The Impact of Utilizing Project-based Learning (PBL) Supported by the Internet Resources on the Improvement of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Students' Abilities to Comprehend Texts

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Abstract:

The aim of the research is to examine how Project-Based Learning affects the ability of students who are learning English as a foreign language to comprehend what they read. Its objective is to establish whether the adoption of PBL can facilitate the development of students' ability to understand what they read. The study involved 44 students in their first year of study in the faculty of foreign languages and translation at Misr University, where an experimental group received PBL-based instruction in reading comprehension, exclusive of the traditional approach used for the control group. According to the analysis of statistics, there was a notable enhancement in the comprehension skills of the participants who received instruction through Project-Based Learning, in comparison to the conventional group. Therefore, the study concludes that adopting PBL has the potential to increase students' success in reading comprehension and motivation levels.

Keywords: Project-based learning (PBL), Reading comprehension

أثر استخدام طريقة المشروع مدعم بمصادر عبر الإنترنت لتنمية قدرات دارسى اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية فى فهم النصوص

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مناهج وطرق تدريس لغه إنجليزيه- مدرس بكلية اللغات والترجمة- قسم اللغه الإنجليزيه جامعة مصر للعلوم والتكنولوجيا

ملخص البحث

تهدف الدراسة إلى تحقيق فاعلية استخدام طريقة المشروع مدعم بمصادر من خلال الإنترنت في تنمية قدرات دارسى اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. قامت الباحثة باختيار عينة مكونة من ٤٤ طالبًا في الفرقة الثانيه بكلية اللغات والترجمة بجامعة مصر للعلوم والتكنولوجيا، وتم تقسيم العينة إلى مجموعتين (مجموعة تجريبية تلقت تدريبًا على طريقة المشروع، بينما درست المجموعة الضابطة باستخدام الطريقة التقليدية)، وضمت أدوات الدراسة إختبارًا قبليًا واختبارًا بعديًا لمعرفة حجم تأثير طريقة المشروع على اكتساب مهارات الفهم القرائي. تم معالجة النتائج باستخدام برنامج الرزم الإحصائية SPSS بينما أظهرت النتائج وجود فروق دلالة إحصائية لصالح المجموعة التجريبية في التطبيق البعدي للاختبار، وبناءً عليه، أوصت الباحثة بأهمية استخدام استراتيجية التعلم بالمشروع لتحقيق أفضل نتائج التحصيل في اللغة والمهارات الفرعية؛ مما أدى إلى النصح بإجراء مزيد من الأبحاث للاطلاع على فاعلية هذه الاستراتيجية في مستويات دراسية أخرى وفي موضوعات دراسية مختلفة.

كلمات ذات دلاله (كلمات مفتاحيه):

التعلم بالمشروع عبر الانترنت، فهم النصوص باللغة الانجليزية لغير الناطقين بها.

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1. Introduction

Due to advances in technology, young people are now considered to be part of the "visual generation" who favor images over reading. This change in reading habits has been observed amongst students and has prompted the Egyptian government to support universities in enhancing students' proficiency in English to enable their professional development. Mastering English reading skills is not only vital for succeeding academically but also for individual growth. With this in mind, compulsory English reading courses are offered by all universities in Egypt, and extra efforts are made to improve the quality of instruction. Academic success for students is linked to their reading habits and proficiency in comprehending what they read.

Traditional language instruction in Egyptian universities - particularly in EFL contexts - poses a significant problem, as highlighted by Pan & Huang in 2009. Typically, such instruction follows a teacher-centered approach, with a strong focus on reading, grammar instruction, vocabulary clarification and extensive repetition in exercises (as observed by Wei in 1996 and Jin & Cortazzi in 2004). In classrooms like these, pupils are considered passive within the teacher's delivery, and they are not given enough autonomy to participate actively as learners (Ning, 2011). These dated teaching methods have resulted in students disengaging from EFL classes. This has driven an inclination

toward teaching communicatively by utilizing self-directed group work, incorporating various communication-based approaches within reading classes and prioritizing student-centered learning techniques. As a result, both collaborative work and learner interaction are treated as requisites for learning EFL reading.

Therefore, instead of relying on traditional teaching methods for reading, a Internet supported Project-based learning approach provides an interactive and communicative environment that helps students develop socio-linguistic skills, according to Bolukbas, Keskin, and Polat (2011), Gomleksiz (2007), and Ning (2011). This approach involves students actively engaging with the text by investigating, selecting, gathering, analyzing, and comprehending information sources, which can improve their ability to understand written materials (Kuhlthau, 1997).

The concept of project-based learning (PBL) involves assigning students a large selection of reading materials, covering everything from traditional print-based sources to those that are digitally accessible. Researchers such as Chu, Tse, Loh, and Chow (2011) have found that engaging in learning activities with computers and Internet can significantly improve one's reading comprehension scores. Implementing this approach leads to higher levels of vocabulary knowledge and fueling skills necessary within a 21st century learning context focusing on EFL.

Students of English as a foreign language often struggle with reading comprehension as they spend a significant amount of time trying to understand the text. Their motivation to read is reduced as they encounter difficult words. As learners face more challenging words, they are prompted to stop and look up the meaning of words, creating a tedious and dull atmosphere for reading. Their growth in reading can be impeded due to obstacles presented by poor comprehension skills. The researcher found that English language learners have a poor understanding of the text. Over the years, many approaches have been implemented to help these students learn and understand English texts better. Utilizing PBL provides an opportunity for learners to take ownership of their

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learning and become more engaged. Moreover, classrooms are incorporating technology to enable teachers to cultivate dynamic and engaging learning environments and to provide them with access to cutting-edge instructional materials. Teachers may need to adopt new teaching methods such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) combined with technology to help students overcome learning difficulties and achieve higher academic achievements.

The Research Question:

The writer establishes the research question based on the background of the problem, which is:

Do EFL freshmen who utilize Project-based Learning (PBL) supported by the Internet Resources perform better on English reading comprehension examinations than those who receive traditional lecture instruction?

The Research Hypothesis:

There is a statistically significant difference between the mean score of the experimental group students and those of the control group in the reading comprehension skills of post-test in favor of the experimental group students.

Significance of the study:

This study is expected to have several contributions, namely:

1. to provide a better understanding of the significance of utilizing Internet supported Project-Based Learning mode in education where English is a foreign language.

2. to enhance existing research in terms of the efficiency of Internet supported Project-Based Learning technique for English as a foreign language instruction.

3. to stimulate the people who design syllabuses to incorporate Internet supported Project-Based Learning method for the purpose of enhancing reading comprehension abilities.

4. to assist instructors in adopting advanced and productive tactics and variety of resources for teaching English as a foreign language, by this innovative approach

Definitions:

The present study incorporates two operational definitions of variables, which include:

-Reading comprehension

To comprehend a written text, the reader must acquire and formulate its significance. This entails developing a mental representation, or a pattern that combines information from the text with the individual's previous familiarity and experience (Kintsch, 2012; Van Dijk&Kintsch, 1983). In EL-Deen's viewpoint (2009:p.8), Comprehension is the capacity to engage thoughtfully with written material, using a comprehensive approach featuring cognitive and meta-cognitive skills to extract meaning from the text and convey the writer's intended message.

Project Based Learning

Project-Based Learning is a teaching approach that requires students to create, manage, and execute an extensive project that results in a publicly showcased deliverable such as a product, publication, or presentation. (Patton, 2012:13). This model of teaching emphasizes making students address significant real-life issues and problems to obtain new knowledge and capabilities by figuring out appropriate solutions and collectively working on practical products or presentations. "Project-based instruction" should feature an authentic questioning technique and employ cognitive technology tools for efficient learning (Krajcik, J. & Blumenfeld, P., Marx, R., & Soloway, E. 1998). This type of

teaching creates the foundation for adults to work accurately and cooperatively with others, promotes lifelong learning, and imbues students with self-knowledge and motivation. Besides implementing a project-based learning scheme that is curriculum-guided (as noted by Thomas et al., 1999& Knoblauch 2021), it is also an instructional method that emphasizes student-centered teaching by assigning projects. In essence, Project-Based Learning encompasses engaging educational approaches that challenge students to apply and refine their abilities and understanding by utilizing diverse resources to resolve complex, authentic projects that have unclear, partially unpredictable outcomes. Moreover, this approach provides students with opportunities to obtain skills in distributing and managing resources like time and materials.

Theoretical background

It is obvious the importance of reading for obtaining linguistic competence particularly at the tertiary level of education for EFL students (Nasri and Biria, 2016). Yee (2010) adds that being able to read confidently in English can also improve learners' ability to access information from educational sources. As a result, different teaching approaches are being employed to improve reading comprehension levels, including project-based learning. This approach blends 21st-century technological abilities with the enhancement of the vocabulary and reading comprehension competencies in EFLcontext.

In Celce-Murcia's view (2001, p.187), poor reading or comprehension skills can contribute to feelings of isolation and ineffectiveness. A multitude of factors, such as text complexity, environmental conditions, anxiety, motivation, decoding speed, and health issues can impact an individual's ability to understand text, causing complications in reading comprehension as it requires the identification of printed symbols and their subsequent interpretation, according to Dennis (2008).

It is essential to facilitate the progression of reading proficiency since it has a significant influence on students' educational growth and success (Leppanen, Aunola, &Nurmi, 2005). As instructor, I have noticed that my students struggle with comprehension when presented with reading tasks. Milan in Kuning (2015:12) believes that identifying the primary concept, recognizing the distinction between primary information and supplementary details, and interpreting underlying meanings from the given text are all crucial elements that contribute to enhancing reading comprehension., and making references to objects mentioned by the author, as discussed by Nation (2008:34).

Teaching English reading as a foreign language poses challenges due to a lack of exposure to the language in formal and informal settings beyond the classroom (Zoghi, Mustapha, and Massum, 2010; Gomleksiz, 2007). However, a student-centered and self-directed approach in English reading instruction that emphasizes communication and meaning-making, using communicative teaching methods, has become increasingly popular. Cooperative learning caters to interaction and communication and helps develop socio-linguistic competence in students. This teaching method has shown promise as an alternative to traditional reading instruction for effective EFL learning (Bolukbas, Keskin, and Polat, 2011; Gomleksiz, 2007; Ning, 2011; Tsai, 2004).

Few opportunities are available for students to practice English communication in challenging learning environments. It is believed that doing projects outside of class may help students improve their language skills. Project-based learning allows students to actively seek, analyze, and comprehend information from various sources, including books, the internet, and other reading materials. Utilizing this approach can have a favorable effect on one's ability to comprehend written material. Traditional teaching methods used in Egypt should be replaced with more innovative strategies. This study aims to provide more insights into project-based learning and reading comprehension abilities in both teachers and students. It also examines how the type of project affects one's ability to improve. Knowing the results will allow us to determine that new

methods are more beneficial than old ones and that certain types of projects are better in improving reading ability.

Teachers face a challenging task in improving students' reading skills due to limited lesson time and strict requirements in the established curriculum. The constrained teaching period may not contribute substantially to enhance foreign language reading, particularly for students who struggle with reading or find it unpleasant. Nevertheless, it is imperative to develop reading proficiency, especially for undergraduates who employ English as their medium of instruction in academic pursuits. Therefore, integrating reading activities into their everyday lives and school-related tasks can be an efficient method to enhance their abilities.

To enhance the reading abilities of English language students, many approaches are available to educators. One such method involves students preparing ahead of time for debate competitions, and in doing so, improving application skills like skimming, scanning, and critical analysis, thereby selecting only pertinent and trustworthy evidence to support their thesis (Zare, P., & Othman, M., 2013). They can also improve their outlining and summarization skills along the way. Another positive strategy employs quiz-games, which make reading lessons more engaging and unique. Here, EFL students look into various biographies which sharpens their scanning and skimming proficiency which helps them identify specific details. Overall, such interactive reading initiatives enhance EFL learners' information-related abilities, build recognition of different genres of texts, and foster the conversion of information from one form to another. A third project involves developing short story movies as an entertaining and engaging channel for EFL students' reading skills (Ismaili, 2013). Upon reading short stories, students are encouraged to strengthen their capacity for speed-reading, searching efficiently using skimming and scanning for crucial information, and recognizing significant themes about the tale. (Zeraatkari & Hadipanah, 2013)

In Project-Based Learning (PBL), students can create their own magazine as a type of project. (Poonpon, 2011) This involves analyzing and reading different printed and online materials, such as magazines and news articles. It's a great way for students to practice their reading skills like skimming and scanning. (Makhloufi, 2013) There are different types of PBL assessments that are used, like self-assessment, peer assessment, case-based assessment, performance-based assessment, and portfolio assessment. For effective PBL, the teacher's role shifts from being dominant to being a guide or facilitator. PBL emphasizes student-centered learning and group collaboration. (Papandreou, 1994),

The successful implementation of a project involves several stages. These stages can serve as a practical reference for teachers who want to incorporate projects into their classrooms. (Kriwas, 1999& Karasn 2019 (as follows:

- Brainstorming

The first step in this process involves selecting a project topic and raising interest to investigate it. This is particularly important as it sets the foundation for the research process that follows. To actualize this, Brinia (2006) suggests stimulating students' curiosity by discussing contemporary local or global issues. Alternatively, the students and teacher can also base their topic selection on news articles sourced from newspapers or magazines following extensive deliberation among each other.

-Planning and creating the tasks for the project.

In this stage, groups are formed and roles are allocated to each member. The group also discusses matters pertaining research methodology, suitable sources of information, intended activities and learning locations located beyond the classroom. According to Fragoulis (2008), it is best to organize and structure the activities in a comprehensive and detail-oriented manner to ensure ease and speed of research undertaken by the group.

- Conducting the project activities

During this stage, the groups carry out the activities designed in the previous stage, which may include the gathering, processing, and categorization of relevant information. If required, the group may take breaks for information sharing and feedback, which can include discussing issues related to teamwork and addressing individual relationship issues (if any arise).

-Evaluation

The evaluation stage involves assessing the activities carried out by all participants against the initial goal of the project, reviewing the implementation process, and the final outcome. As suggested by Brinia (2006), Both individual and collective evaluation takes place, which involves recognizing errors and issues and also evaluating abundant cognitive and experimental data acquired throughout the research process. It may also involve seeking feedback from others and assessing one's own performance.

Numerous research works have concentrated on the theoretical foundation of project-oriented learning in the context of teaching foreign languages., but only a few have examined the practical aspects and evaluated the impact of this approach in EFL teaching. Thus, our study focuses on evaluating the implementation of project work at the university level, reporting on difficulties encountered, benefits gained from project-based learning, and providing relevant pedagogical implications resulting from our findings.

The study will use a quantitative research design that employs a one-group time-series approach. Project-based learning (PBL) involves students in activities that stimulate intellectual inquiry while inspiring maximum participation in tasks that carry significance, allowing them to produce new knowledge and develop an understanding of the subject matter. Within this

method, project work takes the place of traditional assessment methods such as tests and quizzes.

Teaching a diverse group of students using the same materials often leads to difficulty, with some students who require assistance being left disengaged. In order to resolve this issue, the students in this study were informally and flexibly grouped according to specific learning goals, activities, and their individual needs within the class. Both teacher-led grouping, which includes whole-class instruction, small-group instruction, and individual work under teacher supervision, and student-led grouping, including performance-based groups and option-based groups via interviews were utilized (Valentino, 2005). In this study, students were grouped in pre-, while-, and post-reading instructional activities to prevent static group patterns from emerging. The different grouping forms utilized are specified as follows:

Instruments

This research utilized a variety of tests:

a**. Cambridge Placement Test –** which was administrated in order to assign the students to groups of proper level.

b. Reading pre-test from course Teacher's Book Unit tests. Tests are designed by Oxford publishing on a high professional level. Pre-test was implemented in the end of the first month of the first semester. (Appendix 1)

c. Reading post-test from course Teacher's Book Unit tests, Towards the end of the second month of the first semester, both pre-tests and post-tests were conducted to evaluate the progress in reading comprehension. The researcher also made in-class observations as a part of the study. (Appendix 1)

d. **End of course Questionnaire** (Appendix 2)

Materials

The course material used for this study consisted of Oxford Intermediate level books by Hancock and McDonald, published in

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2013. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) projects were assigned according to the topics covered in the books, with the intention of improving the students' reading skills. The PBL projects were carefully designed for this purpose, including the creation of short videos and wall magazines.

Extensive explanations were provided concerning the features of PBL, the steps involved in creating PBL projects, and the steps that the students followed.

Methods

The research study involved 44 students who were freshman-level English Language and Translation College students at Misr University for Science and Technology, a private university in Egypt. The study took place between September and December of the year 2021, and the age range of participants was between 18 to 20, comprising both males and females. The participants voluntarily enrolled in the study and were selected randomly and assigned to two groups. The control group had 22 participants while the experimental group had 22 participants. To achieve the study's objectives, the researcher utilized various data collection methods, including pre- and post-tests, ongoing assessments, question-guided journals, and unstructured interviews. These methods were used to obtain the necessary data for the study.

In this research, the implementation of a project-based learning process closely followed the project work stages described by Fragoulis (2009). He processes consisted of different phases such as brainstorming, developing project tasks, executing project tasks, and assessment. In the initial meeting, the researcher introduced project-based learning and highlighted its benefits based on scholarly sources. The research goals were explained, and participants who were interested were asked to sign a consent form. Then, the participants completed a speaking test whereby each spoke on a presented topic for five minutes. In the second week, the speculation stage involving the decision on the research topic to pursue began. The process aimed to stimulate student engagement in project assignments.

In the second class, the process of brainstorming started by distributing the course outline to the students. The syllabus articulately explained the four obligatory projects which pertained to social concerns or featured articles and the evaluation criteria, the timeline for execution, the expected completion date, and the presentations due date. During this session, the third phase of the project development cycle began where the students had to design the project activities. The researcher reiterated the benefits of project-based learning, outlined its effective execution, and provided guidelines to students to choose individual, pair, or group work. In addition, the researcher helped participants select research topics, establish the first project's scope, and provided a list of questions as a presentation guide. Additionally, the researcher addressed student queries and suggested information sources and research tools. Participants were encouraged to report their progress face-to-face with the researcher and seek guidance whenever needed.

The conducting of project activities (third stage) and evaluation (fourth stage) were merged, spanning over ten weeks. Subsequently, students undertook fieldwork, implementing their planned activities and collecting information to generate their final projects. They faced obstacles and resolved issues by discussing them with classmates and the researcher. Furthermore, their projects were reviewed and approved by the researcher before being presented to the class as outlined in their plans. Finally, the projects were evaluated based on the project's scope.

The study consisted of two projects - "The Pursuit of Happiness" and "How do you feel when you make somebody happy?" These projects aimed to boost the self-esteem of teenagers while also enabling them to learn more about their immediate environment, including their family and local community. By transforming students into explorers and journalists, these projects provided a valuable outlet for young adults to investigate and exchange their experiences. Through researching and interviewing, students developed their storytelling talents while also unearthing cultural stories inspired by their community which were then converted into audio recordings. Project-Based Learning (PBL) offers students the chance to acquire both substantive knowledge and language skills through an effective and

practical approach. It is crucial not to overlook language learning while focusing exclusively on content. In the study conducted, PBL was utilized in the curriculum development process with the aim of enhancing awareness of Egyptian culture. The study took place from September to December 2021 with three weekly class hours. The researcher utilized quantitative methods of data collection to evaluate the level of reading comprehension attained by both the experimental and control groups at the beginning and end of the research phase. Quantitative methods also helped to analyze pre and post-experiment data. The statistical software SPSS was employed for data collection, and independent as well as paired sample t-tests were conducted for data analysis.

Findings and Discussions

The study used a test to present the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group's reading comprehension pre and post intervention. The pre-test result for the experimental group was 77.5, while the post-test result was 87.6.

Table 1: Paired Samples Statistics of Students' Reading Comprehension pre- and post-test results (experimental group)

Groups	N	Mean	Std.
Experimental Group Pre-test	22	75.432	13.009
Experimental Group Post-test	22	81. 599	9.800

In contrast, Table 2 demonstrated that in the control group, which did not undertake PBL, the pre-test mean result was 77.80, and the post-test mean result was 69.56. The conventional approach to teaching reading comprehension events further negatively impacted the group's reading skills level as there was a decline between the pre and post-test scores.

Table2: The statistical data of paired samples of reading comprehension results pre and posttest for the control group students.

Control Group	N	Mean	Std.Deviation
(Pre-test)	22	76.097	11.03
(Post-test)	22	67.560	12.40

Table 2 indicated that the application of PBL positively impacted the experimental group, as their reading comprehension improved, with a rise from 77.5 to 87.6.

Table3: The statistical data of reading comprehension test results for both the Control and Experimental groups after the experiment.

	N	Mean	Std.Deviation
Control Group Post- test	22	69.10	12.501
Experimental Group Post- test	22	87.50	9.867

Table 3 presented the outcomes of both groups, with the control group's post-test result mean being 69.10 compared to the experimental group's mean of 87.5. It demonstrates that the control group students received inferior outcomes compared to the experimental group. To find out its significance, the researcher worked out the data in Independent t-test.

Table 4 displays the outcomes of the Reading Comprehension post-tests for both the experimental and control groups.
Table 4: The post-test outcomes of reading comprehension for both the experimental and control groups.

posttest	t-test				Pretest	t-test			
F	Sig	T	df	Sig. (2 tailed)	F	Sig	T	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
.389	.500	- 5.02 - 5.02	40 37.415	. 000 .000	.328	.556	.100 .100	40 38.015	.910 .910

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The Sig. (2-tailed) value is less than 0.05, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between the pre and post-test scores of the PBL-implemented group and the control group. Thus, it can be concluded that PBL had a noteworthy and beneficial impact on the reading comprehension skills of learners.

Conclusion:

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire, it was discovered that most students perceived Project-Based Learning that incorporated local culture into English as a Foreign Language education as both challenging and stimulating. Roughly 70% of students expressed their keen interest in collaborating on such projects. Nonetheless, some individuals encountered difficulty with the teacher adopting a role as a facilitator and coordinator, instead of being the exclusive provider of knowledge and problem-solving solutions. Remarkably, low achievers who felt depressed by unfamiliar words while reading showed more diligent learning as they felt excited to have a deeper study involving their living community, reducing pressure with background knowledge of the authentic reading materials. Among high achievers, some preferred to work individually to achieve better scores. However, this pattern changed under project-based learning as every student seemed to be excited to express their discoveries in a different subject area. Initially, some students struggled with the freedom to choose their topic and form their team, but they eventually understood that the instructor was present to aid and encourage them along the way. The study's findings have two crucial implications. One concerns the English reading comprehension skills of students, which were enhanced by implementing project-based learning. The results demonstrated how proficient students were in identifying essential information and details through authentic references from English online sources. The study also observed that students possessing sufficient background knowledge about their research topic could

practice reading comprehension skills even in the presence of difficult-to-interpret words. For low achievers, the use of real texts improved their confidence levels in engaging in group projects. Yet, the student-centered learning approach required more effort on the instructor's part. Secondly, this study established a link between language arts and technology, revealing that many participants learned to research a particular topic using search engines like Google or Yahoo, and their ability to select interview topics, collect and analyze data, outside of campus greatly improved.

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