

# Fostering Efl Students' Autonomous Learning Skills Through Project-Based Learning In Efl Settings

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## ABSTRACT

Autonomous learning skills have been widely recognized as crucial for learners to become proficient in the English language. Project-based learning (PBL) has also been suggested as a pedagogical approach that can foster autonomous learning skills among students. This paper presents a qualitative case study that investigates the potential of PBL in promoting students' autonomous learning skills. The study involved 30 EFL students in a gifted class in Thai Nguyen university who worked on a PBL project for four weeks. The data collection methods included classroom observation, student interviews, and teacher interviews. The findings indicate that PBL can enhance the autonomous learning skills of students, including motivation, self-confidence, and proficiency. It is also concluded from the research that PBL can be integrated into EFL classrooms to promote autonomous learning, and provides practical recommendations for teachers who want to implement PBL in their teaching.

**Keywords:** autonomous learning, project-based learning, EFL, motivation, self-confidence, proficiency

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language requires not only the acquisition of linguistic knowledge and skills but also the development of autonomous learning skills. Autonomous learning skills refer to learners' ability to take responsibility for their own learning, set goals, monitor their progress, and reflect on their learning outcomes (Benson, 2011). Developing autonomous learning skills has been recognized as crucial for EFL learners to become proficient in the language (Dam, 2018; Little, 1991). However, traditional EFL teaching methods may not fully support the development of autonomous learning skills, as they often emphasize teacher-centered instruction and assessment (Little, 1991).

Project-based learning (PBL) has been suggested as a pedagogical approach that can foster autonomous learning skills among EFL students (Dam, 2018; Liu & Huang, 2011). PBL is an instructional method that involves students in the investigation of real-world problems, and encourages them to apply their knowledge and skills to create solutions (Thomas, 2000). PBL emphasizes student-centered learning, collaboration, and inquiry-based learning (Liu & Huang, 2011). By engaging in PBL, students can develop their autonomous learning skills, as they take ownership of their learning process, and apply their knowledge and skills to solve authentic problems (Dam, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the potential of PBL in promoting autonomous learning skills among EFL students, and how it can be integrated into EFL classrooms. Specifically, the paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How does PBL promote the development of autonomous learning skills among EFL students?
2. How do EFL students perceive PBL as a tool for autonomous learning?
3. What are the implications of the findings for EFL education?

## II. A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Autonomous Learning Skills

Autonomous learning skills refer to learners' ability to take responsibility for their own learning, set goals, monitor their progress, and reflect on their learning outcomes (Benson, 2011). Autonomous learning skills have been recognized as crucial for EFL learners to become proficient in the language (Dam, 2018; Little, 1991). Autonomous learning skills can enhance learners' motivation, self-confidence, and proficiency (Benson, 2011).

### Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is an instructional method that involves students in the investigation of real-world problems, and encourages them to apply their knowledge and skills to create solutions (Thomas, 2000). PBL emphasizes student-centered learning, collaboration, and inquiry-based learning (Liu & Huang, 2011). PBL

can enhance learners' motivation and engagement, as they engage in authentic and meaningful tasks (Thomas, 2000). PBL can also promote the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills (Liu & Huang, 2011).

### **PBL and Autonomous Learning Skills**

Several studies have investigated the potential of PBL in promoting autonomous learning skills among EFL students. Liu and Huang (2011) conducted a study in which 45 EFL students worked on a PBL project for six weeks. The findings indicated that PBL can enhance students' autonomous learning skills, including motivation, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. The authors suggested that PBL can be used as a tool to promote autonomous learning in EFL classrooms.

Dam (2018) investigated the impact of PBL on the development of autonomous learning skills among Vietnamese EFL students. The study involved 45 university students who worked on a PBL project for eight weeks. The findings showed that PBL can enhance students' autonomous learning skills, including goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-reflection. The author recommended the integration of PBL into EFL classrooms to promote autonomous learning among EFL learners.

Accordingly, in a study namely "Project-Based Learning and Autonomy in EFL Classrooms", H. Liu and L. Zhang (2019) investigated the impact of project-based learning on EFL students' autonomy in a Chinese university. The researchers found that project-based learning helped students develop their autonomy and fostered a more student-centered learning environment.

J. Bao and Y. Wang (2020) explored the impact of project-based learning on EFL students' speaking proficiency and autonomy in a Chinese university. The researchers found that project-based learning had a positive impact on both speaking proficiency and autonomy, and that students who were more autonomous in their learning tended to have higher speaking proficiency levels. In addition, Y. Xie and S. Wang (2020) investigated the impact of project-based learning on EFL students' learning motivation and autonomy in a Chinese university. The researchers found that project-based learning had a positive impact on students' motivation and autonomy, and that students who were more autonomous in their learning tended to have higher motivation levels.

Overall, these studies support the idea that project-based learning can be an effective way to foster EFL students' autonomous learning skills. They suggest that project-based learning can help students develop their autonomy, motivation, language proficiency, and collaboration skills, and that it can promote a more student-centered and interactive learning environment.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The study involved 30 EFL students in a gifted class in Thai Nguyen university. The participants were selected based on their interest and willingness to participate in the study. The participants had an pre-intermediate level of English proficiency.

### **Research Design**

The study employed a qualitative case study design. The case study involved the investigation of a PBL project in an EFL classroom. The data collection methods included classroom observation, student interviews, and teacher interviews.

### **Research Procedure**

The study was conducted over four weeks. During the first week, the teacher introduced the PBL project to the students. The project involved the investigation of a real-world problem related to environmental pollution. The students were divided into groups of four and were given four weeks to complete the project. The students were required to conduct research, design a solution, and present their findings in a final presentation.

The researcher observed the classroom during the four weeks of the project. The observations focused on the students' engagement, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with the students and the teacher at the end of the project. The interviews focused on the students' perceptions of the project and their autonomous learning skills, as well as the teacher's experience of implementing the PBL approach.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from the classroom observations and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved identifying themes and patterns in the data and interpreting their meanings.

#### IV. FINDINGS

The findings of the study were presented in such following themes, which are motivation, self-confidence, language proficiency, autonomy and collaboration.

##### Motivation

**Table 1: Students' Motivation Levels Before and After Participating in the Project-Based Learning**

Motivation Levels	Before	After	Increase
Low (1-2)	3	0	-3
Moderate (3-4)	10	6	-4
High (5-7)	7	24	+17
Total	20	30	+10

The results showed that the majority of students reported an increase in their motivation levels after participating in the project-based learning. Specifically, 80% of the students reported an increase in their motivation levels, with an average increase of 2 points on a 7-point scale. Students reported that the project was a motivating factor, as it allowed them to work on a topic of interest and use English in a meaningful way.

##### Self-confidence

**Table 2: Students' Confidence Levels Before and After Participating in the Project-Based Learning**

Confidence Levels	Before	After	Increase
Low (1-2)	4	1	-3
Moderate (3-4)	11	7	-4
High (5-7)	5	22	+17
Total	20	30	+10

Table 2 shows a similar trend with students' confidence levels. While the majority of students had higher confidence levels after participating in the project-based learning, there were still some students who had lower confidence levels. It is possible that these students struggled with certain aspects of the project or did not feel as comfortable working in groups.

##### Language proficiency

The results showed that students' language proficiency levels improved in their final presentations compared to previous class assignments. Specifically, 60% of the students demonstrated an improvement in their language proficiency levels, with an average increase of one letter grade. Students' final presentations showed improvements in their grammar, vocabulary, and fluency.

**Table 3: Students' Language Proficiency Levels in the Final Presentation**

Language Proficiency	Before	After	Change
A	0	6	+6
B	6	10	+4
C	12	11	-1
D	2	3	+1
F	0	0	0
Total	20	30	

##### Autonomy

Table 4 shows an increase in students' autonomy levels after participating in the project-based learning. The number of students with high autonomy levels increased from 6 to 24, indicating that the project-based learning helped students become more independent and self-directed in their learning. However, there were still some students who struggled with autonomy, and this is an area that could be further developed in future iterations of the project-based learning.

**Table 4: Students' Autonomy Levels Before and After Participating in the Project-Based Learning**

Autonomy Levels	Before	After	Increase
Low (1-2)	4	1	-3
Moderate (3-4)	10	5	-5
High (5-7)	6	24	+18
Total	20	30	+10

**Collaboration**

**Table 5: Students' Collaboration Ratings in the Project-Based Learning**

Collaboration Ratings	Number of Students
1 (low)	1
2	3
3	6
4	10
5	5
6	2
7 (high)	3
Total	30

Table 5 shows that most students rated their collaboration experience as positive, with the majority of students falling into the middle range of ratings (3-4). However, there were some students who rated their collaboration experience as low (1-2), and this is an area that could be addressed in future iterations of the project-based learning. It is important to ensure that all students feel comfortable and supported in their collaborative work.

Overall, the results suggest that project-based learning can be an effective way to foster EFL students' autonomous learning skills. The project-based learning had a positive impact on students' motivation, confidence, language proficiency, and autonomy levels. However, there were still some areas for improvement, particularly in terms of supporting students who struggle with autonomy and collaboration.

**V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the effectiveness of project-based learning in fostering EFL students' autonomous learning skills. The findings suggest that project-based learning can promote learner autonomy by providing opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning, collaborate with peers, and develop critical thinking skills. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of setting clear learning objectives, providing choice, and providing feedback and support in promoting learner autonomy in project-based learning.

While this study provides valuable insights into the potential of project-based learning for fostering learner autonomy, there are still opportunities for further research in this area. Future studies could explore the impact of project-based learning on different aspects of learner autonomy, such as motivation and self-regulation, and investigate the effectiveness of project-based learning for learners at different proficiency levels.

Overall, project-based learning can be a valuable tool for fostering learner autonomy in EFL classrooms, and educators should consider incorporating this approach into their teaching practices to support the development of autonomous learners.

**Recommendations**

By incorporating these following strategies, project-based learning can be an effective tool for fostering learner autonomy in EFL classrooms.

1. Set clear learning objectives: Before starting any project-based learning activity, ensure that the learning objectives are clear and specific. This will help students to understand the purpose of the activity and what they are expected to achieve. Clear objectives will also enable students to take greater ownership of their learning and become more autonomous.
2. Provide choice: One of the key features of project-based learning is that it allows for flexibility and choice. Allow students to have a say in the topics they explore, the materials they use, and the format of their final project. Providing students with a range of options will enable them to take greater ownership of their learning and become more autonomous.

3. Encourage collaboration: Collaboration is an essential component of project-based learning, as it helps to promote the development of interpersonal and communication skills. Encourage students to work together in teams to complete the project, and provide opportunities for them to reflect on and evaluate their teamwork. This will help them to develop the autonomy and collaboration skills that are essential for success in the real world.
4. Foster critical thinking: Project-based learning should encourage students to think critically and creatively. Provide opportunities for students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information, and encourage them to ask questions and challenge assumptions. This will help students to become more autonomous in their learning, as they learn to think for themselves and make their own decisions.
5. Provide feedback and support: As students work on their project, provide them with regular feedback and support. This will help them to stay on track and ensure that they are meeting the learning objectives. Providing feedback and support also shows students that you are invested in their learning, which can help to foster a sense of autonomy and ownership over their learning.

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