



## ON PROJECT BASED LEARNING APPROACH AND FUTURE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Aprendizaje Basado en Proyectos y futuros docentes de Lengua Extranjera

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### KEYWORDS

*Foreign Language teaching  
Project Based Learning  
Cooperative Learning  
Teambuilding  
Classbuilding  
English theatre  
Emotional Intelligence*

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### ABSTRACT

*Although learning English as a Foreign Language is needed all over the world nowadays, it is still difficult for some Spanish students to learn it. Considering that teacher's decisions on the use of methodologies is essential in class, we look at future teachers.*

*In this study we focus on future teachers' training as a key element to match theory and practice and bring to Foreign Language (FL) classes innovative approaches such as Project Based Learning (PBL). A recent experienced (2021-22) in the Faculty of Education of Málaga has been analysed and important conclusions have been drawn from results obtained.*

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### PALABRAS CLAVE

*Enseñanza Lengua Extranjera  
Aprendizaje Basado Proyectos  
Aprendizaje Cooperativo  
Cohesión equipos  
Cohesión clase  
Teatro Inglés  
Inteligencia Emocional*

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### RESUMEN

*Aunque el aprendizaje de Inglés como lengua Extranjera es necesario en todo el mundo hoy en día, todavía es difícil aprenderlo para algunos alumnos españoles. Considerando que las decisiones sobre uso de metodologías es esencial en clase, nos centramos en los futuros docentes.*

*En este estudio, el foco está en la formación de futuros docentes como elemento clave para unir teoría y práctica para llevar al aula enfoques innovadores como el Aprendizaje por Proyectos.*

*Se ha analizado un reciente estudio(2021-22) implementado en la Facultad de Educación de Málaga de cuyos resultados se han extraído importantes conclusiones .*

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## 1. Introduction

In this study, we present an experience carried out in 2021-22 in a university located in the south of Spain. Participants were in the third year of the Education Degree and they were learning to be English as a Foreign Language teachers.

We would like to present it here because we believe that the analysis of the experience where teacher-fronted class was removed to implement a different methodology will greatly benefit other practitioners.

The origin of this study was the necessity to explain students essential elements in Project Based Learning approach (PBL) as well as how it works.

The focus is also on the influence that the implementation of a project, following PBL approach, exerts on students. For that, we will pay attention to relevant factors such as classroom learning atmosphere; students' participation and students' acquisition level both on English and on methodology level.

Without any doubt, learners' feedback will be of special relevance to understand their learning.

## 2. Aims

Different objectives have been pursued in this study.

First of all, we would like to check if Project Based Learning approach could be taught in an active way involving university students in a real Project

Our second hypothesis is that there is a relation between positive emotions, social skills development, engagement and success in learning.

We also would like to know is if the project implemented in this class includes essential PBL projects according to Larmer y Mergendoller, (2015).

On the other hand, we would like to know if students will be interested in doing something similar when they became in service teachers after the experience.

Finally, we would like to check if Project Based Learning implementation has helped this group of students to do Teambuilding and *Classbuilding* (Kagan, 2009). Also, if it has contributed to create a good learning atmosphere and learning has taken place.

## 3. Methodology

In first place, we are going to present participants and their context and then, we will explain how we implemented it.

### 3.1. Participants

Participants taking part in this study were sixteen: fifteen students and their professor.

Students were from 20 to 38 years old. Most of students were enrolled in this subject, FL Competences Development, for the first time, but 2 students had already studied it and did not pass it the previous year.

Their professor, in her fifties, is an Associate professor who also teaches English in a Primary and Early Secondary school.

### 3.2. Context

It is important to notice that 2021-22 was the academic year in which, although the sanitary crisis caused by COVID-19 was not over, it was possible to return to ordinary classes in the university. However, it was compulsory to use face masks. Some students were very concerned about COVID-19 and some others not so much.

Another important element to take into account concerning the context is the day of the week: Fridays. It is quite common in Málaga, like in many other cities, that students hang out with their friends on Thursday night because some of them usually go to their home villages at the weekend. Moreover, being just after leaving the lockdown made part of the society, in general, and some young people, in particular, feel that there was a necessity to go out. Going out on Thursday meant not much sleep and being tired on Friday. But classes were not in the morning, classes were from half past three to half past six.

Finally, we have to say that although the group of students was not very big, they did not know more than one or two persons as they came from different groups and the previous year classes were virtual which did not help socialization.

### 3.3. Methodologies used

We have to start saying that since the course started in September, Cooperative Learning structures such as RoundRobin, Find someone who, Think, Pair Share (Kagan, 2009) had been used in class. Something which was not easy at first, due to social distance recommendations and students reticence. Cooperative Learning structures were used not only to help students understand how to implement Cooperative Learning (CL) (Johnson &

Johnson, 2014), (Gillies, 2016), but also to promote *Teambuilding* and *Classbuilding* (Kagan, 2009). However, it was observed that students continued sitting down in the same place in class with the same partner on both sides.

Following the idea of learning by doing (Dewey, 1916) and with the intention of helping future teachers to understand PBL essential elements (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2015), (Velasco-Moreno, 2018, 2021), professor thought that, perhaps, the best way to understand how Project Based Learning works was by being immersed in a project. That is why she challenged students by showing a theatre play done with Primary level students adapting Charles' Dickens masterpiece 'A Christmas Carol' and asking them if they could do something similar. Students' answers were quite different. Some of them immediately agreed while others hesitated and others did not even answer just looking to the floor. After some talk about how professor did it with her students at school, some students started to convince others and, at the end they all agreed on doing the project. So, after asking for volunteers for each character from the play, students started to make groups according to the scene in which they appeared and after getting a consensus started to write their own script.

Once the script was finished, students started to do rehearsals and once they knew their dialogues and how to act in each scene as well as what to wear or what relevant elements should bring started the recording. In order to make it more real, changing sceneries, professor brought a green cloth that everybody helped to hang on the wall and filming started.

While filming, many decisions had to be made like music selection, special effects and so on. After filming, it was time to edit it. The final product was so perfectly well made that it was published in the University web in the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1rFgcFZd0U>

With great expectation, the final product was visualized by everybody in class and immediately after that, feedback was solicited and they had to identify PBL essentials on their project.

Finally, students were asked to write a text to be sent to a real newspaper to give the news informing about what some UMA students had done. This task was proposed on Christmas holidays. This writing could show students' reflections instead of writing a diary (Bailey, 1996).

In the results section, we are going to reflect on feedback given by students directly and also in the news sent to the newspaper and also on professor's observations.

### 3. Results

This section is going to be divided in different sub-sections according to different aspects. Based on students' feedback and quoting sentences by students in the task 'Our play on the News', it will be possible to learn about how the project was seen and experienced by students; what emotions aroused on them; what was their motivation and engagement level and what they learnt, among other things. We will pay special attention to their attitude towards using PBL in the future.

Some fragments of their writing are presented here. In some cases they are written in first person and in some others in third person as they well planned to be sent to a local newspaper.

#### 3.1. Did students understand the project process?

All students remembered perfectly well all the tasks that they had to do in order to complete the project. Here is an example.

'Students from 3<sup>rd</sup> year in Education degree have recorded a new version of 'A Christmas Carol'. To create that, they spent 3 sessions working really hard preparing everything: the distribution of the characters so that everyone participated; the creation of an adapted dialogue; the place for the green cloth to change backgrounds, the search of a suitable music for each scene; some clothes that could be suitable to distinguish each of the character, etc'. (A.)

It is almost impossible for us to find one process description which did not include their feelings about doing it as we can see in the following fragment.

*'Firstly, we needed to decide our characters, but it was not a problem at all. After that, we made groups by scenes so, in these groups we were writing the script for that part. When all of us finished it, we created a document where all those little scripts formed the play.'*

*'Secondly, we started with the rehearsals. It only took us one or two days and then, we started to record the play. To be more realistic and professional, we put a green chroma key on the wall to have a suitable background when editing the play.'* (S.)

Now, we move on to students' feelings trying to answer the following question:

#### 3.2. How did students feel about doing that Project?

We are really interested in knowing the emotions that arose on participants when doing a Project like one. Here are some fragments that show quite well how they felt.

'All students loved the idea and worked hard to create the script. While some were nervous about facing the situation and possible mistakes, most were comfortable from the beginning.' (M.)

'As the rehearsals progressed, everyone began to feel more comfortable and with more confidence. (V.)

*'This experience was awesome' (C.)*

*'As a conclusion, this project was amazing and I enjoyed it a lot' (M.N)*

*'A group of students who are studying the third year of English Primary Education in the University of Málaga have done an incredible project in the subject called Development of Communicative Competences in the Foreign Language (English)'. (Ariadna Moreno)* This student comments in another paragraph: *'It is also essential to highlight pupils' feelings. Everyone felt excited and motivated from the beginning to the end of the project. They wanted to create an awesome final product. (A.M)*

Others students wrote:

*'We had fun' (P.A.)*

*'It was a wonderful experience' (S.)*

*'For me, it was an incredible experience.' (A.O.)*

*'We had a good time' (M.)*

*'Without any doubt, it was an incredible experience doing our Christmas Carol play with my classmates.' (V.)*

*'I think we had a great time because it was very funny when we didn't remember our phrases and we laughed or when someone made noise and we had to start over again. (R.H.)*

As we can see, with many different adjectives students show their happiness on working with PBL approach. We would like to highlight the following comment because in a short sentence she explains a lot:

*'It was a really funny, enjoyable and useful project. We did a Christmas Carol Play!' (B.)* and continues like this *'That type of activities shows us that it is possible to learn a lot of things while we are having fun and enjoying with our teachers and classmates.'*

Reading students' news, it is possible to check something that their teacher had observed during the process: the boundaries between students were getting stronger with each task. We move to another important issue: Social skills development.

### 3.3. Social skills development

Students were also conscious of that relationship between them was growing up. Here are some comments on that:

*'Students began to create new bonds in the class and despite some failures in the dialogues, nothing meant an embarrassing moment for any of them. On the contrary, all were laughter and fun while learning a new approach.' (V.A.)*

*'I think it brings the class together because now we know our classmates better. (R.H.)*

*'The time spent has been very useful and was worth it as it had a positive and significant impact on all students' (A.M.)*

*'...and (the project) made us know each other more than we did before the theatre.' (B.)*

*'... and it was fun to do it as a class together.' (R.H.)*

The following statement showed several things: First, that students were using CL in class, an approach that had been explained to them before as well as the benefits it brings to students. Second, that they realized that they had been doing CL and third, that being involved in a project had promoted using Cooperative Learning.

*'... but also, we grew as a team and even as a class. We were doing class and team building'. (C. B)*

*'All students agreed that it was a good way to know each other in class. This is a good aspect to consider in order of cooperating and working with other people. In the society we are living, it is fundamental to know how to work with other people, respect other opinions and make decisions all together in common. This project was a clear example of this aspect. Students worked on classbuilding and enjoyed working everybody with everybody else. (M.N)* She also adds: *'We learnt that, making such a project, made a strong bond between everybody in class and made the working process enjoyable.'*

Another important concept that appear in their reflections is Confidence/ Self-confidence, as we can see in the following fragments:

*'As a shy person, acting in front of others, it was a difficult challenge for me but with the classbuilding and all friendship made during the theatre project, I lost a lot of it and made me a more self-confident person who is also able to build relationships with other classmates and to get along better in class.' (M.)*

Also it is observable in the next fragment: *'In addition, pupils noticed that this project has allowed them to have greater confidence and deal with their colleagues, since they have known them much more. As a result, it was created an extraordinary feeling of classbuilding' (A.M)*

There is no doubt, from examples shown, that the project helped all students to reinforce the group identity (Teambuilding) and also to be very happy to work with any student in class (Classbuilding) The cohesion of students could be felt as the time passed by. If, at the beginning of the course, not all students came to class daily, while doing the project, all students came to all classes. Everybody talked to everybody else feeling free to give suggestions, sharing opinions and getting a consensus. It was remarkable one day when class had to be changed from the afternoon to the morning and when the class finished they all decided to have lunch together and offering seats in their cars to go together. The feeling of unity within the class made them wish to spend more

time together, probably talking about something they were creating: their play. At that moment, it was clear that they had a solid Classbuilding.

Let us move now to another important issue: Engagement.

### 3.4. What was students' engagement level?

Students' engagement could be observed from the very first beginning of the project. In several students' texts it is noticeable that they include themselves in the decision of doing the project. For example in the following one:

*'In order to celebrate Christmas, we decided to make a theatre adaptation for 'A Christmas Carol' by Charles Dickens.'* (S.)

Another student informs that the idea came from the professor but also reinforces the idea that students decided to do it as we can read in the following text: *'Students from a class of the Primary Education degree decided to make a play based on the famous Charles Dicken's novel 'A Christmas Carol'. The idea came from their teacher, who proposed the activity in class.'* (M.N.)

Commitment is observable in fragments like: *'We needed to decide our characters but it was not a problem at all.'*

Also, the word motivation is frequently used by students in their news.

*'For me, and I am sure that for my classmates too, it was a really good experience because it made us feel motivated ....'* (B.)

*'We learnt the dialogue. We were really into it.'* (C.). Here, the author wants to express that they really wanted to do it. We could reflect about the difference of doing a task or something because one has to do it or doing it because one wants to do it. Intrinsic motivation is implied in Claudia's feedback.

*'All students were really involved in every task, they shared opinions and different ideas and they did the project in a few days. They coordinated themselves really well and made an amazing job which is worth sharing with the rest of the students of the university.'* (M.N.)

Words underlined in the previous sentence show the unity of the students and their engagement in every task.

Motivation is the key to engagement and all students' text contain this concept like in: *'We were very motivated doing this project and we didn't think we were learning English'* (P.A.)

Learners were conscious of how Cooperative Learning were helping them in this project such as A.M. points out: *'In consequence, they (students) were very engaged, trying to do their best and working together .*

A relevant aspect that shows students' engagement is the moment when the writing task was set and date when the time was going to be closed. It was on Christmas holidays. On the last class session before Christmas, the filming was completed. Then, one student, Pablo Andrade, kindly edited it and students were asked to write a text to be sent to a local newspaper giving the news about the project done. It had to be done at that moment. That is why professor sent them the following message: *'Before you forget about 'Our Christmas Carol' play, I would appreciate if you could write a short text that could be sent to a newspaper explaining about what you did, how you did it and how you felt about doing it. Please, upload it in Practice 7, Writing,' before 8<sup>th</sup> January 2022.*

In spite of holidays, they did it and uploaded it which shows great engagement on their side.

As we have seen students did an excellent job in their final product and all during the process but, it is important to us to reflect on the following question.

### 3.4. What did students learn?

The purpose of this study was that students could learn essential elements of PBL approach and how to implement it in class.

After watching the final version of the video all class members sat down on a circle and before giving feedback on the project, professor asked them to recognise PBL essential elements according to Larmer and Mergendoller (2015).

#### **Challenging problem or question**

They quickly identified the challenging problem or question which was *Can you do a play similar to the one presented?* That was the starting point of everything, a challenge that they decided to do.

#### **The key knowledge and success skills**

*Underneath any project there are aims set. In this case, to improve fluency using English as a Foreign Language was one of them. Also, she wanted her students to learn how to implement PBL approach in an educative setting and at the same time, she wanted to improve cohesion in class as students did not know each other. For that reason Team and Class Building were planned aims.*

*In students' oral feedback, they recognised all those aims in the project and said that they believe they had fulfilled them.*

According to success skills, students said that they had acquired and/or improved a lot of success skills. They stated that their social skills had greatly improved as well as their linguistic skills. Without being aware of that,

they had developed all linguistic skills in a foreign language: listening, Speaking, Interacting, Reading and Writing. The shiest students also referred to a great development on their self-confidence.

### **Sustained inquiry**

Curiously, some students not only had not read Charles' Dickens novel, but also had never heard of it. So they were curious to learn more about the story before starting the adaptation.

During the whole process inquiry was present as they did not know how to do many things and look for the best way to do them.

### **Authenticity**

There was no doubt for them that there was authenticity in this project. The final product was authentic and it was immersed in an authentic context, just before Christmas. So authentic that they even compared their work with the Christmas play that it was on a TV programme on New Year's Eve and stated that their work was much better produced.

Authenticity was also responsible to make them do the task proposed on Christmas holidays because it was the most suitable time for the news to appear on a local newspaper.

### **Students' voice and Choice**

It was easy for them to identify that element. They observed that, after professor's suggestion, students had to decide what they wanted to do related to everything in the play: about the story, about the number of characters, about dialogues, scenes and so on. Students' voices were heard because they worked cooperatively and they always did their best to get a consensus.

### **Reflection**

Students said that they had reflected on what they were doing and about how to improve their work all along the process.

### **Critique and Revision**

Learners recognised that there was a lot of critique and revision in and outside class because they shared with others what they had done and listened to their critique and then revise it. They listened carefully their partners critique too.

### **Public Product**

*The final product was the video which was presented in class.*

As one student points out *'In the end, they managed to record a funnier story than the one they had worked on for the first time and they all felt very happy to see the final result.'* (V.A.)

But they were so happy with the result that wanted to show somewhere else. So, it was shown to students from a different subject. It did not seem to be enough because they thought that that final product could be useful for more people and that is why it was presented to the university and finally published as a public product in the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1rFgcFZd0U>.

We would like to present some students comments from the text for the local newspaper they wrote in which they refer to what they learnt about Project Based Learning approach and CL while being immerse in the project.

*,The aim of PBL is to develop the learning process in a natural way, doing something for which you need to use the foreign language and learn about different subjects. For the teacher, the aim is in the process while students are focusing on the final product.'* (P.A)

They have compared it with other methodologies, like in the following statement:

*'In other subjects, the professor talks to you about PBL and then they test if you have memorized the main features of it. It is very boring and I ask to myself: do you end up knowing how to implement PBL in a real class? I don't think so. I prefer this way. In this subject, we implement different methodologies. For me, it is the best way to learn them.'* (A.M)

*'We were doing class and team building. As we had to work in groups to put the dialogue together, we encouraged cooperative learning.'* (C.B.)

They also realized about other aims that they had fulfilled as in the example: *'This way (doing the play) we were developing writing, reading, listening and speaking skills.'* (C.B.)

*'In only one lesson, students were developing the 4 linguistic skills but they weren't thinking about it during the process because they were focusing on the final product.'* (P.A.)

*'... at the same time, they were learning a lot about grammar, vocabulary and developing speaking skills. (Blanca)*

*'Furthermore, they improved their linguistic skills...They increased their knowledge due to the wide range of contents that they used.'* (A.M)

*Moving to our last aim in this study, we ask ourselves if they will be prepared to implement PBL in their future with Primary level students.*

### 3.5. Will students use PBL when they become teachers?

Being our purpose to prepare students for implementing innovative practices when they become in-service teachers, we observe that their comments about this issue is favourable and determined to use it in the future.

*'Also, this project helped us as future teachers to know how to organize a class, make cooperative projects where students are really motivated as we were in the theatre play. I wish everybody could see it a(the video) and enjoy it as the way we did and also encourage every teacher at school to do it with their students.'*(M.N.)

*'In particular, with that marvellous experience, students learnt not only what was project based learning, but also how to implement it in their future classes with their students.'* (A.M.)

*'Using PBL, we can provide our students not only more autonomy, but also more self-confidence.'* (Silvia)

*'Without any doubt, if I have the opportunity, I would love to do it with my students.'* (B.)

*'I am pretty sure that I will do this kind of projects in a near future.'* (S.)

*'It is high time to give more innovative opportunities to students to learn in a true learning experience!'* (S.)

*'I am sure I will do this with my students because we had fun and we learnt a lot. Thank you, teacher.'* (A. O.)

## 4. Conclusions

In this study, we could check that it is possible for students to learn what Project Based Learning is while participating actively in the implementation of a project. They could experiment and learn the essential elements present when Project Based Learning approach is implemented which was one of the study aims. In addition, they learnt that it is possible to enjoy while being immersed in a Teaching-Learning process.

Undoubtedly, the implementation of the project provoked positive emotions in 100% of participants while co-working with classmates. This positive feeling grew at the same speed than their social skills development. For that reason, we believe that promoting team and class building with projects that need students' collaboration will always help students to feel more confident in class. Taking into account the Affective Filter hypothesis (Krashen,1986), if the student feel relaxed and there is a comfortable atmosphere in class, student will be less anxious and it would be easier for him/her to participate and communicate with others which would help his/her FL acquisition. Thus, teachers, at schools, as well as professors, at the university, should focus on creating a good learning atmosphere in class and learning will come easier and faster for students.

We found that positive emotions helped even the shiest students to talk and collaborate with their classmates and they were aware of that . On the other hand, we believe projects demanding collaboration help students to improve their social skills as well as FL fluency but, above all, they help students to be engaged. The positive effect that the team and the class exerts on each student provokes on the student a stronger desire of participation as motivation increases. At the end, it brings students' success in learning. It is clear to us the link among emotions, social skills development, engagement and success in learning.

On the other hand, positive emotions on an experience like that, can help actual university students in the future, when they became teachers as teachers tend to do what they experimented in the past. The implementation of this project helped them to learn about the different tasks they had to do, different problems they had to face and ways to solve them. Similarly to Goleman (2001) states that people tends to feel emotions felt in past when they experiment a similar situation, we believe that teachers will implement PBL in their future classes due to the positive emotions they felt when implementing it. Feedback received from participants in this study show that they would like to implement PBL with their future Primary level students. We are convinced that they would not have the same fears about implementing this innovative approach than other teachers who never had the opportunity to experience it. Probably, that is the reason why many in-service teachers never think about the possibility of using PBL in their classes.

Finally, we would like to say that in the Faculties of Education future teachers should learn to experiment new methodologies and approaches in order to know not only the theory, but also the practice and find the way to offer more learning opportunities to students.

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