

Bridging Theory and Practice: Project-Based Learning in EFL Classrooms

Ram Nath Neupane, PhD

Lecturer, Tribhuvan University

Email : ramnath.tmc@gmail.com

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Abstract

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a learner-centred approach that develops learner autonomy, collaboration, and active participation in the learning process. It leads the students to overcome real-world problems through individual learning styles, strengths, and capacities. The present study aims to explore the classroom implementation of project-based learning in EFL classrooms. To achieve this, five English language teachers from two constituent campuses of Tribhuvan University were purposively selected and semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guideline to gather the intended information. The collected data were analyzed under different themes based on their responses. The findings reveal that teachers emphasize the teaching importance of PBL in developing learner-centered teaching, enhancing critical thinking, and encouraging integration of four language skills in authentic contexts. However, they also reported various challenges, such as time constraints, large classrooms, and limited training that hinder adoption of PBL. Addressing such issues can promote learner autonomy, engagement, and meaningful learning outcomes. The study recommends sufficient teacher training, curriculum reform, policy design, evaluation rethink, and strong institutional support to make the PBL more effective in EFL context.

KEYWORDS: Alternative assessment, authentic tasks, language integration, field work, learner-centred

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone many changes due to the invent of new technology, updated teaching ideas, and strong focus on learner autonomy. Traditional methods, such as grammar drills and memorizing rules are being replaced with more interactive ways of learning that focus on real communication and student participation (Richards, 2015; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Modern ELT methods aim to improve real-life communication skills, employ tasks for learning, and include cultural context to make learning more meaningful (Ellis, 2003; Kramsch, 1993). One such method is project-based language teaching (PBLT), where students work on real tasks in groups, think critically, and explore topics deeply. It helps learners use the language to solve problems, which matches the goals of communicative teaching and prepares them for 21st-century skills (Stoller, 2006; Beckett & Slater, 2005).

Project-Based Learning (PBL) differs from traditional lessons that are shorter and teacher-centred. As an alternative, it emphasizes longer tasks across different subjects and real-world issues. This helps students explore big ideas and solve complex problems (Education Technology Division, 2006). PBL also promotes thinking skills like analyzing and evaluating. Since it is based on research and hands-on learning, learners actively explore questions and challenges over time (Bell, 2010; Frank & Barzilai, 2004). It supports key 21st-century skills, such as communication, teamwork, creativity, and critical thinking in which students are provided situations and they solve problems and make decisions (Lattimer & Riordan, 2011).

Project-based methods are useful in language learning as they allow students integrate four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Project-based method, also called project-based language teaching, considers language as a **tool** for learning, sharing ideas, and presenting information (Stoller, 2006). Students do research, understand information, work in groups, and produce spoken or written results. These are real-world language tasks (Hedge, 2008). Activities in PBL may include interviews, group talks, observations, and presentations that focuses on learner autonomy and teamwork (Richards et al., 1985). However, at Tribhuvan University, the successful implementation of project-based language teaching is very difficult task due to the limited resources. Teachers may not have internet, sufficient books, or teaching materials. In such cases, low-cost or free projects that use local environments and personal experiences should be adopted (Reid, 2008). There are various examples of tasks, such as community interviews, reports on local issues, or nature observations. These tasks help students practice meaningful language skills. By using what is locally available and encouraging students to take the lead, PBL can still be very effective in developing language skills.

Project work is a pivotal aspect of project based language teaching. It places the students at the center of learning and helps them to be more independent, creative, and cooperative. Project work engages learners in authentic tasks that combine language with meaningful communication (Fried-Booth, 2002; Stoller, 2006). These authentic tasks follow the stages like planning, collecting information, analyzing it, and presenting results. Projects often take place outside the classroom, into the real world (Hedge, 2008). Students work together and manage their projects that promotes motivation and mirrors the ideas of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Students can choose topics they enjoy or know about, making them more involved and creating a sense of teamwork and success (Hedge, 2008; Richards, 2006). Project work develops autonomy, creativity, and cooperation by engaging learners in meaningful tasks. Through stages like planning, researching, and presenting, it enhances motivation, teamwork, and communication while linking learning to real-world experiences and interests.

Project work brings both process and product learning (Stoller, 2002). It highlights more on learning content than just grammar or vocabulary that provides students a full learning experience. Through research and teamwork, students gather and analyze information and use language to share their results. The final products, such as reports,

posters, or presentations give purpose to their learning. Students work on both fluency and accuracy during the process, where they learn language in meaningful ways. Project work helps build student confidence, independence, and 21st century skills. It also encourages creativity and enjoyment, making language learning more fun and effective.

Tribhuvan University has introduced the semester system for all Master's programs and certain Bachelor's programs, with both internal and final assessments. The semester system has led to significant transformations in teaching approaches, curricular designs, and evaluation methods. The new curriculum follows a constructivist approach that focuses more on student-centred learning, real-life problem-solving, and critical thinking (Fosnot, 2013; Savery & Duffy, 1995). This approach makes learning more meaningful and useful for students in their personal and professional lives. Instead of traditional lessons, teachers at present era, employ interactive and reflective strategies that help students understand better and become more independent learners. The curriculum also promotes inquiry-based and hands-on learning, the use of technology, and the development of 21st-century skills like communication, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving (Richardson, 2003). In this new system, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has become an effective teaching method which permits students to lead their learning by working on meaningful projects that involve critical thinking, research, and real-life application. In EFL contexts, Project-Based Learning (PBL) provides students with opportunities to use English in authentic situations, which enhances their language proficiency and builds their confidence in communication. Studies reveal that PBL improves language learning and supports students' thinking, social, and emotional growth (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Stoller, 2006). In this context, the present study aims to explore the practice of project-based language teaching in the EFL classrooms.

Literature Review

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is useful in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings that supports active learning and overall student development. It allows students to do meaningful, group-based tasks where they use language while solving real-world problems. In this context, Haines (1989) asserted that project work should include non-language tasks, such as designing, drawing, and organizing. These tasks encourage students learn practical skills, be more creative, and do the activities actively. Supe and Kaupuzs (2015) claimed, PBL promotes students to use target language in real situations that assists them learn through teamwork. Aslanides et al. (2016) reported that PBL helps students move away from teacher-centred approach to explore, question, and solve problems on their own that builds their critical thinking skills. Aksela and Haatainen (2019) found that PBL helps both strong and weak students by encouraging cooperation and helping everyone grow.

In English language teaching (ELT), project work is useful for the integration of language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Beckett and Slater (2005) claimed that students in PBL use the language in meaningful ways that increases motivation

and supports fair assessment. However, for PBL to work well, tasks should be planned, and teachers should support regular guidance.

In higher education, PBL helps students connect theory with practice. It usually involves planning, doing, and presenting a task that results in a final product like a report or a presentation (Thomas, 2000; Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Bell (2010) noted that such projects increase student autonomy, intensify learning, and help apply knowledge in real life. At Tribhuvan University, project work is included in Master and Bachelor programs (e.g., MBS, BBA in Management, M.Ed/B.ED. in Education, and MA/BA in Humanities), with the aim of enhancing research, writing, and presentation skills. However, studies, such as Sharma (2017) and Adhikari (2024) reported some issues, such as poor supervision, unpreparedness of students, and unclear grading. For Paudel (2020), many students do not get proper training in research and face time limits and limited support.

Assessment is another challenge in PBL. Experts support, making rubrics, portfolios, and peer or self-assessment make grading more fair and useful (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Andrade, 2005). However, at T.U., project grading is still often based on final exams, with little feedback or transparency. Joshi (2019), Poudel and Sigdel (2023) found the problems like unclear roles, poor time management, and lack of support in assessment process. Supervisors are often overloaded with work and don't know what is expected from them. Students claim that they need more guidance, clearer instructions, and regular feedback.

Studies, such as Bhandari (2021) and Bastola (2021), show that Project-Based Learning boosts critical thinking and communication in EFL contexts. However, it is a significant challenging to implement PBL at Tribhuvan University due to poor supervision, insufficient training, traditional assessment methods, and a lack of institutional support. As a result, student engagement, feedback quality, and learning outcomes are negatively affected. In this reference, the present study aims to explore the practices of PBL at Tribhuvan University, focusing on challenges and overcoming them in EFL contexts.

Methodology

Since the study explored the practice of project based learning at Tribhuvan university, the researcher adopted, an interpretivist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology as it allows the multiple realities of the participants (Cohen et al., 2018). This philosophy aligns with the knowledge that is co-constructed through social interaction and interpretation in a particular context. Similarly, this research employs a descriptive phenomenological research design aiming to express the essence of participants' lived experiences (Creswell, & Creswell, 2020). Based these philosophies and research design, data were purposively collected from five university EFL teachers in Nepal. Among them, one teacher was an associate professor, two were assistant professors and the other two were teaching assistants. They had extensive experience of teaching English as a foreign language at Tribhuvan University. Such various kinds of teachers were included in the study to gather intended information from diverse perspectives. To fulfill the objectives, an interview

guideline was developed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted, aiming to explore their perspectives freely. Teachers were interviewed at their campus premises using Nepali language for the ease of exploration and communication. All the interviews were video-taped through mobile phone to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness of data. The collected information was transcribed into English and organized it, creating different themes. To ensure the ethical rigor of the study, participants' identities were anonymized providing identification codes prefixed with "T," and all personal identifiers were removed from the text to maintain the ethical standards (Miles et al., 2014).

Results and Discussions

After conducting interviews with teachers, the finding is organized under six specific themes. They provide the key concepts and experiences, practice of the teachers on project based learning.

Teacher Perceptions on PBL

Perception simply refers to the way how we receive something. There are mixed perceptions of teachers on PBL. Teachers who received training for professional growth are usually more confident and better realize PBL's benefits for deeper learning and long-term memory. In this light, one teacher (T1) believes that:

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is very important approach in English language learning as it provides students an opportunity to gain and rehearse real-life skills. It also enhances communication, problem-solving, and leadership skills of the learners. This method also integrates four language skills- listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

PBL strongly support language learning by involving students in meaningful tasks, which integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It also promotes communication, problem-solving, leadership, and collaboration that help the learners to develop real-life skills.

However, teachers (e.g. T2 & T3) are not willing to employ PBL in their language classrooms due to some practical challenges, including limited time and technology, large class sizes, rigid curricula and institutional support, and unclear assessment approach.

As reported by T2 and T3, many teachers are not willing to implement PBL in language classrooms due to various factors, such as limited instructional time, large class sizes, inadequate access to technology, and insufficient teacher training. Without proper support and guidance, teachers cannot properly manage group work activities, assess individual endeavor, and projects with course objectives.

Curricular Goals and Classroom Practice

There are specific goals and objectives of curriculum. The curricular goals are usually designed, incorporating both hard and soft skills of a particular subject. At Tribhuvan University, particularly in the semester system, the curriculum has been designed to bridge hard skills, such as specific knowledge and technical competencies, and soft skills,

such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. However, it is difficult to meet the practical implementation of these goals as T2 claims:

The present curriculum aims to develop both soft and hard skills. However, in practice, most teachers mainly focus on theory for exam purpose. This limits students' opportunity for interactive learning.

This remark suggests that although the present curriculum is designed to promote both practical and interpersonal skills, its implementation is very weak as teachers emphasize mostly on theory and exam. As a result, it limits students' interactive learning experiences.

Many teachers often focus on delivering contents due to some challenges such as, limited time, large class sizes, and insufficient training in pedagogy and technology. By ignoring the major soft skills, it can create a huge gap between curricular goals and classroom practice. As a result, teachers need the programs such as, professional development, institutional support, and a practical conjunction between curricular goals and classroom implementation. As one teacher (T5) remarked:

There is a huge gap between the curriculum design and its implementation in the classroom. Only theoretical questions are asked in the final exams. As a result, many students are not interested in project work activities. Even when they are given the tasks, they either copy the work or leave the tasks incomplete.

The exam policy at TU emphasizes only theoretical questions, which may create a gap between the curricular goals and classroom practice. Consequently, students show little interest in project work, pushing them to copying or leaving tasks unfinished.

The education system primarily depends on traditional examinations, limiting space for the continuous, practical assessment integral to PBL. In addition, large class sizes and insufficient resources make it challenging for teachers to facilitate group work or hands-on learning activities.

Student Autonomy and Motivation

Student autonomy and motivation are the core aspects of effective higher education, especially in the project based learning, a student centred approach. At Tribhuvan University, the position of student autonomy and ownership of learning varies among the teachers. In this light, one teacher (T4) noted:

PBL helps students take charge of their learning. It encourages students to be more active, provide alternatives, and reflect about their tasks. When students work on real-life projects, they become more responsible and conscious about their tasks and employ their thinking skills better. As a result, their learning become more engaging and interesting.

PBL helps students to become more active in their own learning by developing learner autonomy, problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking skills. It also promotes a sense of responsibility and motivation.

However, some fundamental challenges such as, rigid curricula, heavy loaded courses, teacher-centered methodologies, and traditional assessment system lead to rote

learning. Furthermore, students have very limited experience of self-directed learning and they need some guidance to make autonomous and conducive learning environments.

Student motivation and interest are globally accepted as academic success and purposeful engagement in higher education. At Tribhuvan University, as highlighted by T3: *Student motivation is essential for project implementation. However, it is affected by various factors, such as instructional pedagogies, classroom environment, and interesting, and meaningful course contents. The assessment tools that we employ in the classrooms should motivate and engage the learners in their learning activities.*

This reveals that student motivation is shaped by various factors, such as instructional techniques, a interactive learning environment, and meaningful and engaging contents. Assessment should enhance student motivation and active engagement in their learning.

Project-based learning can enhance intrinsic motivation, helping students to take charge of their learning and align it with real-world context. However, some barriers such as rigid curricula, institutional pressure and limited resources hinder their implementation.

Selection and Relevance of Project Topics

At Tribhuvan University (TU), selection of project topic is often hindered by rigid curricula, insufficient training, and a not proper relation between academic content and real-world contexts. In this reference, all teachers had similar opinions and they claimed:

Many students select the project topics that are easy and interesting to them. Some students select them based on available resource materials while others do it on the basis of relevance. However, a small number of students still depend on teachers and supervisors.

PBL encourages students to choose topics that interest them personally. They should have social relevance, learner engagement, and deeper learning. However, students can select the topics on the basis of their interest, availability of data or resources or as suggested by teachers. Therefore, the first and most important task is to find the project topic. For Neupane (2009), the student can select project topics on the basis of their interest, level of expertise, relevance, availability of materials, and measurement.

The interaction on PBL classes increases to a more authentic inquiry and deeper thinking skill when students identify the personal and social relevance of their projects. Therefore, Tribhuvan University should take a flexible, and learner-centered approach, which supports interdisciplinary exploration and tackles community-specific issues.

Integration of Language and Assessment

At Tribhuvan University (TU), teachers usually do not integrate four language skills. As a result, it limits opportunities for interactive and meaningful language use. It is a project-based learning (PBL), which provides a framework to integrate language skills through real-world tasks, developing communication, collaboration, and critical thinking as T5 reported:

Project based learning integrates various language skills in their context. At the time of project work, it is essential to read the authentic materials for information, write the reports for reflections and dissemination, listen to peers or authentic materials for comprehension, and discuss with informants, teachers and peers for communicative competence. This method contrasts to traditional teaching approach that promotes only rote learning and grammatical accuracy.

This reveals that project work integrates four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. At present, Tribhuvan University has transformed its assessment system, moving from paper pencil test to alternative assessment system. In assessment system, students are required to submit their term-papers, by engaging students in tasks and activities that reflect real world language use. These project works require students to read academic and authentic texts, comprehend and synthesize information in writing, discuss findings collaboratively, and present results orally. PBL promotes both fluency and accuracy, fostering learner autonomy and motivation.

Unlike paper pencil tests that focus on rote learning, alternative assessments such as portfolios, oral presentations, peer evaluations, and self-assessments enhance the problem-solving, creativity, and collaborative nature of student work. At Tribhuvan University, these methods can be effectively employed to align assessment with the core aspects of PBL. For instance, T1 asserts:

I adopt various assessment tools, such as oral presentation, writing report, peer and self-assessment to evaluate their speaking and writing skills. These activities aim to promote collaboration, problem solving, leadership and critical thinking skills of students. Alternative assessment is more practical, relevant and engaging method than traditional exams, focusing on rote learning.

However, with the absence of clear guidelines, its implementation is very poor. Many teachers do not want to employ alternative assessment tools due to the lack of knowledge and skills. Thus, TU needs to make clear policies, provide the training to the faculties, follow the continuous assessment system to evaluate and grade the students. This system can maintain the reliability and transparency of evaluations as they will be engaged in reflective practice for continuous improvement. Adopting alternative assessment is therefore crucial for promoting quality and equity in higher education at TU.

Implementation of Project Based Learning

The effective implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) at Tribhuvan University (TU) needs administrative and institutional support to solve the challenges related to student centred approach as a teacher (T4) noted:

I think administrators and institutions do not fully support for the teachers who want to employ PBL in regular classrooms as this approach is expensive in one hand and our exam system does not fully recognize it on the other. Instead, teachers follow traditional teaching methods, focusing on rote learning rather than encouraging students to think critically.

Schools and administrators often resist using Project-Based Learning (PBL) because they favor traditional teaching methods, which focus on memorization rather than critical thinking or problem-solving.

Teachers need special training in PBL as they have poor skills of designing lessons, implementing in regular classrooms and evaluating them effectively. Similarly, the time constraints hinder the implementation of this approach as there is always pressure of completing course in time, especially in semester system so that teachers and students do not give time for PBL. Nature of the class is another factor of not implementing PBL effectively as many classes are large, and heterogeneous in Nepalese context. T2 suggests that:

Successful implementation of PBL depends on teacher training, particularly in developing collaborative tasks and integrating language development with content instruction. The real-world tasks such as interviews, surveys, and tests are essential to employ PBL in the classrooms.

Implementing Project-Based Learning depends on training of teachers. Teachers should support collaborative planning and integrate language learning with content instructions, leading students in real-world activities like interviews, and surveys to promote experiential learning. Project based learning should promote authentic outcomes, such as oral presentations or written reports. It should combine both process and product based assessment methods. Institutional support is essential for enhancing a conducive learning environment.

Teachers' practice of Project-Based Learning (PBL) emphasize both potential and challenges in higher education, particularly at Tribhuvan University. Research reveals that professional training significantly promotes teachers' confidence and understanding of PBL, enabling them to recognize its benefits for long-term learning and practical skill development (Thomas, 2000). Experienced and trained teachers realize that PBL engages students in meaningful tasks integrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which fosters communication, creativity, leadership, and collaboration. This holistic approach contrasts sharply with traditional methods that often focus on rote learning and exam performance.

Despite these benefits, practical aspects limit effective PBL implementation. Large class sizes, limited instructional time, inadequate technological resources, and unclear assessment guidelines impede teachers' ability to facilitate interactive, and student-centered learning (Adhikari, 2024). Moreover, curricular activities centred on theoretical knowledge and examinations often limit opportunities for project-based activities, promoting critical thinking and problem-solving (Condliffe et al., 2017; Pham, 2021). Teachers also report that students' engagement with projects may be superficial, with tasks completed superficially or copied, reflecting the pressure to succeed in traditional exams (Rahimi & Sajed, 2014).

Student autonomy and intrinsic motivation, central to PBL, are further constrained by rigid curricula, teacher-centered pedagogies, and limited prior experience with self-

directed learning (Candy, 1991; Little, 1991; Pham, 2021). However, when students are empowered to pursue real-life projects, teachers observe enhanced motivation, ownership, and deeper learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Thomas, 2000). Challenges in project topic selection also affect engagement, as students often choose for ease or teacher-recommended topics rather than exploring personally or socially meaningful issues (Blumenfeld et al., 1991).

Language learning particularly benefits from PBL, as it integrates four language skills in authentic contexts, promoting fluency and accuracy while encouraging learner autonomy (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Nation & Newton, 2009). Assessment practices are critical; alternative assessments such as portfolios, oral presentations, peer evaluations, and self-assessments capture collaborative and practical learning more effectively than traditional exams, enhancing teamwork and problem-solving skills (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Moss & Brookhart, 2009). Yet, inconsistent implementation due to lack of structured guidelines lessens their potential. Finally, institutional and administrative support is crucial for successful PBL implementation. Faculty development, curriculum flexibility, clear guidelines, and resource management are necessary to create authentic learning experiences, cultivating linguistic competence, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary skills (Mergendoller et al., 2006; Stoller, 2002; Mani & Deepthi, 2010). Without such support, even trained and motivated teachers face obstacles in fully realizing PBL's potential.

Conclusion

This study explored teachers' practice of project based learning at Tribhuvan University, using a semi-structured interview. Five English language teachers were purposively selected from two constituent campuses of Tribhuvan University. The study concludes that English language teachers at TU recognize the value of PBL that enhances communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking skills. It also promotes a sense of responsibility and intrinsic motivation, helping students to take charge of their learning and better align with real-world context. PBL encourages students to choose project topics that interest them personally. They should have social relevance, learner engagement, and deeper learning. Students can select the topics on the basis of their expertise, availability of data or resources. Teachers who received training for professional growth are usually more confident and better realize PBL's benefits for deeper learning and long-term memory. This method also integrates four language skills- listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Teachers often focus on delivering contents due to some challenges, such as large class sizes, and insufficient training in pedagogy and technology. By ignoring the major soft skills, such as communication and critical thinking skills, it can create a huge gap between curricular goals and classroom practice. Many teachers do not want to employ alternative assessment tools due to the lack of their knowledge and skills. Similarly, the time constraints hinder the adoption of this approach as there is always pressure of completing course in time, especially in semester system.

Implementing Project-Based Learning (PBL) depends on training of teachers. Teachers should support collaborative planning and integrate language learning with content instructions, leading students in real-world activities like interviews, and surveys to promote experiential learning. Project based learning should promote authentic outcomes, such as oral presentations or written reports. It should combine both process and product based assessment methods. Teachers need special training in PBL as they do not have proper skills in designing lessons, implementing in regular classrooms and evaluating them effectively. Similarly, TU needs to make clear policies, provide the training to the faculties, follow the continuous assessment system to evaluate and grade the students. This system can maintain the reliability and transparency of evaluations as they will be engaged in reflective practice for continuous improvement.

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