that PBL contributes to the development of communicative competence and self-confidence among students. Gatiat and Zhorabekova [4] believe that an effective PBL tool is one that can create opportunities for improving intercultural communication skills.

To maximize the benefits of PBL in the classroom, researchers suggest creating assignments based on Stoller's ten steps of PBL. Each assignment is based on the fundamentals of PBL, while also closely intertwined with the core elements of ICC, such as respect, tolerance, curiosity, and authenticity. The study by Sun and Zhu [5] examined the impact of project-based language teaching (PBLT) on the development of key competencies in senior high school students and the factors influencing the impact of PBLT on improving key competencies in senior high school students in English as a foreign language. English teachers and students from one secondary school were selected as participants in the study. Their results showed that PBLT has many positive effects on the development of key competencies of senior high school students in English as a foreign language, especially in six aspects: observation and attention (A-1) and extraction and generalisation (A-3) at level A, description and interpretation (B-1) and synthesis and application (B-3) at level B, as well as reasoning and argumentation with evidence (C-1) and creation and imagination (C-2) at level C. The study also provides important insights for language teachers on how to better understand and effectively implement PBLT in language teaching.

Researchers as Khoudri et al. [6] examine autonomous learning skills, independent learning, and project-based learning as ways of responding to this 21st-century requirement. The authors also consider whether project-based learning can increase student autonomy in the context of Moroccan EFL and believe that researchers need to take into account that not all students maintain a positive attitude towards project-based learning, perhaps because they are used to being spoon-fed and held by the hand by their teachers, which makes them passive. To overcome this dilemma, teachers should constantly remind students that project-based learning promotes their autonomy and prepares them for the demands of life after graduation.

The study of Rangkun et al. [7] examined the effectiveness of project-based learning (PBL) in improving students' speaking skills using a pre-experimental design with pre- and post-testing. Sixteen eleventh-grade students participated in the study.

Jiang et al. [8] examined trends in technology development and key elements that contribute to the synergy between AI and PBL in English language learning. Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, the authors analyze articles from well-known databases, including ERIC, IEEE,

ScienceDirect, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Their research findings show that a PBL system enhanced with artificial intelligence could contribute to improving language proficiency, motivation, engagement among students, as well as the development of transferable skills.

These studies highlight the effectiveness of PBL in stimulating student engagement and improving communication fluency. However, despite extensive research on the use of PBL in the classroom, limited attention has been paid to its implementation in the context of student independent work, an area that is becoming increasingly relevant with the transition to flexible, learner-centred models of education, especially in the case of Kazakhstan.

This article aims to fill this research gap by assessing the pedagogical value of PBL when used as a component of independent learning in an ESL context. Three objectives are set: (1) to formulate the theoretical principles underlying PBL in second language learning, (2) to explore practical strategies for integrating PBL into students' independent assignments, and (3) to assess the measurable impact of such integration on students' communicative competence and their behavior in the process of independent learning.

Through this research, we aim to deepen the theoretical and applied understanding of PBL in language education and offer practical recommendations for educators developing independent learning modules. The relevance of this work lies in its potential to shape innovative practices that meet modern requirements for student independence and communicative competence in second language learning.

3. Method

This empirical study was conducted over a three-month period with a group of first-year students from five Kazakh higher education institutions. All participants were native speakers of Kazakh and demonstrated a pre-intermediate level of English proficiency, as determined by institutional placement tests prior to the study. The selection of this target group was deliberate, aiming to examine the pedagogical effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in fostering communicative competence at an early stage of English language acquisition. To carry out this study, the following primary research methods were employed in accordance with the aim and objectives of our research (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Main Research Methods Used in the Study.

Nº	Methods	Purpose of Use
1	Pre-test and Post-test Design (Quantitative)	To assess students' knowledge at the beginning and end of the experiment
2	Classroom Observation (Qualitative)	To capture real-time learner behavior, engagement, interaction, and participation during PBL tasks
3	Student Reflection Journals or Learning Logs (Qualitative)	To understand students' perceptions of their own learning progress, challenges, and motivation
4	Focus Group Discussions or Semi-Structured Interviews (Qualitative)	To gain deeper insights into students' and possibly teachers' experiences and attitudes toward PBL
5	Analysis of Student Artifacts (Qualitative)	To assess language use and development through completed PBL tasks

3.1. Research Design

A quasi-experimental research design was employed, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the impact of PBL on students' communicative abilities. The study followed a pre-test/post-test format, using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as the standardized assessment framework.

3.2. Procedure

The experimental process consisted of the following phases:

1. **Pre-Assessment:** At the onset of the study, participants underwent a diagnostic evaluation based on CEFR descriptors. This pre-assessment focused on key communicative parameters, including grammatical accuracy, vocabulary usage, oral fluency, and coherence in spontaneous speech. The results established a baseline for subsequent comparisons.
2. **Project-Based Learning Intervention:** Over the course of twelve weeks, students participated in a structured series of PBL tasks integrated into their independent learning curriculum. Each project was carefully designed to reinforce thematic content and grammatical structures covered in the students' ongoing language syllabus. Emphasis was placed on real-world communication scenarios to promote practical language use. Projects included components of research, collaborative problem-solving, and oral presentations, encouraging both autonomous learning and interpersonal communication.
3. **Post-Assessment:** At the conclusion of the intervention, a second evaluation using the same CEFR-based rubrics was administered. This assessment provided a standardized measure of progress in communicative competence, particularly in areas of fluency, grammatical accuracy, and the integration of learned content into authentic language tasks.
4. **Qualitative Feedback:** To complement the quantitative findings, qualitative data were collected through structured surveys and reflective sessions. Students were invited to share their perceptions of the PBL process, including its challenges, benefits, and impact on their language learning motivation and autonomy.

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the CEFR-based assessments were analyzed to determine statistically significant improvements in communicative performance. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to compare pre- and post-intervention results. Qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights into learner experiences.

By employing a standardized international framework (CEFR) and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data sources, the research design ensured methodological rigor and allowed for a holistic evaluation of the role of PBL in enhancing ESL communicative competence in a pre-intermediate learner context.

3.4. Stages and Implementation of Project-Based Activities in ESL Instruction

Project-Based Learning (PBL) in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction follows a structured and pedagogically grounded framework. The method is characterized by its student-centered orientation and focus on authentic language use, integrating linguistic development with cognitive, social, and research skills. The implementation of projects is carried out in several pedagogical stages:

3.4.1. Preparation Stage

This initial stage is foundational and includes the identification of student profiles. Teachers are encouraged to assess the individual interests, learning preferences, and prior experiences of students to ensure relevance and engagement. This phase also involves:

- Selection and formulation of the project topic;
- Introduction and discussion of the topic with students;
- Review and reinforcement of key vocabulary and relevant grammatical structures to support upcoming tasks.

3.4.2. Organization of Participants

Students are grouped to facilitate collaborative learning. Group formation considers diversity in gender, academic performance, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Responsibilities are allocated based on individual cognitive strengths, such as logical reasoning, analytical thinking, and creative design. This stage is crucial for fostering cooperative dynamics and equitable task distribution.

3.4.3. Project Implementation

In this phase, learners engage in exploratory activities to gather new information and document their findings. Students select the modality of project execution, which may include visual materials (e.g., posters, charts), multimedia outputs, or creative representations (e.g., skits, simulations). Projects may be developed independently or under guided supervision. Learner autonomy is emphasized, and teacher intervention is minimal, fostering a sense of initiative and responsibility.

3.4.4. Project Presentation

Completed projects are presented to peers and evaluated based on clarity, content, creativity, and linguistic accuracy. Formats may include oral presentations, digital showcases, printed materials, or classroom exhibitions. Students are encouraged to use English actively during the presentation, integrating previously studied vocabulary and grammar. This stage is instrumental in promoting public speaking skills and peer learning.

3.5. Evaluation and Reflection

The outcomes of the project are analyzed both by educators and students. The evaluation criteria are multi-dimensional, focusing on:

- Mastery of thematic vocabulary;
- Grammatical competence, particularly in the use of targeted structures;
- Information literacy and the effective use of digital tools;
- Clarity and coherence of content delivery;
- Visual and structural quality of presentation materials;
- Critical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to propose and defend solutions;
- Articulation of personal viewpoints and self-assessment.

Student reflection is an integral part of this stage. Learners are prompted to evaluate their personal progress and learning experiences using guided prompts (e.g., *"I learned..."*, *"It was difficult..."*, *"I was surprised that..."*).

3.6. Typology of Projects in ESL Contexts

PBL in ESL instruction encompasses a range of project types tailored to pedagogical goals and learner needs:

3.6.1. By Content Focus:

- Constructive-Practical Projects: involve tasks such as creating collages, observation diaries, or simulations of communication scenarios.
- Role-Playing Projects: assign students fictional or real-world roles (e.g., political figures, business professionals) to simulate socio-cultural interactions.

- Information Projects: require students to gather and synthesize data from various sources, culminating in presentations, reports, or multimedia outputs.
- Research Projects: involve systematic inquiry into a selected topic, fostering skills in hypothesis formation, data collection, and interpretation.
- Vocationally-Oriented Projects: address issues related to students' future professions, enhancing relevance and motivation.
- Sociological Projects: rely on instruments such as interviews and surveys to explore societal trends and behaviors.
- Creative Projects: emphasize interpretative and expressive skills, allowing learners to respond to literary, cinematic, or real-life themes.
- Publishing Projects: result in written outputs such as newsletters, brochures, or digital content.
- Scenario Projects: focus on event planning or scripting for thematic occasions (e.g., cultural evenings, educational campaigns).

3.6.2. *By Disciplinary Scope:*

- Mono-Disciplinary Projects: confined to a single subject area.
- Interdisciplinary Projects: integrate content and skills from two or more academic disciplines.

3.6.3. *By Participant Composition:*

- Individual Projects
- Paired Projects
- Group Projects

3.6.4. *By Duration:*

- Short-Term (up to 2 weeks)
- Medium-Term (1–2 months)
- Long-Term (up to one academic year)

Case Study: Interdisciplinary Project "Running for Mayor"

Project Description

Title: *Running for Mayor*

Type: Interdisciplinary, Group-Based, Short-Term (2 weeks)

Subjects Integrated: Sociology, Political Science, Geography, History

Language Focus: Future Simple, "To be going to," Present Continuous for Future Arrangements

Group Composition: Groups of three students

Overall Objective: To enhance students' critical thinking, teamwork, civic awareness, and public speaking skills through the simulation of a political campaign.

3.7. *Project Objectives*

1. To acquire and actively use topical vocabulary related to governance and public service;
2. To consolidate grammatical structures related to future expressions;
3. To develop collaborative research and problem-solving skills;
4. To effectively communicate ideas and plans in English through structured presentations.

3.8. *Project Stages*

1. Needs Analysis and Problem Identification (In-Class)
2. Discussion topics:
 - Local urban challenges and community needs;
 - Opportunities for social development and infrastructure enhancement;
 - Welfare strategies for diverse population groups.

3.9. *Project Planning*

Activities:

- Brainstorming campaign goals and voter outreach strategies;
- Identifying relevant information sources (e.g., media, surveys);
- Framing campaign promises related to urban improvement.

3.10. *Group Formation and Role Assignment*

Each group comprises:

- One mayoral candidate;
- Two campaign team members are responsible for media and logistics.

3.11. *Independent Research and Campaign Design (Out-of-Class)*

Students prepare campaign blueprints including:

- Messaging strategies;
- Targeted outreach plans;
- Mock election logistics;
- Resource management (budget, time, personnel, data).

5. Project Presentation (In-Class)

6.

Students present campaign strategies using visual aids (e.g., slides, posters, videos). The peer audience assumes the role of city residents.

3.12. Candidate Interaction and Debate

Two formats:

- Q&A with audience;
- Formal debate among candidates on topical issues (e.g., environment, public health, economic policy).

3.13. Reflection Activity

Students reflect on their learning process using guided prompts to self-assess their linguistic and cognitive development.

3.12. Assessment Criteria

- Use of thematic vocabulary;
- Accuracy in grammar application;
- Research and information synthesis;
- Coherence and clarity of presentation;
- Visual design and engagement quality;
- Problem-solving and critical analysis;
- Ability to formulate and defend viewpoints.

4. Results and Discussion

This study, conducted over a three-month academic term, investigated the impact of Project-Based Learning (PBL) on the communicative competence of first-year English as a Second Language (ESL) students. The participants, all native Kazakh speakers with pre-intermediate English proficiency, engaged in a series of structured PBL activities integrated into their language curriculum.

The experimental design began with a pre-assessment utilizing the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) rubrics to evaluate students' baseline performance across three communicative domains: vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, and oral fluency. These criteria provided a reliable metric for standardized language proficiency evaluation.

Following the pre-assessment, a variety of PBL tasks were introduced, each targeting specific grammatical structures that paralleled classroom instruction. These projects emphasized real-world application, requiring students to engage in autonomous research, problem-solving, collaborative discussion, and oral presentation. Notably, the project tasks were designed to simulate authentic communicative contexts, encouraging students to apply their linguistic knowledge in meaningful ways.

Upon project completion, a post-assessment identical in format to the pre-assessment was administered to evaluate linguistic development. The quantitative results indicated measurable gains in grammatical accuracy, fluency, and lexical range. These improvements affirm the efficacy of PBL in promoting the internalization and functional use of language structures.

In addition to quantitative analysis, qualitative data were collected through structured student surveys and reflective journaling. Responses revealed increased learner motivation, confidence in communication, and a more favorable attitude toward English language learning. Students reported greater enjoyment and a sense of achievement through the autonomy and creativity fostered by PBL.

The project typologies employed in the study included constructive-practical, role-playing, informational, research-based, vocational, sociological, creative, publishing, and scenario-based formats. This diversity allowed for the accommodation of varied learning styles and linguistic functions. A representative example, the "Running for Mayor" project, embodied a short-term, interdisciplinary, group-oriented approach designed to enhance political literacy, presentation skills, and mastery of future tense grammatical structures.

The methodological framework for project implementation included the following stages: project initiation and needs assessment, participant organization and role distribution, autonomous task execution, classroom presentation, peer and instructor feedback, and reflective evaluation. This systematic scaffolding supported language development while promoting higher-order thinking skills and learner independence.

Evaluation criteria were based on mastery of thematic vocabulary, grammatical accuracy (with a focus on future forms), information literacy (including the use of electronic resources), clarity and coherence of presentation, problem formulation and solution proposal, and the ability to articulate and defend personal viewpoints.

These findings underscore the potential of PBL to serve as a transformative tool in ESL instruction. The integration of theoretical language concepts with authentic, task-based learning environments enhanced both linguistic competence and

learner engagement. Importantly, the study offers a replicable model for integrating PBL into curriculum design, especially for educators seeking to bridge academic content with communicative language teaching principles.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing communicative competence among first-year ESL students. Over the duration of the project cycle, participants engaged in five distinct PBL tasks, each designed to facilitate language acquisition through meaningful, real-world application. The use of CEFR-aligned rubrics for pre- and post-assessment provided a valid and reliable measure of linguistic progress, confirming the tangible benefits of PBL for language development.

Students demonstrated significant improvement in language performance, particularly in fluency, vocabulary usage, and grammatical accuracy. Additionally, the process promoted essential 21st-century skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and self-directed learning. The positive progression of learner performance was most apparent during the final project presentations, which provided a comprehensive assessment of students' communicative abilities.

Furthermore, the fusion of language theory and project-based practice created a dynamic and student-centered learning environment. Qualitative reflections from learners suggested increased motivation, self-confidence, and a stronger sense of purpose in their language studies. These attitudinal shifts are significant in fostering long-term learner autonomy.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting PBL as a viable and impactful methodology in ESL education. The structured framework and diverse project models presented herein offer educators a practical, scalable blueprint for implementing PBL in language classrooms. The study affirms that when language instruction is embedded in real-world contexts, supported by strategic scaffolding and reflective practice, students are better positioned to achieve both communicative competence and academic success.

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