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BEYOND PROJECT COMPLETION: THE ROLE OF INQUIRY, PEER FEEDBACK, AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN DEVELOPING EFL STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

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Abstract. This article examines how inquiry, peer feedback, and reflective practice extend the educational value of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in developing critical thinking among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The study focuses on the learning processes that occur beyond the completion of project products, emphasizing students' abilities to formulate meaningful questions, investigate information, analyze evidence, evaluate alternative perspectives, and reconsider their decisions. Particular attention is given to peer feedback as a collaborative mechanism that encourages learners to justify ideas and respond constructively to different viewpoints. Reflective practice further supports metacognitive awareness by enabling students to evaluate their learning experiences, recognize weaknesses, and improve subsequent performance. The integration of these elements can create a more purposeful, analytical, and learner-centered EFL environment.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning, EFL students, critical thinking, inquiry-based learning, peer feedback, reflective practice, metacognition, collaboration, analytical skills, learner autonomy.

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) today, a student's mere knowledge of grammatical rules or an expanded vocabulary is no longer considered a sufficient outcome. Modern EFL education demands higher-order cognitive skills from students, such as analyzing information, comparing sources, evaluating evidence, drawing independent conclusions, substantiating their own opinions, and responding to the views of others. From this perspective, Project-Based Learning (PBL) stands out as an effective pedagogical approach that enables English language lessons to be linked to real-life problems.

A key characteristic of project-based learning is that the student does not passively receive pre-packaged information. Instead, the student identifies a problem, formulates questions, seeks information, selects relevant evidence, exchanges ideas with group members, revises their own perspectives, and creates a final product. Consequently, the project outcome—whether a presentation, video, poster, report, or other product—is not the sole objective of the educational process. The primary pedagogical value lies in the student's thought process, the questions asked, the evidence selected, and the evolution of their views during the creation of that product. Research in 2025 has also focused on explaining the impact of PBL on the critical thinking skills of EFL students specifically through the processes of problem-solving, inquiry, and reflective assessment.

In project-based learning, inquiry—an activity based on exploration—enables students to shift from merely accepting ready-made answers to independently formulating questions and seeking solutions. Critical thinking begins with the act of questioning. When a student learns to ask questions

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beyond the simple "What is this?"—such as "Why is it like this?", "What evidence supports this?", "Are there other perspectives?", or "How reliable is this information?"—their thinking process deepens[1].

For instance, imagine a project on the topic of "Environmental Problems" in an English class. A teacher might assign the task: "Prepare a presentation on environmental protection." However, such an assignment might only encourage students to gather information. If the task is reframed as a problem-based question—such as "Our city has increasing waste problems. What practical solutions can young people propose?"—students are compelled to explore the issue more deeply.

They might ask: "What causes the problem?", "How does waste affect people?", "What solutions are used in other countries?", and "Which solution is realistic for our community?" ...formulates additional questions. As a result, English grammar and vocabulary are applied within the actual research process. The learner simultaneously develops language competence and critical thinking skills.

Selecting sources is also of particular importance during the inquiry process. Accepting all online information as equally reliable runs counter to critical thinking. Therefore, students should be taught to question a source's author, publication date, purpose, and evidence. For instance, if a student encounters conflicting information regarding the environmental impact of plastic waste in two different online sources, they must attempt to justify which source to trust.

Such activity simultaneously engages skills in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and drawing conclusions. Research on inquiry-based EFL education has also shown that inquiry-based tasks develop students' skills in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation[3].

Merely asking questions is not enough to develop critical thinking; the content of the question matters as well. For instance, the question "What is pollution?" primarily requires the recall of facts. In contrast, the question "Why does pollution remain a problem despite environmental regulations?" requires an analysis of causes. Meanwhile, the question "Which solution to urban pollution is more realistic for young people, and why?" demands comparison, evaluation, and argumentation.

Therefore, at the beginning of a project, the teacher can instruct students on how to formulate questions in three stages:

Factual questions — What? When? Where?

Analytical questions — Why? How? What causes this?

Evaluative questions — Which solution is more effective? Why? What evidence supports your opinion?

For example, in a project titled "Social Media and Students," students might initially formulate a factual question such as, "How many students use social media?" They would then move on to a question like, "How does social media influence students' learning habits?" Finally, they would formulate an evaluative question, such as, "Can social media be considered more beneficial than harmful for students? What evidence supports your position?" In this way, a simple information-gathering activity is channeled toward independent thinking. 3. Peer feedback

In project-based learning (PBL), peer feedback is a key mechanism. In a traditional lesson, a student typically gauges the quality of their work based on the teacher's assessment. In PBL, however, the student also hears the opinions of other groups or classmates. This process allows them to view their work from an external perspective.

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For example, a group might prepare a poster and presentation in English on the topic "Healthy Lifestyle for Teenagers." After the presentation, another group provides feedback based on the following questions:

Is the main idea clear?

Are the arguments supported by evidence?

Is the information relevant?

Are there alternative viewpoints?

What can be improved?

These questions prevent students from simply giving a generic "good" or "bad" rating; instead, they learn to provide feedback based on specific evidence[5].

Another important aspect of peer feedback is that the student providing the feedback also engages in critical thinking. They must analyze the other group's work and identify its strengths as well as areas for improvement. Thus, feedback serves as a learning activity not only for the recipient but also for the student providing it.

However, for peer feedback to be effective, it must be organized around clear criteria. Otherwise, students might limit themselves to vague comments like "I like it" or "It is good." Therefore, it is advisable for the teacher to use a rubric or a brief assessment sheet.

For example:

Criterion

Question

Content

Is the main idea clearly expressed?

Evidence

Are the ideas supported by evidence?

Analysis

Has the issue been examined from various perspectives?

Language

Is the English language used appropriately?

Innovation

Has the group proposed a unique solution?

Such a rubric also encourages the student to reflect on the assessment process itself.

Peer feedback does not automatically lead to a result. A crucial step is revising the project output based on the feedback received. For instance, the initial version of a group presentation might contain three main ideas. Another group might point out that the second idea lacks sufficient supporting evidence[2].

Reflective practice—or reflective activity—is one of the most important, yet often overlooked, stages of project-based learning. Upon completing a project, students are expected not merely to declare that the project is finished, but to answer questions such as: "How did I think during this project?", "Which of my decisions were correct?", "Where did I make mistakes?", and "How did my perspective change?"

For instance, a student working on a "Cultural Traditions" project might initially have found it difficult to use English-language sources. During the project, however, they learned to compare multiple sources and extract the necessary information. In their final reflection, they might express a

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thought along these lines: "At first, I believed that the first website I found was enough. Later, I learned to compare different sources before making a conclusion."

In project-based learning, assessment should not focus solely on the final product. If a teacher evaluates only the design or grammatical accuracy of a finished presentation, the importance of inquiry, peer feedback, and reflection processes is diminished.

Therefore, the following components can be considered in the assessment:
clearly defining the problem;
asking meaningful questions;
using reliable sources;
analyzing evidence;
comparing diverse perspectives;
justifying one's own ideas;
incorporating peer feedback;
identifying one's own errors;
refining the project product;
drawing reflective conclusions[4].

Such assessment directs the student toward organizing a high-quality thinking process rather than simply "finishing the product quickly."

Overall, the potential of PBL in EFL education extends beyond the project's final product. Its true pedagogical value lies in encouraging students to conduct research, ask questions, verify evidence, listen to others' opinions, reconsider their own views, and reflect on their activities. Modern research indicates that PBL and inquiry-based approaches can activate critical thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, drawing conclusions, and self-regulation. Therefore, when organizing project-based learning in EFL classes, the question "How did the student learn to think during the project?" is more significant than "Is the project finished?" While inquiry leads the student to explore, peer feedback allows them to compare their views with other perspectives, and reflective practice helps them understand their own thought processes. The coherent integration of these three mechanisms transforms the English language learning process into a more active, collaborative, and intellectually meaningful educational environment.

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