Does PBL – Project-Based Learning Expert Visit Facilitate the PBL Implementation Process in Undergraduate EFL Classes?

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Abstract: In this era of globalization, which is marked by the usage of the Internet, English as the world's first language plays an important role in almost all spheres. It undoubtedly sets up new demands for English language acquisition (English teaching and learning), and for more professional, 21st-century related English. This paper attempts to investigate whether the undergraduate EFL learners, PBL expert and PBL implemented school visits, before implementing PBL (Project–Based Learning), have a positive effect on students, and assist the formation of positive attitudes towards this style of learning. The study was conducted at TISHK International University, Faculty of Education with 22 first-grade students. The data were collected using pre and post-questionnaires and were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The research reveals that interaction with a more knowledgeable person (MKP) or being enlightened by competent and motivated experts stimulates learners' interest in PBL and facilitates the PBL implementation process. The study also shows that the visualization of various, authentic and original specimens of PBL's projects activates the process of forming positive attitudes towards PBL.

Keywords: EFL (English as a Foreign Language), Expert, Project–Based Learning Implementation, Undergraduate EFL students

1. Introduction

The research often indicates that students consider their lectures to be overly difficult and dull. Students generally believe they do not have the energy and time to do assignments. These are challenges that cannot be ignored and there are various ways to find solutions. Trying to apply an innovative, student-centred and active learning style is one of the attempts toward a more positive and productive learning environment. PBL is one of the approved approaches which helps educators figure out how to make learning come alive in educational institutions (Kavlu, 2015; Klein et al., 2009). PBL has been implemented in American education system (Petersen, 2008; Sidman-Taveau, 2005), Algeria (Aimeur, 2012), China (Beckett & Miller, 2006; Beckett, 2009; Ke, 2010), Greece (Tsiplakides & Fragoulis, 2009), Japan (Foss, Carney, McDonald, & Rooks, 2008; McCarthy, 2010), Thailand (Poonpon, 2011; Simpson, 2011), Turkey (Baş, 2011; Baş & Beyhan, 2010; Gülbahar & Tinmaz, 2006), and also United Kingdom (Hilton - Jones, 1988).

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However, PBL is a newly applied learning method in Iraq and KRI (Kurdistan Region of Iraq).

In the last years, the goal of the Kurdistan Ministry of Higher Education has shifted to improving the standards of higher education institutions in order to be as successful as the universities in the Western countries, achieve excellence in teaching, become internationally competitive, and enable graduates to be competitive and highly employable (Palander, 2013). Hence, the contemporary, authentic, interactive, and student-centered approaches should be investigated and transferred into practice. As the majority of students come from the rote memorization dominant education system (Kavlu, 2015; Palander, 2013; Sofi-Karim, 2015) visiting experts and trip fields are one of the alternatives which assist educators and facilitate the process of integrating new learning methods, shift to critical thinking, self – learning and cooperative learning through teamwork.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Project-Based Learning

With tremendous technological change, educators struggle with keeping students academically engaged whereas PBL has been recommended as an effective instructional approach that culminates in high levels of students engagement and academic achievement (Barell, 2006; Bender, 2012). Some proponents of PBL offer this instructional approach as the best way to gain and develop mastery in the 4 Cs – 21st-century skills; communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking (Krauss & Boss, 2013).

2.2 The Researcher Schematized the Actualization of 4 Cs Skills through Project-Based Learning

Table 1: Actualization of 4 Cs skills through project-based learning

4 Cs	PBL's Phase
Communication	• To be able to generate a project, learners communicate with group members • Each member of the group needs to communicate her/his ideas with other members of the group • Get in contact with the Teacher/Lecturer/Assistant (for clarification, to consult)
Collaboration	• Work with others (peers) in harmony • Regular collaboration meetings (to establish project's steps plan, for discussions), argumentative collaboration, carry out research, analyze collected data, each member express her/his personal opinions and collaboratively reach common decisions.
Creativity	• In the process of project formation, the combination of different ideas and dreams increases the originality of the project • Using creativity to solve problems • Learners are given the freedom to plan, to manage their project and each group can present – the end product in their unique way, which evokes creativity and boost the construction of creative knowledge.
Critical Thinking	• The Decision-making phase paves the way and nourishes critical thinking. • While doing PBL's project learners acquire factual knowledge and a deeper understanding of the content that forms and boosts critical thinking (Harrigan, 2014). • Discussions, learning from each other, and the constructivist characteristic of PBL (individuals construct new knowledge by establishing relationships with their background information, prior beliefs, and experiences) stimulate critical thinking • Brainstorming to solve problems enables learners to do critical thinking together (intragroup).

There are other advantages of PBL that have been documented by studies (Bender, 2012; Klein, Taveras, Hope King, Commitante, et al., 2009; Simpson, 2011). PBL attaches great importance to deeper understanding (Barreda, 2016; Maltese, 2012; Thomas, 2000). Studies have shown that PBL generates and cultivates a higher level of conceptual processing, deeper reflection, increased critical thinking, and higher understanding of principles (Adams, 2005; Kwek, 2011). These lead to an increase in learners' achievement. PBL results in improved retention of information because learners are operating information in a distinctly different way than is typically involved in rote learning (David, 2008; Donnelly &

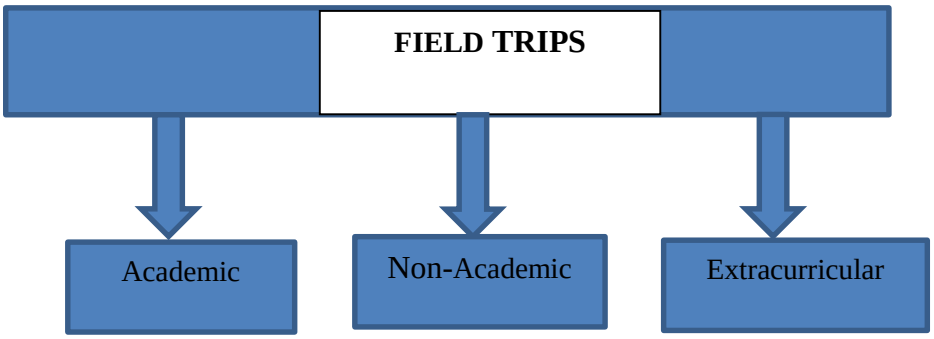
Fitzmaurice, 2005; Harrigan, 2014; Team, 2015). Doing a PBL project enhances the usage of the effective problem–solving strategies (Han & Bhattacharya, 2001).

The rapid changes and development of the 21st-century world cannot be ignored by EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers. These improvements increase the need for more capable, skilled people who have full command of foreign languages. However, teaching in non–active, non–realistic, and one–side settings or only language skills – writing, reading, listening, and speaking, are inadequate to equip students with the 21st digital, and competitive century's requirements. To be successful in academic life or make progress in their future careers, learners of all fields need an education system that provides them with an environment where learners pass through the experiences that enable them to gain holistic competence. Each discipline math, science, social studies, and language should have its own contribution to the formation of personal and academic development of learners as individuals.

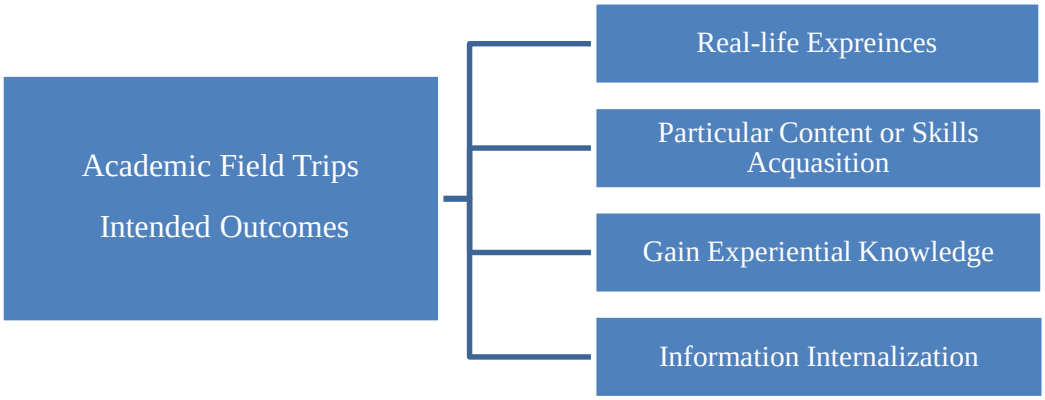
2.3 Field Trips and Expert Visit

Educational psychologist Piaget (1970) defined field-trip of education, as a productive and helpful platform that assists the transformation from concrete to more abstract cognition. Various learning outcomes have been proven to actualize during field trips, including outcomes connected to the cognitive and social domains (Anderson & Lucas, 1997; DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008; Kenna, 2014). Experienced-based learning which is referred to by Dewey (2007), Kolb (1984), and Piaget (2013) is one of the appropriate concepts that can describe this form of learning.

Legutko (2005) stated that one of the obvious advantages of field trips is that learners enjoy getting out of the classroom walls, getting engaged with the real world, and acquiring first-hand experiences. Field trips are out-of-school settings visits and are generally classified into three groups: academic, non-academic, and extracurricular trips (Atyeo, 1939).



Scheme 1: Type of field trips



Scheme 2: Academic field trips outcomes

Universities as a part of higher education are potential sources of economic, cultural, and social development in any country (Shakil & Hafeez, 2011). Therefore, generating academic as well as natural and enjoyable settings in the learning process by organizing discussions and debate panels, Students' Conferences or Joint Conferences of Universities, workshops, seminars, presentations, and academic field trips are substantial elements that enable undergraduate students to get opportunities for authentic observations, self- experiences, and self-long-lasting learning.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to determine whether the PBL (Project-Based Learning) Expert Visit facilitates the implementation of the PBL process for undergraduate students. The study was conducted at TISHK International University, Faculty of Education with 22 First Grade students. The data were collected using pre and post-questionnaires and were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics.

4. Findings and Discussion

Before the implementation of Project-Based Learning, students should be given in-depth and detailed information about what the Project – Based Learning is; how to do the teamwork, gather information and data, put it in order, and how design obtained data in a logical manner. Logically all of these steps cannot be comprehended by students in one explanation. Therefore, a field trip was arranged as well as a type of PBL project was arranged. The field trip was arranged to a Project-Based Learning – implemented school of the Ishik Educational Institutions (previously known as a Fezalar Educational Institutions) in KRG-Iraq. The primary objective of the field trip was hands-on training because the principal aspect of Project-Based Learning is learning by doing. The students were informed that this field trip was a mini model of a Project-Based Learning application. This practice will provide students an opportunity to comprehend how to investigate the assigned task, how to collect information, and how to present it.

As PBL was a new educational approach for students, numerous studies, master's and doctoral thesis, teachers' handbooks, and guidebooks related to Project-Based Learning were scrutinized by the researcher. Some of the most effective ways included how to introduce a new approach to students before

the implementation of the study, inviting effective guests, visiting experts outside the University (school), or arranging workshops and seminars. Therefore, a program was scheduled from theory to practice. Firstly, the PBL – Expert Mr. Agpak was contacted and asked to give an explanatory workshop. In order to provide a more useful workshop, Mr. Agpak asked for some information about students' knowledge, backgrounds, departments, ages, and whether their English level is sufficient to understand the seminar and workshop in English. The required information was reported to Mr. Agpak.

The Department was informed about the scheduled visits, which consisted of the expert, PBL implemented school and traditional Kurdish schools. The researcher requested an official letter in order to be allowed to make the trip out of the University with 22 students. The petition was sent via email to the Head of the Department, for visiting these three locations. However, the Head of the Department did not accept the third traditional Kurdish School visit, he indicated that it is not ethical for lecturers from another country to judge the students' local schools. Based on this feedback, alternations were made to the petition and resent to the Head of Department, soon it was signed and handed over to the researcher. Then, the next day all students came. The field trip started with Mr. Agpak's seminar and workshop and continued with PBL implemented school visit.

4.1 Pre – Post Visit Questionnaire

To analyze the effect of a field trip and an expert visit, to examine whether students absorb what the PBL is, and the steps that should be fulfilled to accomplish the project are requirements of an effective PBL experience. The researcher implemented a pre-post Visit questionnaire. After receiving permission, the students were informed about the trip. The following day the learners displayed positive attitudes towards the educational visit. (Photos of the trip in Appendix 1). Half an hour before leaving the University pre-visit questionnaire was carried out. The department's assistants explained the questionnaire, and how to complete it, and translated some points in cases where needed. Assistants were Kurdish - one graduated from the State University and the second one from TISHK University (previously known as an Ishik University) ELT Department. After collecting pre-visit questionnaires visits were made.

Students were welcomed in a very friendly and warm environment. The teacher training building and Mr. Agpak's office were full of various projects on different topics – walls, floors, ceiling, classes, and students' desks all were representing and describing PBL.

Mr. Agpak held a detailed workshop about PBL and showed successful specimens of PBL. Students took photos and videotaped the workshop with their smartphones. Photos from Agpak's office. (Photo in Appendix 2). Next step - PBL implemented school was visited. The classes and school environments, as students stated in their post-questionnaires, were amazing and students were astonished. Students took pictures of the projects and photos with students. In a workshop session, Agpak invited a group of students with the PBL projects that they have done for some of their classes. Elementary school 4th-grade students, with clear and fluent English in a very proper way, explained the way of doing their projects. The day after the trip post-visit questionnaire was applied in order to make students express their feelings and acquired information while all the happenings were fresh in their minds.

4.2 Reflections from Pre–Visit Questionnaires

All the students from the group (22) participated in the trip. With regard to the questionnaire results, none of the students had heard about PBL (Project-Based Learning) before coming to the University. However, %12 of the students prepared some power-point presentations in high school and did copy-cut-paste works in the biology, chemistry, and physics lessons. All the above-mentioned activities (power-point presentations, copy-cut-paste works) were done alone none of the students did her/his project as group work cooperatively. The most significant point in the pre-visit questionnaire was that all students stated that they want to get information about PBL. This item showed their enthusiasm for seminars, workshops, and learning innovations. 60 percent of students indicated the reason they wanted to get information about the PBL was because they are future teachers. The students believed they need to follow contemporary innovative methods and approaches in order to be competent teachers. The rest of the 40 percent explained that they want to get information about PBL because they are university students and they need to keep themselves up–to–date with novelties and development in the educational area. Two open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire to allow students to contribute to the study. The first question was asked about what they think about English Language teaching in Iraq to explore the pros and cons of students' past English Language learning experiences. The second question was inquiring about what should be done to achieve improvement in English teaching in Iraq.

Student 7: It (English language teaching) was better before but unfortunately, it got worse because of wars.

Student 21: It (English language teaching) is not good because we don't have any interactions with teachers.

Student 14: I spent 8 years in school learning English and I am still at the elementary level and continue studying English, and my English is still bad.

The second question was answered only by a few students. Although the students answered the questions in their native language, it showed that students had poor skills in putting forward an opinion. Generally, students remarked that the English language teaching system should be reviewed.

4.3 Post – Visit Students' Expressions

Student 3: I was really glad to visit PBL implemented school. These school students were quite organized, despite being smaller than us their English level quite better than ours. Mr. M. Agpak's seminar was quite descriptive.

Student 16: After yesterday's visit now I know project generation techniques. Brayati (the name of the visited school) – PBL implemented school was amazing and the students were very nice and smart.

Student 20: I had a really good day yesterday with these brilliant students in Mr. Agpak's office. I really felt excited. Their notebooks, Projects, and their English level were really good.

Student 8: Yesterday was a completely new experience in my life, the children of that school were fantastic because of that great system they have. After Mr. Agpak's workshop and seminar, I realized that we also can improve our English level by doing such projects.

Student 15: It is the first time; I have had a field trip in my education life. We need such experiences in our education and they will have a good effect on our future.

Student 22: I was really embarrassed yesterday because those small students in the workshop with their projects, their English was further better than mine. I don't want to have teachers that just push us to write and read. I want to understand what I read, write and speak fluently.

Student 1: Yesterday's workshop and school visit clarified PBL in detail. Students were very young but very clever and smart.

Student 19: After yesterday's visit I also want to be a good teacher who knows new methods. Mr. Agpak's training center with great projects was a very striking and interesting place and I learned what is PBL and how projects should be prepared.

All post-visit feedback demonstrated that students appreciated this visit, and workshop, the analyses of post-visit feedback showed that the PBL Expert visit and workshop presented by the expert helped students to understand

1. What PBL is?
2. Motivate students toward PBL implemented education
3. What are PBL's potential benefits to their English language level?
4. Students start feeling ready to do the PBL related projects

It shows that well-designed goal-oriented field trips, and visiting experts (MKO – More Knowledgeable Others), to see the implementation of theories, in reality, generate enthusiasm, motivation, and readiness for the implementation of PBL, which facilitates the instructor's work inside of the class.

The findings showed that students in the KRG region of Iraq especially students from public schools which means the majority of students have not experienced hands-on type learning, Project-Based Learning, or Problem-Based Learning. These types of learning promote meaningful cooperative teamwork and develop critical thinking. Students did some simple cutting-pasting, and preparing PowerPoint presentations (copy from the internet and paste to their PPTs) themselves alone. However, students were not given assignments or projects that require critical thinking and finding solutions through in-depth research. Therefore, we can say that in countries where public schools (because of some reasons; lack of budget, lack of professional, motivated teaching staff, general infrastructure, being a war zone, or the most important factor the education system based on rote the memorization) is not implementing or are not able to cultivate the 21st-century skills in their students in primary, secondary, or high schools. However, it is still not too late to initiate the cultivation of these skills at the undergraduate level. The research showed that active out-of-class academic field trips could be productive initiators.

Another point is that research shows and most of the students pointed out is the importance of the friendliness of the expert and the warm environment of PBL implemented school. It showed attitudes of the expert (MKO) are very effective even sometimes more effective than the information he/she provides. As it is known students do not learn from the people who are arrogant, not respectful, or not friendly. The factor of being friendly and approachable should be taken into consideration while planning the visits.

5. Conclusion

The teacher's planning area is required for a successful field trip. There are some factors that should be taken into consideration before the field trip. It is necessary to plan in advance the experience that is aimed for students to obtain. The venue should be pre-visited and the staff should be met. Moreover, the intended field trip and expert objectives should be communicated, and activities should be arranged. The students should be informed about the program flow, activities, and expectations to enable students to be actively engaged in the whole process of a field trip. The instructor should remain involved, and be a part of the activities to guide the students when necessary. Following the field trip, it is essential to allocate quality and sufficient time to reflect on the experiences and assist students to build connections to the aimed goals and objectives.

Furthermore, the workshop was held in the PBL implemented teacher training center and the real PBL specimens were presented. These enable university students to experience the implementation of PBL. The students of the PBL implemented school demonstrated how to apply and prepare PBL-related projects, which activated more than one learning domain. Cognitive learning occurred during listening, analyzing PBL specimens, and actively participating in the workshop by asking and answering questions. Thus, cognitive learning can be an outcome of the field trips – this is an outcome valued by instructors, administrators, and parents. Besides cognitive gains from the field trips, the undergraduate students were able to experience the applicability of PBL in school and the different stages of academic life. The undergraduate students' field trip facilitated the implementation of PBL in the course because it increased motivation, and interest, sparked curiosity and improved positive attitudes. The social and affective learning domains activation was observed.

6. Limitations

There were certain limitations included that the researcher worked only with First Grade Undergraduate students at the Faculty of Education. Also, there was a small sample size observed and the university was private. Therefore, the results are not generalizable to larger contexts, or different countries.

7. Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher recommends that future research involve more studies that include experimental learning components, such as field trips. Participants from a larger percentage of the undergraduate students are not only from the private but also from the public universities, different faculties, and departments. In the further studies, more observation time could give better information about the field trips and expert visits effects. Conducting longitudinal studies with the control and experimental groups with several visits would provide data over time, which this study could not do.

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Appendix 1

While going to Visit on the bus

Appendix 2

While Mr. Agpak's Workshop

Appendix 3

While PBL implemented School Visit