



## Enhancing Academic Reading Proficiency with Project-Based Instruction

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper looks into how Project-Based Learning (PBL) is used in higher education's EAP and ESP courses to help students become more proficient academic readers in English. The purpose of these courses is to help students become more adept at critical thinking while also getting them ready to use English in a classroom. Despite their strong linguistic ability, students are unable to improve their reading skills because they lack motivation to read. The claim that PBL considerably enhances pupils' academic reading abilities over conventional teaching techniques was put to the test. The results from the experimental and control groups were analysed and compared using an experimental study approach. The hypothesis is supported by the findings of the independent and dependent t-tests. Coursebooks used in field-related courses, internet resources, and items pertinent to the students' topic of study from ESP courses are all included in the reading assignments. Project assignments encourage EFL students to read interesting and helpful content.*

**Keywords:** reading skills, EAP, Project-Based Learning, ESP

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Through the use of projects, teachers can impart to their students a variety of skills that are essential for success in the twenty-first century. Inquiry-based learning is the responsibility of the individual student, and group projects are produced as a result of research collaboration (Bell, 2010, p. 39). When putting PBL into practice, there are a number of important factors to consider, including managing time and student groups, creating a culture that values student self-management, collaborating with people outside of the classroom, making efficient use of technology, and assessing and evaluating students and their projects (Mergendoller & Thomas, 2005, p. 1).

The purpose of tertiary EAP and ESP courses is to get students ready for academic English usage while also connecting the language to their area of study. Language proficiency and professional advancement are closely related (Spahiu, 2021, p. 288). Despite their strong linguistic ability, students are unable to improve their reading skills because they lack motivation to read. Thus, one of the four abilities that ESP and EAP courses seek to cultivate is academic reading, which can be improved by EFL learners through the use of PBL.

The research issues that the project attempts to address are as follows:

*1. In ESP and EAP courses, can project-based learning improve academic reading skills? and 2. What kinds of exercises are best for honing academic reading abilities?*

The claim that PBL considerably enhances pupils' academic reading abilities over conventional teaching techniques was put to the test.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading has been extensively examined at various educational levels as a receptive skill. Numerous writers have studied how PBL can help university students improve their reading abilities (Kavlu, 2015; Shiraz & Larsari, 2014; Mejang, 2008).

Over the course of four months, 120 Iranian students at the B1 level participated in experimental research done by Shiraz and Larsari. The pupils were split up into two experimental groups and one control group. Data analysis was done using One-way ANOVA. It was shown that there was a positive association ( $F=26,266$ ) between the usage of PBL and the improvement of reading abilities in EFL classes. The second experimental group's results are consistent with the first experimental group's statistically significant progress. The average value rose by twelve points. While the control group also improved, it was not as significantly as the two experimental groups (pre-test  $M=23,35$ , post-test  $M=32,15$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

Mejang (2008) dealt with eighty Thai medical students whose ability in English varied from A2 to B2. For four months, the pupils were enrolled in an EAP course. Every pupil took part in the experimental group. The dependent t-test findings show that PBL considerably raised pupils' academic reading proficiency. The absence of a control group is the study's limitation.

Kavlu (2015) comprised forty-five A2 first-year Indian students. Participants were ELT students who took a semester-long EFL course. One group served as the control, and the other as the experimental. Kavlu demonstrated that PBL produces superior outcomes to conventional instruction using an independent t-test. On the post-test, the control group's mean value decreased from  $M=77,905$  on the pre-test to  $M=69,702$ . In the post-test, the experimental group's mean value climbed from  $M=77,905$  on the pre-test to  $M=87,619$ . As a result, Kavlu supported the theory that PBL is more effective than traditional teaching techniques at improving reading skills.

There was just one group of students at the B2 level among the participants in these research, who were students with English proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B1. Our study concentrated on students who had higher proficiency levels, such as B1, B2, and C1 levels, in order to obtain deeper understanding of how PBL might improve reading skills when applied to high-proficiency kids.

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### 3. METHODOLOGY

The data gathered from the pre- and post-tests were analysed and compared using an experimental research approach. A placement test, a reading pre-test, a reading post-test, a needs analysis questionnaire, and a survey at the conclusion of the semester were among the tools used to gather data.

Eighty students were split into two groups, forty in each: the experimental group and the control group. The three faculties from which the students were drawn were the faculties of engineering, accounting, and human resource management. A placement exam administered prior to the semester's start indicated that 34% of them were at the B1 level, 55% were at the B2 level, and 11% were at the C1 level in accordance with the CEFR for languages. They participated in the required English language 1 course, which combines elements of an ESP and an EAP course. A reading pre-test and a reading post-test were administered to the students at the start and end of the semester, respectively. The experimental group underwent the PBL, receiving eight project assignments in the form of projects either every two weeks or every week. Traditional assignments, mostly reading and writing exercises from the course book, were assigned to the students in the control group. Every project was customised to fit the requirements of students from various departments.

The pre-test and post-test data were analysed using SPSS Statistics V.22. Each group's results were compared using a dependent t-test, and the control group's findings were compared to those of the experimental group using an independent t-test. In the section that follows, the findings are displayed in tables.

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### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students completed the needs analysis form before the course started. According to the findings, 33% of the students anticipated learning vocabulary connected to ESP, which was followed by the ability to comprehend texts written by professionals and speak clearly when utilising ESP and EAP.

While 25% of the students favoured traditional teaching approaches, over half of them preferred interactive classrooms. Of the respondents, 36% would rather work in groups, 24% would rather work alone, and 24% enjoy project work. Just 16 percent of the pupils selected pair work. Because professors keep their attention during class, students also prefer dynamic learning environments. Just 5% of the pupils said they prefer traditional methods of instruction.

Students selected multiple choices for every question pertaining to the course materials for English as a foreign language courses. Specifically, texts on subjects linked to their field of study (21%) and ESP coursebooks (16%) were chosen by a similar number of students as standard English coursebooks and audio and video materials connected to their field of study (25 percent each).

The majority of students believe that the English course intended as an ESP course is essential for their higher education and future careers, according to the needs analysis of students. The primary cause of this is that none of the pupils had ever studied ESP before.

Regarding language competency, 50% of the pupils assessed their English knowledge as B2, 45% thought they were at a B2, and only 5% thought they were at a C1. These answers line up with the placement test results.

Students' main goals for the course are to increase their speaking and academic writing abilities, as well as to broaden their knowledge of academic vocabulary and ESP terminology.

Students want to improve their ability to read both general and professional literature in terms of reading subskills.

The course and project assignments were created using the findings of the needs analysis conducted with the students.

To find out if there was a difference between the control and experimental groups' mean points scored on the pre- and post-tests, an independent-samples t-test was performed. The pre-test values for the experimental group ( $M=19,78$ ,  $SD=2,98$ ) and the control group ( $M=19,90$ ,  $SD=2,86$ ) do not significantly differ from one another, according to the results [ $t=-,268$ ,  $p=.789 >.05$ ], indicating that the groups were homogeneous at the start of the study. The control group ( $M=19,300$ ,  $SD=3,188$ ) and the experimental group ( $M=22,62$ ,  $SD=2,508$ ) had significantly different post-test scores [ $t=5,184$ ,  $p=.000 <.05$ ]. As

a result, we can rule out the null hypothesis, which states that PBL has no effect on students' academic reading abilities when compared to conventional teaching techniques. Moreover, does project-based learning improve students' academic reading abilities in ESP and EAP courses? is the first study question. may receive a favourable response.

Pre-test		N	M	SD	t	p
Reading	1,0	40	19,78	2,98	-,268	,789
	2,0	40	19,90	2,86		
Post-test		N	M	SD	t	p
Reading	1,0	40	22,62	2,508	5,184	,000
	2,0	40	19,300	3,188		

Table 1: Results of the independent t-test for the control and experimental group

A dependent t-test was used to measure the progress students made in each group by comparing the points on the pre-test and post-test and whether there was a significant difference in the mean values of the test scores.

The pre-test value (M=19,95, SD=2,55) and the post-test value (M=20,25, SD=2,71) do not significantly differ from one another, according to the findings of the t-test with the control group [ $t=-,268$ ,  $p=.789 >.05$ ]. This indicates that there was no discernible improvement in reading proficiency in the control group. Conversely, the experimental group's t-test results show a significant difference in the values between the pre-test (M=19,77; SD=2,98) and the post-test (M=22,62; SD=2,50), [ $t=-,268$ ,  $p=.000 <.05$ ], indicating that the project-based learning approach improved the students' academic reading skills. Therefore, the hypothesis of the effectiveness of PBL in comparison with traditional teaching methods can be confirmed once again.

The kinds of exercises that are appropriate for enhancing students' academic reading abilities in ESP and EAP courses are the subject of the second research topic. As per the course syllabus, reading skills development exercises were incorporated into seven out of eight projects. These tasks included scanning, skimming, and intensive reading of information obtained on websites, blogs, ESP coursebooks, and journal articles on research relating to the students' field of study. The students were required to select, examine, assess, and present readings that were pertinent to their intended careers using their critical thinking abilities. The project tasks weren't based on course books; instead, they were actual. Students were required to work on an actual problem and come up with a potential solution, which they then had to show to lecturers or other students. Alternatively, they were required to upload texts to the university website or use the app.bookcreator.com website to make an electronic book. Because they had a readership for their writing, students were extremely motivated to read and write.

The experimental group's students were invited to complete a survey at the end of the semester to share their thoughts on the application of PBL in general and the growth of their academic reading abilities. There were two sets of questions on the questionnaire. On a 5-point Likert scale, there were 15 assertions in the first group. According to the findings, half of the kids would rather work in a group than alone. In comparison to traditional instruction, the same number of students believe that PBL aids in their reading ability development. Most students believe that PBL improved their research, presentation, and time-management abilities.

A third of the students think that PBL takes a lot of time since it requires them to work outside of class, even if they think it's great for learning foreign languages because it connects theory to practice and gives them more independence. Since PBL does not aid in EFL learning, the remaining 20% of students do not think it is beneficial.

While nearly 90% of the students reported having no technical difficulties while working on the project tasks—such as challenges with Internet connection or other ICT and computer literacy issues—the majority of them only partially agree that it was easy to find the essential material for all projects.

Most notably, almost 65 percent of the students stated that PBL inspired them to read English-language materials more than traditional teaching methods did. Lastly, almost 90% of respondents agree or strongly agree that using PBL in EFL classes has greatly improved their English. They also concurred that PBL assisted them in developing their academic and general English vocabulary as well as field-specific terms.

The second set of questions consisted of five open-ended questions whose purpose was to find out what the students thought about the project assignments—that is, which ones they thought were most or least useful, most or least boring, and interesting—as well as whether they had any recommendations regarding the application of the project-based method to English language learning. The responses from the students were very different. It was intriguing to see that the project that was deemed most fascinating also happened to be the most challenging. Students were instructed to use a variety of computer programmes to design the university's ground floor for this specific project. Reading about and conducting interviews with academic staff and students on diversity and cultural differences proved to be the most beneficial task.

Because PBL encourages students to study, half of the students had no comments or recommendations on its application in their EFL classes. However, they would like to see it employed more frequently. While 32% recommended more frequent teacher-student interactions and extending project submission deadlines to students, 18% of respondents did not respond to this issue. Teachers might then keep a tight eye on their students—especially when they are working in groups. Students would prefer to have more leeway in selecting their themes.

The opinions of our students who participated in the research are shared by students in other comparable studies (Miller et al, 2012, Poonpon, 2011). They bemoaned the dearth of time and technical assistance. Mejang (2008) notes that her students enjoy PBL because it links ESP to their topic of study, medicine, and inspires them to read more in English for academic purposes. PBL, according to students, primarily helps them improve their reading abilities. Speaking and writing come in second.

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## 5. CONCLUSION

Students can actively work on projects to answer questions while combining their prior knowledge of the scientific topic they are studying with their English language abilities thanks to the inclusion of project-based learning in EFL programmes in higher education. Since integrating theory and practice is the ultimate goal of higher education, PBL works well with EAP and ESP courses.

With a control and an experimental group, the study used an experimental research design. The idea that PBL considerably enhances students' academic reading abilities in contrast to conventional teaching techniques was supported by statistical data. The research questions were addressed by the results of the study as well as by the responses given by the students on the needs analysis questionnaire and the course completion survey. PBL has the potential to greatly enhance academic reading abilities. When creating a syllabus for EAP and ESP university courses, teachers should take into account the following factors in relation to the second research question: a) the types of reading skills; b) the source of reading texts; and c) the sorts of project assignments. The project's activities must foster a variety of reading skills, including skimming, scanning, and intensive reading. To this end, reading resources from ESP coursebooks, online resources, and scholarly journal articles will be utilised. Project assignments could also help students develop 21st century abilities including critical thinking and presentation. Designing real project tasks that may be given to a larger audience is therefore essential. The advantages of utilising PBL with students at the A1–A2 and C1 levels, as well as with students from different departments, to improve their (academic) reading abilities, might be further examined.

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