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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unravelling the Effect of Project-Based Learning on Students' Engagement and Interest in EFL Classes: An Exploratory Case Study

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| ABSTRACT

It goes without saying that students' interest and engagement in the learning process lead to better academic achievement. One of the proposed methods and approaches to boost students' engagement and interest is Project-Based Learning (PjBL). The latter is a student-centered instruction which responds to the rapid changes of the current era, making students at the core of the knowledge construction process. The current qualitative case study seeks to explore the effects of PjBL on students' engagement and interest in EFL classes. The sample of this study consists of common core students who were taught through PjBL and was selected through convenience sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews after the implementation of PjBL. The findings of this piece of research confirm that Project-ased learning is effective in facilitating and raising students' engagement and interest in EFL classes to a great extent. This is thanks to the structured stages of PjBL which push learners to go from developing and planning projects, designing tasks, collecting and organizing data, to producing a final artifact. Having to go through all these phases increases students' engagement and interest in learning. Such a method of teaching merits more attention and consideration from curriculum designers for the benefits it offers.

1. Introduction

In Morocco, there is a remarkable underperformance in the English language. According to a recent study, "Morocco has maintained its 76th position globally in the English Proficiency Index (EPI) released by Switzerland-based Education First (EF)" (Hespress English 2024). Such a ranking is considered low and calls for reforms in English education. The latter could draw on the latest trends in educational research to increase the English proficiency ranking in Morocco.

The literature in educational research on interest and engagement suggests that they result in better academic performance. Numerous studies on their effects on academic achievement and performance, particularly in EFL classes, support the claim that they are catalyst to learning. Therefore, raising students' engagements and interest in learning are some of the most crucial concerns of educators. Policy makers and curriculum designers have been urged to make content and materials interesting and

engaging. Educators have also been advised to use approaches, methods, and strategies that put engagement at the heart of the learning process. Interestingly, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) stands out as an approach to teaching that promotes interest and engagement. PjBL does not function unless students are fully engaged in the learning process. Such an approach makes use of all the multidimensional aspects of engagement and interest recognized in educational research.

2. Literature Review
Interest

Dewey (1913) is considered one of the first scholars who conceptualizes interest as a key construct in the learning process. He addresses interest as a direct trigger for learning and as an outcome of interacting with the environment. He defines the state of being interested in something as being concerned with it; therefore, investing efforts in it. Hidi (1990) defines interest as the stimulus leading to increased attention, enhanced cognitive processing as well as persistence in learning. This view explains why one certain type of information is selected and processed while another type is not.

Hidi (1990) further explains the interest in terms of two categories: individual interest and situational interest. The former takes more time to develop and lasts longer in terms of established knowledge and values. This is because of one's relatively lasting tendency to engage repeatedly with a given concern. The latter refers to an increased attention and affective reaction that is triggered suddenly from the environment and may quickly fade. These two types of interest are not to be thought of as dichotomous, but rather as complementary facets interacting with and affecting each other. This interaction could be best understood as a dynamic process where each type has the potential to trigger and shape the other.

In a more recent study, Hidi & Renninger (2006) conceptualize a four-phase model of interest. Phase one concerns a triggered situational interest which, when supported, leads to phase two, a maintained situational interest. The latter may result in phase three which is a less developed individual interest, which can also evolve into a well-developed one, being the last phase. These phases are more likely to be sequential when interaction with the environment happens and when support is provided.

According to Hidi & Renninger (2006), phases of interest consist of affective and cognitive processes. Affective processes generate positive feelings such as liking and enjoyment, and cognitive processes generate focused attention. The closer an individual is to a well-developed interest, the more positive their feelings are, and the more knowledge and values are stored.

A recent study by Zohri (2016) proves that there exists a positive relationship between learners' interest in a course and their achievement's results in the same course. Consequently, recent and current research is concerned with how to trigger, maintain and develop interest in learning. It suggests that triggering interest can happen through interesting teaching techniques such as using group work and technology. Maintaining interest could be done by involving learners in meaningful activities through personally engaging methods like PjBL. Paving the way to an emerging interest and enabling a good individual interest could be achieved by facilitating a learning environment conducive to risk taking and knowledge building. Further, providing support and scaffolds, facilitating problem-solving activities, and addressing learners' areas of interest, are ways that help trigger and sustain interest. Not only that, but as Hidi & Renninger (2006) further explain, creating content which encourages curiosity and setting goals also contributes to that interest as well.

In the same vein, Zohri (2016) suggests that the characteristics of the content of a course can trigger or impede interest. He finds that novelty, fostering competence, and promoting creativity are key to making content interesting.

It should be noted that there is no agreement in literature on how interest is to be measured. However, recent research suggests "positive feeling, stored knowledge and value, and repeated engagement" as indicators of interest (Renninger et al., 2002; Renninger & Wozniak, 1985, cited in Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

Engagement

While there is no one definition of engagement in the literature, the latter agrees that engagement is a multidimensional model incorporating behavior, cognition and emotion. Such model is suggested by Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) and supported later by more researchers. Skinner and Pitzer (2012) define engagement as a visible, concrete manifestation of students' energy and purpose with regards to school tasks. Such energy and purpose appear in students' behavior, cognition and emotion. The latter is apparent in learners' enthusiasm, enjoyment and satisfaction; behavior is manifested in attention, action and efforts; while cognition is evident in strategy, goal strivings and thoroughness.

Philp & Duchesne (2016) state that engagement is a state of focused attention, active participation and emotional responsiveness. In addition to the behavioral, emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement, Philp & Duchesne add a social dimension which

stems from interaction with peers, exchanging feedback and negotiation. Such a dimension is foregrounded by Philp & Duchesne for the advantages it offers to the learning process.

Oga-Baldwin (2019) also analyzes engagement in terms of behavior, thought, emotion, and agency. He states that behavior is the most evident indicator of engagement shown in learners' body language and interactions with instructions. Emotion stems from developing positive feelings towards the learning process. It can also be noticed by signs of body language. A bored student does not seem the same as a happy or satisfied one. As for cognition, it is manifested in the thought invested in the schoolwork. It is difficult to precisely observe cognition. However, it can be measured through students' output and production. Philp & Duchesne mention that reasoning by means of "I think, because" is a sign of cognition. Agency appears in students' initiative to improve understanding through asking questions, expressing ideas, and seeking help. These steps make agency evident (Oga-Baldwin, 2019).

According to Skinner and Pitzer, engagement is of paramount importance not only because it is catalyst to knowledge and skills acquisition but also because it significantly affects learners' psychological and social experiences. It facilitates positive interactions with peers and students and contributes to the overall learning experience. More importantly, engagement is a process that gets stronger with everyday tasks and develops into a durable skill set and assets crucial to learning. Oga-Baldwin (2019) supports this view and believes that engaging with tasks turns out to become a habit.

The literature suggests different ways of measuring engagement. One widely used instrument is a survey instrument containing items at the core of engagement components (Jang et al., 2016). There is also the instructor's own assessment of students' engagement compared to students' self-reported perceptions and assessments (Lee & Reeve, 2012). Further, researchers suggest the use of technology in the measurement of engagement such as using eye-tracking glasses which document how much time students spend on a task; and biometric wearables to determine interactions with classroom activities. (Lai et al., 2013)

Research on engagement in EFL classrooms confirms the paramount role engagement plays in academic achievement. Lee (2014) examined engagement and performance in reading literacy, distinguishing between the impact of behavioral and emotional engagement. He suggests that both behavioral and emotional dimensions significantly impact reading performance; however, the effect of emotion is smaller. Wang et al., (2023) further investigated the effects of engagement on English language achievement. Their findings demonstrated a positive correlation between the two, highlighting engagement as the strongest predictor of achievement compared to other predictors. Their research also shows that negative emotions decrease learners' engagement. Therefore, they exert a negative influence on achievement. More recent studies supported those findings and stressed the crucial role of engagement in students' learning journey (Liu et al., 2023).

Project-Based Learning

PjBL is barely a new approach to teaching. The foundations of PjBL are evident in the early philosophy of John Dewey which links experience to learning. Experience takes place when learners engage and interact with the environment.

The literature defines Project-Based Learning as a comprehensive approach designed to lead students to investigate authentic problems and present their projects through final artifacts. The investigation of a problem necessitates a driving question, discussion and negotiation, collaboration, planning, data collection, and artifact production (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Wrigley, 1998; Thomas, 2000). Simpson (2011) and Kemendikbud (2013) state that reflection, self-evaluation and peer assessment of projects are essential in PjBL. Additionally, according to Gras-Velázquez (2021), PjBL is concerned with doing projects which:

> require students to create an original or authentic product; encourage students to think critically; be made public and shared with peers, family, community members and so on; encourage collaboration through completion of the project; encourage students to reflect during and after completion of the project. (p: 6).

Drawing on these definitions, PjBL puts much emphasis on the process of learning. Students' driven inquiry is the core of such an approach and is apparent in processes of discussing, planning, gathering data and leading to the production of a final tangible artifact.

Thomas (2000) stresses that projects are central to the curriculum in such an approach. That is, doing projects is the core foundational principle in teaching and not just a complementary strategy. Therefore, according to him, doing a project after a unit is not an instance of PjBL. Further, in such an approach, final artifacts are not predetermined by the instructor or the curriculum but opted for by learners. PjBL leaves students with the freedom to find different ways to reach conclusions and answers. Therefore, learners' voice and choice are important in PjBL. Other important features of PjBL include authenticity, sustained inquiry, collaboration, public product, reflection, critique and revision. (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Hedge, 1993; Barrows, 2011; Buck Institute for Education, 2019).

Instances of such projects could be "bulletin board display, written report, debate, brochure, letter, handbook, oral presentation, video, multimedia presentation, theatrical performance" (Kemendikbud, 2013). Final artifacts could also be in the form of a diorama, podcast, a multimodal composition, a recipe and demonstration of how to make a meal (Gras-Velázquez, 2021).

Building on the underpinnings of PjBL, engagement is the fuel for PjBL functioning. This is attributed to the ongoing inquiry in which PjBL immerses students. Doing projects seems to engage them cognitively through asking questions, planning, and analyzing information. They engage students emotionally through building connections, collaborating and opting for projects which stem from personal interests. Behaviorally, they engage students through active participation, discussion, and presentation. Learners' agency is also promoted in PjBL through voice and choice, feedback, and assessment.

Furthermore, PjBL seems to align closely with the four-phase model of interest. PjBL creates a solid foundation for the reinforcement of students' interest in learning. While capturing attention happens through real-life interesting problems, sustaining interest happens through the ongoing inquiry. Individual interest could also emerge and develop through fostering choice in dealing with projects, building confidence, and seeking more resources. further, completing projects outside the classroom, presenting and reflecting on the final artifact could also result in individual interest. These processes could reinforce learners' sense of commitment and pride in their work.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: How do students perceive the impact of PjBL on their cognitive, emotional, behavioral and agentic engagement?

RQ2: How does PjBL influence students' interest in the learning process?

H1: Students perceive their cognitive, emotional, behavioral and agentic engagement in EFL classes as positively influenced by Project-Based Learning.

H2: Students perceive their interest in the learning process as positively influenced by Project-Based Learning.

3.2 Research approach and design

This research paper employs a qualitative approach as it mainly aims at attaining a deep understanding of learners' perceptions of PjBL, their engagement, and their interest in English language classes. It is widely agreed that this approach is best suited when the focus is understanding, exploring, and clarifying feelings, perceptions, and experiences of a group of individuals (Kumar, 2010). To operationalize this approach, a case study design is adopted to investigate a group of students who have undergone an intervention: the Project-Based Learning instruction. According to Kumar, such a design allows extensive exploring and holistic understanding of a process or situation.

3.3 Participants

A class of 34 students was introduced to and taught through Project-Based Learning for eight weeks. However, only 14 students participated in this study. They were common core learners studying in El Mowahidine public high school in Khemisset, Morocco. Students were scheduled to study 3 English language sessions per week. Each session lasted one hour. It was their second year of learning English, and their age ranged between 15 and 16 years old.

Participants were selected for semi-structured interviews based on convenience. This sampling method as defined by Dörnyei (2007) is a nonprobability sampling method where participants are selected based on the ease of accessibility. Further, Voluntary response sampling, defined as selecting volunteered and qualified potential respondents (Murairwa, 2015), was opted for to conduct the interviews.

3.4 Data Collection and analysis

This study makes use of a semi-structured interview which took place after PjBL implementation. The researcher designed the interview questions using engagement and interest models. While the questions on interests were designed based on the four phases model proposed by Hidi and Renninger (2006), engagement was investigated through the framework refined by Oga-Baldwin (2019). The interview aimed at investigating students' reflection on their learning experiences at various phases. Participants were guided to describe the specifics of different situations to deeply explore their involvement, focusing on how PjBL affected their overall interest and engagement in the learning process. Questions targeted their attitudes towards PjBL and its

relevance to the real world. They further addressed PjBL's alignment with their learning styles, and their approach to learning. Questions also addressed students' management of projects at the behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and agentic levels.

To avoid any potential misunderstandings or difficulties in self-expression, the interviews were conducted in the mother tongue of the participants. The interview consisted of 12 questions and was conducted by means of Zoom and phone calls, both of which were recorded. The qualitative data was compiled, transcribed, and translated into English. Then, it was analyzed on dimensional thematic levels based on the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The latter involves " familiarising with the data ... generating initial codes ... searching for themes ... reviewing themes ... defining and naming themes ... writing the report" (p. 79).

3.5 Ethical considerations

This piece of research has abided by the agreed upon research ethics. The interview questions were designed with the sole purpose of obtaining the needed data without causing any kind of harm to any of the participants. Further, informed consent was ensured. Participants were informed of their choice to take part in the study or not. They were also informed that they were being recorded. They all were ensured that their personal privacy would be kept protected and their identity would be kept anonymous.

4. Findings

4.1 Interest

4.1.1 Triggered Situational Interest

Participants' perceptions of Project-Based Learning ranged from feelings of excitement to fear. They reported that they were excited to try a new way of learning, especially that they study almost in the same way in all the other subjects. Further, they showcased positive feelings towards working in groups. A respondent said, "I was happy and excited to try a new way of learning." Others commented, "I enjoyed the idea of doing projects and was focused when the teacher introduced PjBL"; " I have never experienced it before, and I was happy to study through this new way." Nonetheless, respondents expressed negative feelings of worry, fear, and lack of confidence. Trying something new for the first time had them think if they could manage such projects. A respondent explained, "At the beginning, I thought of it as challenging since I needed to take the team members' ideas into consideration." He added, "I am used to working alone and applying my ideas alone." Another respondent said, "I did not like this way of learning at first because I was afraid I would not be able to do a project and a presentation, but afterwards, I liked and enjoyed it." Other respondents further stressed that they had not been confident they would manage projects properly.

To further make sure that learners' interest was triggered through PjBL, participants were asked if the PjBL's activities were different than the usual way of learning in textbook-based instruction. All respondents' answers were positive stating that there was a big a difference. They explained that they had not been given all the information from the teacher, but they had to look for it. Others stated that PjBL was easier thanks to the collaborative nature of PjBL. They also mentioned that they had more chance of creativity. Respondents also liked the vision and blueprint PjBL adopts. They found it practical and proactive to know what to do next. Other students stressed that their concentration increased since they needed to complete the work and form a final artifact. While in the textbook instruction, they would easily get distracted. Group work was also favored. A participant said, "with the textbook instruction, I would not ask the teacher in front of the whole class if I don't understand, but with PjBL, I ask my team members, and the teacher comes to answer our questions and provide help."

4.1.2 Maintained Situational Interest

To explore whether learners managed to maintain their interest over the course of the implementation, they were asked if they enjoyed learning through PjBL over time. Strikingly, all the negative feelings respondents experienced at the start of PjBL changed to positive ones once they proceeded with the projects and presented for the first time. Participants explained that it was an outstanding experience, enabling them to learn new information, and build new skills pertaining to collaboration, presentation and researching. They mentioned that working in a group to achieve an end was motivating and enjoyable. To further probe students' interests, they were asked whether they thought of PjBL outside the classroom and to mention some of those instances. Participants showed that they frequently thought of learning. They mentioned that they thought about how to make their projects stand out. A student said, 'I frequently find myself thinking if the project is good enough and worth the effort we make." Another participant said, "I thought a lot about how to improve my clothing brand project and how to design a website for it". A further respondent reported, "I always think of the way I presented my project on clothes. Whenever I see a presentation, I feel proud of mine." Other students expressed the thoughts they had on their presentation and how to improve it. They also mentioned that they kept thinking about the things they did well and the things they could have done better.

4.1.3 Emerging Individual Interest

In an attempt to explore whether students' individual interest emerged, they were guided to explain if PjBL aligns with their personal learning style. Interestingly, all participants answers were positive. They stated that such a way of learning was more effective in acquisition and retention of information. They attribute this to the stage of gathering data and completing activities at home. A participant stated, " this way is far better because we prepare the projects and look for information ourselves, so we remember it for a long time. Another stated, "the information stays planted in my mind." Other participants expressed their opinions in favor of PjBL thanks to the competition between groups. Some also preferred PjBL for the collaborative opportunity if offers. A participant said, "It suits me very much because I like to see how others think." Another participant added, "I also like to see how other groups present. I like to hear the other opinion." Another said, "I see that whenever I work on a project, I give and I take, and this develops my thinking." A further factor which makes this instruction a fit for students is concentration as opposed to distraction. Students explained that they could easily be distracted when the teacher explains the lesson in the traditional way. In contrast, they focus more when working on projects because they have to go through all the stages and do things and not just listen passively. Further, their project reflects their efforts, so they do their best to achieve the best version.

To further address emerging individual interests, learners were guided to report their views with regards to the real-world relevance of PjBL. Participants reported that such a way develops their sense of responsibility, collaboration, and time management skills, all of which are needed in life-situations. According to them, it helps face the fear of failure. They also said that the relationship between what is leant and the real word lies in the skills they could use in life. These skills include communication, problem solving, and conflict resolution. In this regard, a student said, "There were problems, and we needed to solve them." Another added, "It's difficult to convey an idea to the group members, but we could agree at the end." Another said, "In a group, you need to respect everyone's ideas even if you don't like them. You also need to find a way to adapt the idea and apply it in a way that suits everyone." Other students said that PjBL teaches them how to communicate and this could eventually help them in their lives. Moreover, participants mentioned that the content of the projects could also link to the real life. A participant said, "Whenever I see food items, recipes, and meals, I recall their names in English." Another participant said she tried some of the recipes that were shared in the classroom. Another said, "When I presented my group's clothing brand, I felt that I was advertising for real. I tried to convince my peers to buy from my store."

4.1.4 Well-Developed Individual Interest

At this stage, the researcher needed to investigate whether students' interest in learning through PjBL was well developed. So, they were asked if they would like to study through PjBL in the future. All participants' responses were affirmative. Some of the statements of participants were: "I would like to study through PjBL in all the other subjects," " I hope all teachers use PjBL," and "There is a big difference between the first semester and the second one." They attributed such a desire to the freedom in deciding on final artifacts, the long retention of information, and the group work. Doing things in their own manner was perceived as a plus.

Participants were further asked if PjBL affected their thoughts with regards to learning. All the answers showed positive influence from the part of PjBL. Learners loved the English language more and enjoyed learning. Participants stated that they did not perceive learning as boring anymore; it could finally be fun. A participant concluded that the traditional way of teaching is not sufficient unless the students can focus continuously. Other participants stated, "I loved learning because now I know how to use what I learn"; "I think if teachers want students to understand, they should use PjBL."

4.2 Engagment

4.2.1 Behavioral engagement

The behavioral dimension of engagement was explored through students' self-report of their participation and involvement in tasks throughout projects. Students revealed that they worked in a collaborative atmosphere. They divided tasks and each member was in charge of something. Everyone contributed to the final artifact.

Together, upon completion of tasks, students reviewed and assembled them into final artifacts. Participants reported that they stayed at school extra hours so as to achieve more work. They showed that their participation did not stop in the classroom because they had to do some activities outside of school. These activities include doing research at the school library, printing relevant pictures at the stationery store, completing tasks, and rehearsing for the presentation at home. They also kept enriching their projects via a WhatsApp group created for this purpose.

4.2.2. Emotional engagement

The researcher explored the emotional dimension of engagement through one question: how did you feel throughout the PjBL implementation? Respondents' answers were positive and showed enthusiasm from their parts. The PjBL experience was depicted as a unique one in which they had fun and achieved something tangible. Feelings of accomplishments, change and pride were described. A respondent revealed, "I was convinced that I don't understand English, so I did not pay attention in the classroom until I had to do projects, then I faced the situation and integrated in the group work. I was proud." Another student said, "I would impatiently wait for my English class to do projects."

4.2.3. Cognitive engagement

To investigate how cognition appeared in students' work, participants were asked to describe moments when they were deeply focused and immersed while working on a given project. Each student described the specifics of a situation in which they were thinking, analyzing, and producing output. Participants described different stages they went through to achieve the final artifact. For instance, one participant stated, " I was focused when we used a word map to list ideas. We designed an outline and divided tasks." Another participant described his experience while working on a website for a clothing brand. He was immersed in writing descriptions for clothing items, presenting them in different colours, sizes and prices. He said, "I focused on writing correct sentences to describe clothes." While preparing a menu, a participant revealed, " I categorized food according to types and courses of meals, and my friends picked correspondent pictures and wrote a recipe." A further participant highlighted her interview experience which was a part of a project on sports. She categorized ideas from the responses she got and presented them accordingly in a booklet. Another participant talked about how she organized and assembled the parts of a project on sports. A further participant highlighted, "I compared between different athletes." Participants also mentioned moments of rehearsal on the presentation, which were done mostly at home.

4.2.4. Agentic engagement

Taking agency over the process of learning was showcased by students taking initiative and making a difference in the group work. Respondents reported that they needed to convince each other with their ideas. A respondent explained, "When we have opposite ideas, I try to find something common." Students also provided help and explained to each other in moments of difficulties in understanding tasks. Further, respondents reported that they sought help from the teacher to get feedback, or to make sure they are doing things appropriately and understanding them correctly. In this regard, a respondent clarified, "We used to help each other understand and ask the teacher to make sure we are on the right path."

Another instance of students taking an active role appeared at the presentation and post-presentation stages of PjBL. Not only did students present their final artifact, but they also commented and gave feedback on their peers' presentations. Additionally, students mentioned that they negotiated different ideas to agree on the type and form of the final artifact thanks to the choice they were given. A respondent said, "We were free to choose with whom to work and which final artifact to produce, which played a positive role." A respondent added, "We worked in our own way and chose the final artifact we agreed on."

5. Discussion

Project-Based Learning is found to greatly influence learners' interest in learning English. First, it succeeded to a great extent in triggering their situational interest, raising their curiosity and making them ask different questions. All feelings of worry, curiosity, enthusiasm which students revealed in their first encounter with PjBL showcase a triggered situational interest in PjBL. The latter was further proven when respondents compared textbook-based instruction and PjBL. They showcased an evident inclination and preference to PjBL for its novelty and features. Interest was further maintained when participants were immersed in doing projects. Negative feelings of fear and worry transformed into positive attitudes shown in their satisfaction, joy, and sense of achievement. Such feelings arose from their work and progress.

Over time, learners' individual interests emerged thanks to PjBL's alignment with different learning styles, preferences, goals, and real life relevance. It is found to appeal to students who learn more through group work and collaboration. These factors resonate with experiential and social learning theories. The latter advocate for peer interaction and learning by doing meaningful, authentic activities. PjBL further aligns with students who seek leadership, autonomy; and those who like to stand out with creative work based on their own choices. Such factors are at the core of self-centered learning and self-determination theories that prioritize learners' interest, choice and role in learning. PjBL is also effective for acquisition of information, retention, and increased focus.

More interestingly, students show their awareness of PjBL's relevance to the real world. They can apply its benefits, such as negotiation, problem solving skills, flexibility, in their real life. Hence, PjBL caters to different needs and preferences, and creates an environment conducive to growth and risk taking in a novel fun way.

Additionally, the findings revealed a shift in students' perceptions of learning. Playing an active role, along with having ownership over the learning process challenged the traditional, passive way of learning. Respondents' approach to learning shifted to a more dynamic process in which activities and phases are interconnected and lead to a broader outcome. This shift results in high readiness and enthusiasm to further study through PjBL in the future, not only the English language, but also other subjects. Such a change in perceptions is a testament to a well-developed interest in PjBL on the part of students.

Project-Based Learning approach is found to exert a positive influence on learners' engagement at different dimensions. The findings indicate a high level of students' behavioral engagement shown in their active interaction with their peers, tasks, and other groups. It is also shown in their involvement with different activities in different settings like the classroom, the school library, and home. Such an involvement takes away the passive inclination that stamped the nature of EFL classes for a long time. It shows the potential of PjBL in unlocking students' ability in assuming an active role in their learning. Zhong et al., (2023) studied the factors which determine learners' behavioral engagement in PjBL in a Chinese college. They report that group dynamics, authentic tasks, responsibility towards completing tasks are determinant factors leading to persistence. These findings are also in line with the findings of a qualitative study conducted by Simatupang and Yusuf (2024) in an Indonesian high school. They show that PjBL enhances students' behavioral engagement thanks to its structured phases. The study highlighted frequent instances of students giving opinions, being good listeners, providing answers, and completing activities. Their body language further showed their involvement.

The reported emotional engagement also proved students' positive attitudes towards learning and marked high levels of enthusiasm towards the approach. Their enjoyment and excitement serve as a strong incentive for students to invest efforts in their learning. Those positive emotions are attributed to the characteristics of PjBL. The latter put collaboration and communication at the heart of learning. Developing feelings of belonging and achievement is a further emotional outcome triggered by PjBL. In the same vein, Zhong et al., (2023) found that interesting content and enjoyable experiences ignite students' enthusiasm to attain better results. They found that PjBL facilitate these positive feelings. Aubrey (2022) further explored the effects of PjBL on emotions within a Japanese classroom. He found that PjBL enhances group cohesion and interpersonal relationships between peers and creates a sense of belonging. All of which result in an emotional investment in students' learning experience.

Agentic engagement, demonstrated through taking agency over learning, making decisions, seeking help, and reflecting, shows a great deal of responsibility and leadership skills. These skills grow out of an encouraging teaching atmosphere, which is conducive to boosting students' self-confidence and productivity. Findings depict students' awareness of their role as active learners. Such an active role is evident in taking responsibility for their own artifacts in particular, and their overall progress in general. Interestingly, Zhong et al., (2023) highlighted that PjBL promotes the desire for achievement and facilitates agentic engagement.

With respect to cognitive engagement, students made use of categorizing, word mapping, outlining, ordering, organizing and presenting strategies, all of which are instances inherent in the PjBL phases. Instances of focus, information acquisition, retention and reflection were frequently present in participants' descriptions. Additionally, participants showed an ability to connect the content and the acquired skills to their real life, which further demonstrates their cognitive thinking. Simatupang and Yusuf (2024) further reported the important role PjBL plays in facilitating cognitive immersion. The latter appears in frequent instances of students giving opinions and comments, analyzing, using arguments, and organizing their work. Aubrey (2022) further reported that the focus on the project outcome kept learners concentrated on generating and doing the different activities that eventually result in a final outcome. Such an intense focus is a further determinant factor of engagement in PjBL classes.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study has been conducted to reveal deep insights into how students' interest and engagement in learning English could be influenced by the teaching approach, particularly Project-Based Learning. The research depicted the ways in which the four phases of interest proposed by Hidi and Renninger (2006) appear in learners' perceptions at different dimensions. Furthermore, the study investigated the behavioral, emotional, cognitive and agentic facets of engagement refined by Oga-Baldwin (2019).

Findings show that interest and engagement overlap and greatly influence and shape the learning experience. A successful class is one in which students are interested and engaged. Interest and engagement emerge, develop and increase through different variables, features and practices. PjBL is a fertile ground for growing and boosting both interest and engagement thanks to its different characteristics, phases and benefits. Additionally, findings revealed that PjBL not only increased their interest and engagement in learning, but it reshaped their overall perception of learning. Those tangible benefits of PjBL are not limited only to acquisition of content, but they also include life skills. PjBL's ability to reshape learners' notion on education and render them active agents over the learning process make it a valuable pedagogical approach worth of adoption.

Not only did this study reveal the PjBL value and potential, but it also unlocked learners' aspirations and desires towards how learning could function, and how the learning environment could affect the overall learning experience. Findings suggest that students are interested and willing to engage in classroom activities which share principles of novelty, choice, ownership, and which put the learner at the center of the learning experience. The same student who once seemed disinterested, passive and disengaged could turn to a highly interactive and well-involved one thanks to a change in the learning philosophy.

PjBL is not just a series of phases learners need to follow to produce a final artifact. It is a broader philosophy pertaining to shifting the focus from the teacher to students. The latter are perceived as responsible, active agents who have ownership over their learning process. Such ownership does not only affect content acquisition but also facilitates the learning of real-life skills and makes sense of the link between school and the real world. Therefore, at the broader level, it is of extreme importance to policy makers and curriculum designers to integrate PjBL instruction in the English language curriculum. It is also necessary for educators to adopt such an approach to witness its various benefits. PjBL stands as an effective approach to learning that is worth the effort it needs for its implementation. At the specific level, curriculums need to provide more choices for students over activities and over their roles. They also need to provide presentation and reflection opportunities. Further, a shift toward employing more collaboration and cooperation in completing tasks needs to be considered. More authentic, interesting and captivating tasks and activities that could be linked to real life situations would also increase learners' productivity.

7. Limitations

One limitation of this piece of research concerns the generalizability of the findings. The number of participants in this study is not only very limited but also specific to one level which is common core. Further research could employ a quantitative design with a larger sample. Different levels could also be considered to explore and measure the PBL effect on students at different developmental levels. Further, this research employed only one research instrument: semi-structured interviews. Such a type of research could make use of observation. The latter provides natural data from natural settings, which could support participants' perceptions regarding their engagement and interest. Further, researcher's subjectivity could be a further limitation to this study. A peered analysis and interpretation of results could minimize the researcher's subjectivity and bias.

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