

Project-Based Learning in ESP. Case Study in Economic Sciences

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Abstract

This paper deals with the advantages brought by Project-Based Learning (PBL) in the ESP courses and seminars. The first two sections tackle several theoretical elements related to the topic (definition of PBL, main features and advantages); the next sections focus on a case study proposal (based on observation and an experiment) in economic sciences, i.e., the application of PBL in ESP courses and seminars, in order to enhance the students’ ESP skills and soft skills. The practical sections also propose several PBL activities that can be adapted and implemented for the purpose of the study, taking into account the curriculum, the students’ needs and proficiency level. The findings highlight the possible developments in the students’ skills, entailed by the implementation of PBL in the ESP courses and seminars.

Key words: Project-Based Learning, ESP skills, soft skills, activities, business English

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1. Introduction

The constant technological development and expansion of the globalization phenomenon has contributed to the transformation of the English language into a contemporary lingua franca, and hence the need to renew the teaching approaches, strategies and materials and to adapt them regularly to the students’ needs and fields of study, in real life learning contexts and non-formal environments as well. For this purpose, ESP teachers employ various modern approaches, in order to increase their students’ motivation and upgrade the teaching and learning processes (see Maruntelu, 2019). Such an innovative and student-centered approach in this knowledge-based environment is represented by Project-Based Learning, which would also open the path towards modern assessment and provide precious opportunities for the development of ESP skills in lifelike contexts. Project-Based Learning also allows the integration of modern teaching, learning and assessment strategies and resources in the ESP courses and seminars, contributing to the enhancement of several soft skills as well, such as critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, and communication.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Project-Based Learning – definition and main features

The concept of Project-Based Learning is defined as “a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning important knowledge and 21st century skills through an extended student-influenced inquiry process, structured around complex authentic questions and carefully designed products and learning” (Larmer and Hallerman, PBL in elementary grades, 2009: p. 7).

According to the literature, this dynamic and comprehensive approach allows learners to investigate issues similar to those from the real life, engaging them into the learning process and deepening their knowledge of the respective subject. Scholars also agree that when working on projects, students actively involve into an experiential learning model, and enhance their teamwork skills and independence (see, for instance, Guo et al., 2020; Markula and Aksela, 2022). In addition,

Project-Based Learning also increases their motivation, through their personal participation in the learning process, the tangible product of this process (i.e., the project), and the opportunity to communicate in authentic situations.

According to Fried-Booth (2002: p. 127), projects represent a modality to engage the student in the learning process and make him/ her employ “the full range of skills and talents available”, furnishing at the same time “a planning approach for multi-level classrooms” and the necessary tools for “cross-curriculum and language skill integration”. Therefore, in the ESP seminars, Project-Based Learning involves activities based on authentic communication, such as planning, organizing, teamwork, problem-solving, decision-making, negotiation, role assignment, selection and presentation of information; in addition to soft skills, they also employ their English receptive and productive skills regardless of the students’ proficiency level), creativity and knowledge acquisition skills (see Chmelárová and Pasiar, 2017).

In Slavin’s perspective (1995), cooperative learning is connected with Project-Based Learning, as it opens the path towards cooperation, and the design of some of its forms requires the assignment of specific roles for the achievement of an overall group task, facilitating meaningful and authentic learning. Thus, Project-Based Learning involves all students, but each one of them should have different responsibilities in order to make sure than everybody participates.

The literature presents several significant steps that should be implemented in the design of successful Project-Based Learning, i.e., planning or preparation (for instance, establishing the project purpose, main topic, place, final product and assessment procedures; selecting human resources and materials); implementation (e.g., carrying out the established activities, acting out the roles, with the teacher as supervisor and resource provider), and assessment (formative and summative), the project being regarded as both process and product. This last stage requires teachers to assess the entire project, the students’ individual contributions and the work performed as a group; thus, this student-centered process is problem-oriented (see Thomas, 2000). During the entire process, learners are provided feedback and they are also given opportunities to present their own feedback, to assess their peers’ work and to self-assess their own performance.

In his study, Orey (2010) presents several elements that should be taken into account when it comes to Project-Based Learning. First, the context should be learner-centered, in order to furnish students the opportunity to make decisions and take the initiative throughout the entire process. Second, according to the aforementioned scholar, the focus should fall on collaboration (which will boost the learners’ teamwork skills), time management (opportunities to plan, revise and reflect; appropriate timelines) and the curricular content (well-established goals, standard-based projects that assist and exhibit content learning). Furthermore, the same scholar specifies that students should be given authentic tasks – in order to connect them to the real world – and multiple expression modes; this can be achieved through relevant topics, authentic strategies and modern technologies authentically employed for communication purposes, project planning, development and presentation. Thus, Project-Based Learning triggers an investigation process, in which students have to select the best solutions in order to achieve their goals. Last but not least, Orey (2010) states that teachers should employ innovative assessment methods, substantiated by the idea according to which assessment is a constant and varied process, involving the students’ direct participation.

2.2. Advantages of Project-Based Learning

There are several aspects that highlight the efficiency and value of Project-Based Learning, such as its practical applicability and relevance, as this approach provides the opportunity to implement theoretical knowledge, preparing learners for real-life situations, which can be encountered in their future professional life. Project-Based Learning also involves learners actively in the learning process, as they are placed in the limelight of their own learning and participate in all project stages, from design to implementation and assessment, which boosts their motivation and engagement in the process (Chmelárová and Pasiar, 2017). In addition, the students’ practical skills – required in one’s professional life – are also enhanced; they are given the opportunity to develop and employ key soft skills in various activities, with focus on critical thinking, creativity, communication, teamwork, decision-making, problem solving, time management (see Guo et al., 2020; Markula and Aksela, 2022).

Since students are required to find solutions to various issues and approach complex challenges in their projects (Thomas, 2000), their creativity and critical thinking develop throughout this process; they are encouraged to explore new ideas, ask questions and develop their own points of view in connection to their project topics. Moreover, teamwork and communication are promoted as they are often involved in group activities in order to carry out common tasks, which is vital in our contemporary work environment. Project-Based Learning also furnishes a concrete and personal learning experience (Helle et al., 2006), enhancing the students' ability to memorize various pieces of information, employed in projects. At the same time, the above-mentioned scholars assert that learners become more responsible and autonomous, as they are required to establish their own objectives and manage their learning process, thus developing their self-management skills and learning independence.

As far as the development of ESP skills is concerned, Project-Based Learning certainly contributes to the enhancement of oral communication abilities (fluency, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary), through the learners' participation in various discussions, presentations or debates connected to their project (Poonpon, 2018). The literature also reveals that, as part of a team, students have to interact, express their ideas and opinions, present their part of research, and even assess their peers' performance, in an authentic environment. Moreover, there are types of projects that involve presentations and discussions with colleagues or with a larger audience, which also stimulate the students' oral communication skills (see Ali and El-Henawy, 2015). In the business environment, these communication skills can be employed in various activities, such as negotiations, presentations, discussions with partners and clients, business meetings, trainings, etc.

Specialists in the field also argue that receptive skills are also stimulated by involving learners in intensive reading and listening activities typical of Project-Based Learning (see, for instance, Puangpunsi, 2021); for instance, the teacher can require them to read certain documents or to watch certain videos in order to identify key pieces of information necessary for the design and implementation of their project. Teachers can also ask them to search for and analyze relevant information in the English language, connected to their project topic.

In addition, since Project-Based Learning tasks also stimulate productive skills (see Astawa, 2017), they often require students to write certain professional documents, such as plans, reports, letters and presentations, their writing skills (with a focus on grammar, vocabulary, coherence and organization of ideas) are also improved. According to the literature, these tasks also require the familiarization with, and use of specific formats and writing styles, appropriate to the respective contexts. The learners' vocabulary is expanded (Sari, 2019) by their involvement in projects, as they are often exposed to, learn and employ a wide array of English specialized vocabulary items, often connected to their field of study. When it comes to business English, for instance, this can include economic, financial, marketing and HR concepts.

Having in view that projects are based on the assessment, analysis and synthesis of various pieces of information, learners should be encouraged to develop their critical thinking and express their opinions using the English language (see, for example, Chmelárová & Pasiar, 2017; Thomas, 2000). They can also provide feedback to their peers and exchange ideas in order to improve their projects and reach their objectives (Renard, 2023).

In Project-Based Learning, cultural and intercultural skills are also developed when projects involve the collaboration among students from different countries or communities; it is noteworthy that these skills offer them the opportunity to explore and understand their peers' culture and perspectives and strengthening their intercultural communication abilities and cultural understanding (see Peraza and Furumura, 2022; Visan, 2018). These skills are vital in today's globalized business world. Teachers can also furnish students the opportunity to explore topics connected to specific aspects of the English culture, in line with their field of study.

3. Research methodology

This section of the paper proposes an experiment in order to highlight the advantages of implementing Project-Based Learning in the ESP courses and seminars. Therefore, the research hypothesis is as follows: Project-Based Learning strategies and activities employed in the ESP courses and seminars contribute to the enhancement of the students' English language skills and

vocabulary and will also support the development of their soft skills.

The subjects of the experiment will be BA students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences, 1st year of study. The main research methods are represented by observation and experiment. The experiment will start with an initial test, in order to establish the students' English proficiency level and to identify their learning needs. Then, during the four-week teaching stage, Project-Based Learning strategies and activities will be employed. At the end of the teaching stage, the ESP teacher will give students a final test, in order to assess their progress. These test results should highlight the improvement of the students' ESP skills and soft abilities and thus validate the research hypothesis.

Below we will exemplify some Project-Based Learning activities that can be employed during the teaching stage.

During the teaching stage, ESP teachers can use various activities adapted to the topics of the curriculum and teaching content. The literature recommends a wide array of activities specific to Project-Based Learning, that can be customized to the teaching and learning of business English. Such an instance is represented by the design of a research project (see Lynch, 2017; Borovoy, 2011), where students are required to study a certain topic or field from the business environment and to present their research results either in writing (a report) or orally (presentation). Furthermore, as a separate activity, the ESP teacher can ask students to write a diary in the English language during the design and implementation of the project. Thus, they will reflect upon their experience, challenges and success, and they will be able to express their thoughts and feelings connected to the respective project (see Fasso, 2020).

Simulations in Project-Based Learning are also extremely useful in this context, as they are also tightly connected with experiential learning (see Egilmez et al., 2018). For example, students can also be involved in negotiation projects or simulations. For instance, the ESP teacher asks students to participate in a negotiation scenario for a commercial agreement or for the resolution of a certain commercial/ business conflict. Students can play various roles (e.g., parties involved in the conflict, business partners, negotiator, CEO, chairperson, etc.) and thus develop their business English vocabulary and communication skills. Moreover, this activity requires students to employ their negotiation abilities and critical and strategic thinking as well. Another Project-Based Learning activity based on simulations is represented by the organization of a symposium or conference simulation, to which the students are required to participate with presentations (see, for example, Staake, 2023) on various topics connected to the business environment; this activity gives them the opportunity to exercise their ESP communication skills and to exhibit their knowledge of the selected topic.

Similarly, the teacher can organize debates on business topics (see Abdo, 2020) (e.g., the advantages/ disadvantages of the globalization phenomenon in the business environment, business ethics in connection to a certain situation, the influence of new technologies on the labor market, etc.), which will contribute to the enhancement of the students' ESP communication skills in professional contexts and deepen their business knowledge as well.

The ESP teacher can also simulate a business fair, where students design stands for imaginary companies and present their products/ services (see Renard, 2023) in the English language, in the most convincing way possible. Thus, they are furnished the opportunity to use their communication skills in a simulated business environment.

Drafting marketing projects is another activity springing from Project-Based Learning. The ESP teacher can ask students to design and present a marketing plan for a product or campaign, in the English language. This type of activity involves research, analysis, the design strategies and marketing materials (see, for instance, Staake, 2023).

Project-Based Learning activities can also include the preparation of product or service presentations (Renard, 2023; Staake, 2023) in the English language. The ESP teacher asks students to choose a real product/ service or to imagine one and present it. These presentations usually deal with product/ service features and advantages, marketing strategies and target market.

Another activity derived from the previous one is the analysis of marketing materials, where students are required to analyze and assess various marketing materials in the English language, such as advertisements, brochures, leaflets or websites (see Abdo, 2020; Borovoy, 2011). The analysis should include the identification of key words or messages, the target audience and the employed marketing strategies. Discussions about the efficiency of these materials and suggestions for their

improvement should also be included in the activity.

The ESP teacher can also require students to develop a project based on (international) collaboration, involving information exchange, the design of a product, the development of a campaign in collaboration with students from other universities or countries (Borovoy, 2011). The achievement of these tasks greatly depends on the communication and collaboration in the English language.

The organization of a case study project is a Project-Based Learning activity that also develops the students' ESP skills, and their analysis and problem-solving abilities, in a real-life context. For example, teachers can require students to analyze and solve the challenges presented in a case study from the business environment (see Renard, 2023; Staake, 2023; Borovoy, 2011). They should present their analysis and recommendations in English, using business terminology.

The ESP teacher can ask students to draft a business plan (see Hummel, 2022; Abdo, 2020) for a product, service or idea. This task presupposes several activities, such as conducting market research, carrying out a SWOT analysis, setting the business objectives, identifying the most appropriate marketing strategies. Students are then required to present their business plan to the teacher and their peers, in order to receive feedback.

It is noteworthy that these activities should be customized in accordance with the students' needs and proficiency level, in order to keep them motivated and enhance their various skills, and that they support the objectives of the teaching and learning processes.

4. Findings

It is also noteworthy that Project-Based Learning is an approach directly connected to authenticity (Polman and Broadman, 2022), the research performed for the project having application in the real life. During the entire process, the ESP teacher directs the students for the purpose of creating the final product, for instance a certain type of text (an article, a letter, an essay, etc.), a media product (such a website, a forum, a blog, etc.) or any other type of technology-based product (e.g., a video, a vlog, a film, etc.).

It is expected that the implementation of Project-Based Learning in the ESP courses and seminars contribute to the development of the students' ESP skills and soft skills, as well. By participating in projects, they will carry out various presentations, discussions, debates, negotiations, teamwork activities, which will enhance their abilities to communicate in the English language (Poonpon, 2018; Ali and El-Henawy, 2015). They will have the opportunity to express their ideas clearly and coherently, improve their pronunciation and be more confident when it comes to oral or written communication.

Projects often involve collaboration, task distribution and coordination; thus, it is expected that the students' teamwork skills will also benefit from the use of Project-Based Learning (see Guo et al., 2020; Markula and Aksela, 2022). In addition, they will also develop their ESP vocabulary due to Project-Based Learning, as they will be exposed to the English specialized terminology (Sari, 2019) employed in the business environment; through the involvement in business projects, for instance, they will learn new words and phrases connected to fields such as marketing, business, finances, HR, etc.

By tackling projects and solving tasks in a creative and innovative way, students will develop their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Thomas, 2000); they will be able to analyze the given information, identify solutions, present arguments and take rational and appropriate decisions. Moreover, their research abilities will also be improved; they will learn how to identify adequate sources of information, analyze and synthesize the information and employ them adequately within the project (see Markula and Aksela, 2022). The students' motivation and confidence will also be boosted via Project-Based Learning. It is expected that the participation in projects and the tangible results increase the students' confidence in their ESP skills. Their progress and contribution to various projects should also enhance the students' motivation to learn and develop the ESP and soft skills.

5. Conclusion

In a constantly evolving society, Project-Based Learning is a modern approach that provides teachers the necessary tools in order to respond to the students' learning needs and boost their motivation, regardless of their proficiency level. Therefore, the proposed experiment should reflect the ways in which Project-Based Learning can contribute to a great extent to the development of business English skills, necessary in the professional environment, but also to the increase of the learners' interest and confidence in the teaching and learning processes. We hope that both the theoretical background and the suggested case study can be held up as an example of interesting, engaging ESP teaching and learning activities

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