

## Implementing Project-Based Learning in Moroccan Classrooms: Misconceptions, Impact and Challenges

**Rachida Moussaoui**

*The Applied Language and Culture Studies Lab, Chouaib Doukkali University, El Jadida*  
[rachidamoussaoui100@gmail.com](mailto:rachidamoussaoui100@gmail.com)

**Reddad Erguig**

*The Applied Language and Culture Studies Lab, Chouaib Doukkali University, El Jadida*

How to cite:

Moussaoui, R. & Erguig, R. (2024). Implementing Project-Based Learning in Moroccan Classrooms: Misconceptions, Impact and Challenges. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies* 5(1).15-27. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v5i1.402>

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 15/10/2023

Accepted: 10/12/2023

### KEYWORDS

Project-based learning (PBL), English language teaching (ELT), language skills, Morocco.

### Abstract

*English language teaching (ELT) underwent significant changes during the 1970s and 1980s. New educational approaches and practices emerged, shifting the focus from teaching to learning. Among these methods is project-based learning (PBL), which has gradually gained popularity in many ELT settings. The incorporation of the PBL approach in the educational system has revealed its positive effect on boosting learners' skills and learning outcomes. Nevertheless, discussions with ELT practitioners and researchers in Morocco have revealed three key facts regarding PBL in the Moroccan context. First, it is noticed that such a method has not been adequately used in Moroccan classrooms, especially at the university level. Second, the implementation of PBL in Morocco has often been based on misconceptions regarding the fundamental nature of project-based learning. Third, the research exploring PBL in relation to language skills has been rather limited in comparison with studies that have investigated the role of PBL in promoting soft skills and 21st century skills. The rationale behind the present paper is therefore to promote the effective implementation of PBL in Moroccan EFL classrooms. It aims to achieve this by highlighting the essential elements for successful implementation, addressing misconceptions, and exploring the impact of PBL on learners' language skills. Moreover, this paper also discusses potential challenges that may impede the successful implementation of PBL and suggests strategies to overcome them. By clarifying misconceptions and providing guidance, this paper seeks to foster a favorable learning environment in Moroccan EFL classrooms.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The overall objective of this paper is to promote the effective implementation of project-based learning (PBL) in EFL Moroccan classrooms. In the Moroccan context, the new educational reform known as "the 2022–2026 roadmap" promotes a spirit of cooperation between the community, teachers, school workers, and students. PBL aligns with this vision as

it favors communication and cooperation, among other 21st century skills. However, a discussion with several Moroccan ELT practitioners has revealed the existence of a few misconceptions regarding the definition of PBL and the essential components that constitute a genuine PBL approach. Based on the definition of project work in the Moroccan guidelines of the Ministry of National Education (2007), PBL was interpreted by these Moroccan ELT practitioners as any task assigned to students at the end of each unit of the textbook. Such tasks may take the form of simple homework that can be done without peer interaction or formative feedback. The discussions further illustrated practitioners' focus on PBL in relation to soft skills. This emphasis might create the perception that PBL predominately promotes soft skills, potentially overlooking its role in enhancing language skills.

Therefore, to address such misconceptions, the present paper offers a discussion of PBL as a holistic approach to English language teaching and learning that could promote students' learning. It also draws attention to the findings of several studies that have investigated the impact of PBL on language skills. The current paper also acknowledges the existence of potential issues that may arise during the implementation of PBL and offers a few strategies for teachers to overcome such issues.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we make a distinction between PBL as an approach to teaching and learning and simple project work. Then, we discuss principles that further identify the scope and implementation of project-based learning. Subsequently, we review the findings of several studies that have investigated the relationship between PBL and language skills in order to support our claim that PBL has significant effects on language skills in addition to soft skills. Finally, we shed light on challenges that both teachers and students may encounter in a PBL classroom. We assert the idea that while PBL is an effective approach to learning, it also presents certain issues that need to be addressed in order to foster a successful learning environment.

## **2. PBL VS PROJECT WORK**

Although project-based learning (PBL) and project work both require students to research and complete a project, there are distinct features that differentiate these two terms. It is crucial to note that some educators may use PBL and project work interchangeably, implying that any classroom activity that involves students' engagement in a project is equivalent to PBL. This confusion may be due to a misconception or insufficient knowledge about the full scope of PBL and its procedures. Therefore, it is crucial to offer a distinction between simple project work and project-based learning in order to effectively incorporate PBL in the classroom and maximize its benefits for learning. This section thus provides definitions for both terms.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) was introduced to the education sphere during the 1970s but became popular in the late 1980s (Hedge, 1993; Eyring, 1997). It is regarded as a "comprehensive approach to classroom teaching and learning" (Blumenfeld et al., 1991, p. 396), a "learning strategy" (Astawa et al., 2017, p. 1148), a "holistic approach to language teaching" (Erguig, 2010, p. 2), an "active student-centered form of instruction" (Kokotsaki et al., 2016, p. 1), and a "student-centered pedagogy" (Mohamadi, 2018, p. 3). Within a PBL approach, students engage in meaningful activities to solve a problem or find answers to an inquiry in relation to the everyday world (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Al-Balushi & Al-Aamri, 2014; Kokotsaki et al., 2016).

Project-based learning (PBL) stands apart from traditional project work due to its unique features and instructional methodology. While PBL is a holistic approach that emphasizes collaboration, real-world problems, and inquiry processes, project work typically entails a "task" or "activity" in which learners work individually or in groups to gather information and deliver a presentation to the class (Ministry of National Education, 2007, p. 57). It seems, therefore, that the scope of project work is rather limited compared with PBL. Project-based learning surpasses mere homework assignments that could be completed individually. It places greater emphasis on various skills of communication, critical thinking, and collaboration. In the following section, we discuss principles that further identify PBL as a holistic approach as opposed to mere project work.

### **3. DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF PBL**

For an effective implementation of PBL, project work must be placed at the center of the teaching and learning process. Projects should not be carried out as peripheral activities. Rather, they should serve as the center of the curriculum. Thomas (2000) argues that if projects are used only to provide further explanation, examples, or additional practice for the content, they are not considered PBL projects. For instance, after having a reading session about famous figures in their country, asking students to conduct research and deliver a presentation about a renowned author is a peripheral activity rather than a core activity that is central to the syllabus and the curriculum. It only provides an expansion of previously taught material and does not necessarily promote collaboration or group interaction, nor does it meet the standards of PBL work. Furthermore, following a PBL approach, where project work is positioned as the centerpiece of the teaching and learning process, it is essential to recognize that learners are not expected to complete the project process in a single class session. Instead, project work should extend over a period of time (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Bakar et al., 2019), which can range from several days to weeks.

In a PBL context, students are driven by a question or a problem, which launches a process of researching, collecting, and organizing information. This process leads to the construction of new knowledge and skills. In order to qualify as a PBL project, the task should challenge students beyond their prior knowledge and abilities. Thus, having students perform a play about a Victorian incident following a two-week unit about British history, for example, does not align with PBL principles. Such tasks could be regarded as simple project work since they require the application of prior information rather than the development of new knowledge and skills.

Another distinctive feature of PBL is its emphasis on cooperation rather than competition. If an assignment necessitates individual work instead of collaboration, it cannot be regarded as part of a PBL instruction, even if it leads to the creation of new knowledge. Group work is an essential element in project-based learning (Simpson, 2011; Yaman, 2014; Harmer & Stokes, 2014; Migdad, 2016; Sadeghi et al., 2016; Assaf, 2018). Students work collaboratively in teams to achieve certain objectives in a set amount of time. This process results in many positive outcomes (Yaman, 2014; Assaf, 2018). Working in groups enables students to develop their sense of maturity and responsibility. Each member is responsible to their group for their specific contribution to the project, which "provides more motivation for students than if they were responsible to the teacher" (Bell, 2010, p. 40, as cited in Assaf, 2018). In addition, working in groups encourages learners to make full use of their communication skills. They

develop their listening, respect, negotiation, and self-reflection skills (Yaman, 2014; Assaf, 2018).

To further illustrate the distinction between PBL and traditional project work, it is essential to mention that PBL involves the inclusion of concepts, activities, contexts, products, and performances that resonate with the real world outside of school. Through the PBL process, learners acquire knowledge and develop skills that are pertinent to their daily lives (Simpson, 2011; Thomas, 2000; Harmer & Stokes, 2014; Essien, 2018). Focusing on projects that have real-life applications beyond the classroom has many positive outcomes (Fleming, 2000; Baş, 2011; Yaman, 2014; Assaf, 2018). It enhances a deep understanding of the topics addressed, helps sustain students' motivation, increases their chances of succeeding in their future careers, and keeps the learning process interesting and meaningful. This conforms to PBL's emphasis on interdisciplinary learning. Students build cross-disciplinary connections as they seek out answers to their driving questions. The PBL method encourages students to use knowledge and strategies from various disciplines (Harmer & Stokes, 2014; Migdad, 2016). In a language classroom, for example, teachers can choose project themes that require information from other disciplines (e.g., geography, science, design, media, etc.).

Finally, PBL aims to provide a learner-centered approach to education, while project work tends to be more teacher-driven. PBL promotes students' ownership and autonomy and prioritizes their choice and voice. The project process is not pre-instructed or dictated by the teacher. Learners are given the choice to select sources as well as design, create, and present the final product. Both the process by which students complete the final craft and the manner in which they present it are entirely decided by the students themselves. In sum, traditional project work typically relies on the teacher to lay out the full project process and assign specific tasks to students, while PBL is more student-focused.

#### **4. THE PBL IMPACT ON LANGUAGE SKILLS**

Multiple research studies have provided evidence of the positive influence of project-based learning (PBL) on learners' soft skills, such as motivation and interest (Blumenfeld et al., 1991), autonomy (Laaboudi & Erguig, 2016), collaboration, communication, negotiation, and reflection skills (Huang, 2010; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Fini et al., 2017). However, it is important to dispel the misconception that PBL solely benefits soft skills. It is worth emphasizing that PBL has the potential to positively impact learning in relation to the four language skills. The process of project work in PBL helps engage students in situations and meaningful activities that require the use of authentic language. This leads to improving learners' second language skills (Railsback, 2002; Fragoulis, 2009). We would like to shed light on the fact that PBL has been shown to be effective in improving language skills in many contexts.

First, the findings of Aghayani and Hajmohammadi' (2019) study revealed the positive effect of PBL and collaborative learning on enhancing and promoting writing ability. Their study adopted a quasi-experimental research design and was conducted in the context of a language institute in Iran. These results are consistent with the findings of Sadeghi et al. (2016) study, which investigated the case of comparison and contrast paragraph writing skills. The efficacy of PBL in promoting writing skills can be attributed to its capacity to engage students in writing activities that are relevant and meaningful and that enhance their motivation to communicate and express their thoughts. For instance, one PBL writing activity could involve

students working collaboratively in groups to create brochures or posters intended for display during an English Day event hosted at their school. To complete the project, each group will be required to choose a topic related to their interests, select a genre or genres of writing to include in their final product (e.g., a paragraph, an essay, a film review, a short story, an article, a letter to stakeholders, etc.), and conduct research to answer a driving question regarding the topic they have chosen. The table below offers an example of a project concept that aligns with

<b>PROJECT OVERVIEW</b>	
<b>Project title</b>	Change in our community
<b>Driving question</b>	What is the environmental change you believe your city needs?
<b>Project description</b>	Learners collect required information about an environmental issue in their neighborhoods or area (e.g., polluted tap water, lack of playgrounds, lack of environmental campaigns, trash bins, etc.) and its effects on the well-being of the citizens. They collect data through interviews with citizens, field visits, and other sources to develop a project idea that would help improve or change the situation in their community.
<b>End product</b>	A brochure, a poster, a booklet, an ad, etc.
<b>Related disciplines</b>	Ecology, design, education, health care.
<b>Integrated skills</b>	Writing, motivation, productivity, collaboration, innovation, problem-solving, lifelong learning.

the discussed PBL writing activity.

**Table 5.1.** *An example of a project concept*

The example provided in Table 5.1 describes a project concept related to the environment. At the end of this PBL activity, students are required to submit an end product in written form. This provides students with an opportunity to practice writing through the creation of a product that would help ameliorate the situation in their community. This activity is directly linked to students' personal lives and involves collaborative efforts that enhance students' motivation and focus, leading to the production of effective written work. This is because they are expressing their own ideas and perspectives rather than simply regurgitating trivial content.

Writing is considered an essential skill in second language learning. It involves multiple cognitive skills, helps convey learners' thoughts and feelings, and should therefore be given more consideration in PBL research (Sadeghi et al., 2016).

Second, research investigating the impact of project-based learning on students' productive skills has not been exclusive to writing but has also included reading. Shiraz and Larsari (2014), for instance, conducted an experimental study to assess the impact of project-based learning on EFL students' reading comprehension and to investigate whether this impact is dependent on the type of projects involved. The results were in favor of PBL and stressed its positive effect on students' reading comprehension skills, irrespective of the nature of the PBL activity. The positive impact of PBL on developing reading skills is also

asserted by the findings of the Kavlu (2016) study, which revealed that the use of PBL significantly improves the reading abilities of EFL undergraduate learners. This improvement

can be attributed to the fact that PBL provides an authentic context for reading. During a PBL activity, students seek information that is obtained through reading. This task helps students see the relevance and importance of reading in the real world. In order to complete a project, students go through the process of discussing what they have read, sharing ideas, and helping each other understand difficult concepts, which can improve their reading comprehension and

<b>PROJECT OVERVIEW</b>	
<b>Project title</b>	Running a health-care campaign
<b>Driving question</b>	Is there a mental problem frequent among students at your school?
<b>Project description</b>	Learners collect required information about health-related issues that students at their school experience frequently. They conduct interviews and research to gather relevant data and work together to develop the concept of a campaign (e.g., a logo, a slogan, plan of action, target audience, etc). They will also decide on what to include during their campaign to spread awareness about the issue (i.e., information about the problem, scientific definitions, symptoms, reasons, consequences, types, pieces of advice, etc).
<b>End product</b>	A PowerPoint presentation, a brochure, a poster, a booklet, a video, a short film, ...etc
<b>Related disciplines</b>	Health, medicine, psychology, education

motivation towards reading. An example of a reading-based PBL activity is illustrated in Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2.** *An example of a reading-based project*

The project concept described in Table 5.2 requires students to conduct research and gather information about health-related issues in their school. To create the final product, learners will need to read and discuss various sources of information, such as articles, reports, and research studies, to gather information about mental problems. This activity provides an engaging context for students to practice and improve their reading skills while also learning about important health concepts and developing communication skills.

Third, learning vocabulary is an essential part of second language learning. For learners to be able to communicate effectively in the target language, they must develop and expand their vocabulary repertoire. Among the studies that investigated the impact of project-based learning on students' vocabulary retention are Shafaei and Rahim' (2015) and Migdad's (2016) studies. The findings of both studies revealed the positive effect of PBL on learners' vocabulary recall and retention rates in comparison with traditional methods. Both studies advocate using PBL in place of conventional teacher-centered techniques when teaching English vocabulary. To illustrate this point, The PBL activity described in table 5.2 can improve vocabulary acquisition and retention. While students research and collect information about a health-related issue, they will likely encounter terminology related to health care, medicine, education, and psychology. They will be required to understand such terms and use them to conduct interviews, create the end product (e.g., a PowerPoint presentation, a brochure, a poster, a booklet, a video, a short film, etc.), and develop a successful campaign. Students will also have

to discuss their ideas using the new vocabulary, which will help learners reinforce their vocabulary knowledge.

Fourth, the implementation of the PBL method in language classrooms promotes learners' listening skills. Bakar et al. (2019) conducted a quasi-experimental study at a college in Malaysia. The overall objective was to examine the effect of project-based learning on ESL students' listening skills. The results indicated that the use of PBL helped enhance learners' listening comprehension skills and competencies. In a different context (i.e., primary level), Febiyanti et al. (2021) carried out a study at an elementary school in Bali, Indonesia. The researchers followed a one group pretest-posttest design. Their findings supported the use of PBL to improve students' listening comprehension abilities. Due to its collaborative nature, PBL fosters listening skills as students engage in group discussions and brainstorming sessions. In order to find answers to questions and solve problems, each member actively listens to his teammates' opinions and perspectives. Active listening is also crucial as learners give and receive feedback to make progress and achieve their goals. PBL thus provides students with opportunities to practice their listening and communication skills by emphasizing collaborative work, active listening, and continuous feedback.

Finally, recent research has indicated the positive effect of PBL on second language learners' speaking skills. Studies such as Maulany (2013), Al-Masadeh and Al-Omari's (2014), Yaman (2014), Zare-Behtash and Sarlak (2017), Hang (2019), and Mafruudloh and Fitriati (2020) concluded that project-based learning is effective in improving students' speaking skills and enhancing their attitudes towards oral communication. Communication is an essential element in PBL. In contrast to an individual activity, a PBL activity requires learners to communicate with each other to establish goals, plan tasks, assign responsibilities, and provide feedback. Through collaborating with their peers on a project, students practice their speaking as they discuss perspectives and negotiate meaning. Also, since PBL activities are relevant to their everyday lives, students are likely motivated to communicate effectively. An example of a PBL activity that has the potential to foster speaking would be to assign students to create a community cookbook. Each group will be required to gather information about local dishes in their area. They will need to agree on the theme and content of the end product, test each recipe, take photos of each dish, and develop the cookbook layout, the cover design, and the recipe formats. To share their final products, students may choose any form of oral presentation, which can be in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, a video recording, or a live cooking demonstration. During this PBL activity, students will practice their speaking skills as they interview local residents in their communities, discuss ideas within their groups, and answer questions from their classmates. During their presentations, learners will also make use of their speaking skills as they explain the instructions for each recipe and its cultural significance. Creating a community cookbook is a meaningful and engaging activity that encourages collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Many researchers consider developing speaking skills, in particular, to be the key stage in language learning in order to communicate effectively in the target language (Derakhshan et al., 2016; Zare-Behtash & Sarlak, 2017; Metruk, 2018). Therefore, we would like to call for research regarding PBL and speaking skills in the Moroccan context.

## **5. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING PBL**

Although PBL is an effective approach that has many positive outcomes for learning, its implementation can present significant challenges. Incorporating PBL in the classroom can be rather demanding for both teachers and students (Fleming, 2000; Westwood, 2008; Erguig, 2010; English & Kitsantas, 2013; Harmer & Stokes, 2014). One major difficulty teachers may encounter is their ability to act as facilitators (Harmer & Stokes, 2014). They may struggle to strike a balance between providing guidance and allowing students the freedom to make choices (Thomas, 2000). This can happen due to a lack of prior training or because some educators feel more comfortable with less learner-centered approaches. Furthermore, teachers are also challenged to choose project topics and tasks that motivate learners, focus on performance, and fit in the curriculum (Fleming, 2000; Nassir, 2014).

To minimize such challenges, teachers should be equipped with sufficient content and pedagogical knowledge and have positive beliefs and attitudes towards PBL (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). In the absence of sufficient professional development programs, teachers can develop their own knowledge and skills related to PBL by engaging in self-directed learning. This may include various strategies, such as reviewing articles and research related to PBL, attending workshops and online training, or exploring other resources on the internet. Teachers can also engage in collaborative efforts with colleagues who have expertise in using PBL to discuss ideas and seek feedback.

In addition to teachers, students can also face difficulties adapting to a PBL environment (Fleming, 2000; Westwood, 2008; Nassir, 2014). Group work has been identified as the most significant challenge for students (Fleming, 2000; English & Kitsantas, 2013; Harmer & Stokes, 2014). Collaborative work necessitates the active use of communication, organization, and negotiation skills, which may not be favored by all learners. Moreover, as Westwood (2008) states, students do not always prefer working with their peers to complete assignments. Some of them may be uncomfortable with their assigned role, while others may feel demotivated if their teammates do not contribute adequately to the group work. Additionally, assuming more responsibility in a learner-centered approach can create a sense of pressure among students (Stauffacher et al., 2006). This is due to the fact that they are required to engage in a process of independently choosing between topics, strategies, and methods of presenting the final product. This process also necessitates displaying adequate skills in researching and collecting information.

To address these challenges, teachers need to create a supportive and collaborative learning environment. This aim can be achieved by providing explicit instructions on the benefits of PBL and group work, assigning clear roles to each group member, offering consistent feedback and guidance for students, and conducting short communicative activities to make learners feel comfortable working with their peers (e.g., group discussion, mini-project work, etc.).

In addition to the challenges faced by teachers and students, logistical issues can further complicate the implementation of PBL. Thomas (2000, p. 28) lists a number of issues that may hinder a successful implementation of PBL, such as inadequate resources, inflexible schedules, and class size and composition. Inadequate resources refer to the lack of appropriate tools and materials necessary for PBL activities. For instance, if students are required to collect information about a certain phenomenon in their community to develop an idea for a campaign, they need access to articles, reports, and online resources. In the absence of an internet



connection or resources at their schools, learners will struggle to complete their projects to a satisfactory degree. To overcome this challenge, teachers need to ensure the presence of the necessary resources before developing projects. Moreover, inflexible schedules may reduce the effectiveness of PBL. PBL is a flexible and adaptive approach to teaching and learning. School schedules that are inflexible and compressed lead to rushed projects and impede the effectiveness of PBL activities that require an extended period of time to complete. One strategy to address this challenge is for teachers to find creative ways to integrate PBL into existing schedules or work with school administrators to develop new schedules that allow time for PBL activities.

Another logistical issue that may pose a challenge to PBL implementation is class size and composition. A large class size can make it difficult for the teacher to monitor and provide individual support and guidance. Additionally, due to the diversity of students backgrounds and abilities within the same group, it can be challenging for educators to ensure that each learner is engaged in the project process. Teachers may need to group the students strategically, taking into account their diverse skills and backgrounds as well as how they will help each other, while providing additional support for students who seem to require more guidance. To summarize, there are various issues that may affect the successful use of PBL. Therefore, we emphasize the importance of careful planning to overcome such challenges and maximize the benefits of PBL.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, project-based learning (PBL) is an effective approach to teaching and learning that can significantly improve students' skills in various contexts. While there may be some misconceptions about PBL, it is crucial to emphasize that it surpasses the scope of simple project work and encourages collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication. The aim of this paper has been to discuss the requirements for an effective implementation of PBL and address a few misconceptions regarding its use and impact. We have highlighted some principles that set PBL apart from traditional project work and included examples of PBL activities that have the potential to foster students' skills. Moreover, we have acknowledged that the implementation of PBL presents significant challenges. However, despite these challenges, PBL has been gradually implemented in many ELT settings and has been shown to be effective in various contexts. Nevertheless, there is still a need for more research regarding its use and impact in Moroccan EFL classrooms, especially in relation to language skills. Therefore, we strongly urge ELT practitioners in Morocco to implement PBL and conduct new research that explores its impact on learners' language skills. Thereby, they can contribute to the development of English teaching in our country and provide students with greater opportunities to develop skills they will need in both their professional and academic lives.

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