



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Language Learner Engagement and Outcomes in Project-Based Learning: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Project-based learning has gained increasing attention in language education. As a learner-centred instructional approach, project-based learning has been confirmed effective in fostering engagement and enhancing real-world skills. To provide a comprehensive understanding of how project-based learning influences language learner engagement and learning outcomes, this literature review synthesises and analyses recent empirical studies examining the influence of project-based learning on student engagement and learning outcomes in both global and Vietnamese language learning contexts. Accordingly, the review analysed 39 empirical studies based in EFL/ESL contexts. Findings of the included studies indicate that project-based learning enhances student motivation, language competence, and collaborative learning while also fostering critical thinking and learner autonomy. However, most studies relied on short-term interventions and self-reported measures. Few studies have examined long-term impacts of project-based learning, as well as integrated skill development in this setting. The effects of project-based learning on language learners in higher education and in diverse cultural contexts have also been underexplored. Thus, this review contributes to the growing body of research by providing a deeper understanding of how student engagement develops in project-based learning contexts. The study highlights that future research agenda needs to further explore the long-term and broader impacts of PBL so that language teachers, curriculum designers, educators and policymakers can make more informed decisions about its implementation in Vietnam and other contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

The connection between teaching methods and student engagement has always been obvious. The more students actively participate in learning, the more successful their learning outcomes are. Engagement is tied to positive student results, including higher grades and reduced dropout rates (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2009). Student engagement is widely viewed as both a crucial educational outcome and a requirement for effective learning (Hiver et al., 2021). To enhance student engagement, educators have increasingly endorsed project-based learning (PBL) in language education because its student-centered teaching approach promotes motivation, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity – skills that are valuable in the 21st century (Belwal et al., 2020).

PBL has been used to create a learning experience akin to natural acquisition, thereby making English learning more engaging and motivating for students (Srikrai, 2008). Involvement in a project-based learning process

culminating in an outcome presents opportunities for students to enhance their self-assurance and self-reliance (Fried-Booth, 2002). Levine (2004) found that PBL enhances language skills by prompting learners to engage in purposeful communication while undertaking genuine tasks. Most importantly, project work brings students motivation and interest. It helps reduce anxiety and fosters the expectancy of success, thus promoting learning (Fried-Booth, 2002). These features are favourable conditions for students' language proficiency to improve effectively and enjoyably.

Additionally, studies by Mohamad and Tamer (2021) and Lam (2011) indicate that PBL has benefited foreign/second-language education, particularly EFL learners. Bilbao et al. (2018) propose a significant principle of PBL, that, compared to direct learning, PBL provides learners with enhanced opportunities for successful learning. This is accomplished by improving essential skills, encouraging interaction, and facilitating comprehension of course materials. This allows learners to practice language in real-life situations, fostering more meaningful and effective language skill development. With the growing demand for English language proficiency in the global workforce, PBL is seen to be a viable and practical approach to enhance language students' engagement. This research study aims to shed light on how the existing literature discusses the implementation and effects of PBL in L2 education and how this instructional method leverages L2 learner engagement.

By conducting a systematic literature review and thematic analysis, this paper synthesizes recent empirical research on the effects of PBL on language learner engagement and learning outcomes. The findings aim to inform effective implementation of PBL by highlighting how it can support the development of skills relevant to students' future work lives. In addition, the review identifies key research gaps and suggests directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Concepts of Learner Engagement

"Engagement" is the construct that has been widely used and intuitively understood among educational practitioners. Nevertheless, the current body of literature, consisting of various written works and research studies, indicates growing concern regarding the lack of clear and precise definitions of "engagement". This lack of clarity might be due to the use of widely varying terminologies, working definitions, research tools (Christenson et al., 2012), research aims, and the contexts of each study. Regardless, there is still a general agreement among researchers that "engagement is dynamic, malleable, and comprises at least three components of behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement" (Christenson et al., 2012; Mercer, 2019; Sang & Hiver, 2020). In a recent study, Hiver et al. (2021) defined engagement as "the amount (quantity) and type (quality) of learners' active participation and involvement in a language learning task or activity". Generally, learner engagement refers to "active participation" in a variety of activities, both academic and non-academic, as well as commitment to achieve learning outcomes (Ginting, 2021). In L2 education, an increasing number of researchers have recognised engagement as a significant variable in the process of language learning (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Hiver et al., 2021; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2021; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Thus, as reinforced by Hiver et al. (2021, p. 1), engagement is "a dynamic, multidimensional construct comprising situated notions of cognition, affect, and behaviours".

Conceptually, there is some consensus that engagement is a "multidimensional construct" that consists of three dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional. These three dimensions overlap and interrelate (Christenson et al., 2012; Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

Due to its multidimensional nature, engagement encompasses various aspects of learner involvement and participation. A significant body of research indicates that learner engagement is apparent in observable behaviours and cognitive and social magnitude. Additionally, learners' emotions towards their learning tasks and their interactions with classmates or groupmates contribute to their engagement, as revealed by Henry and Thorsen (2020), Lambert et al. (2017).

2.2. Characteristics of Student Engagement

While the definitions of engagement may show some differences among perspectives, scholars have generally agreed on the critical characteristics of learner engagement. Learning requires both motivation and action from learners. Action is a defining characteristic of a learner's engagement. Action is regarded as the most essential characteristic of language learning engagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Mercer, 2019). Although there are various viewpoints and interpretations of student engagement, *action* is a shared element across all definitions and

frameworks. Engagement pertains to *students' active participation* in learning activities and the extent to which their mental and physical efforts are directed towards goals and purposes.

Another characteristic is that engagement relies heavily on context. Engagement can be shaped by involvement with peers and the classroom through specific tasks and activities. It is also shaped by the culture of communities, schools, and families (Hiver et al., 2021; Pianta et al., 2012; Shernoff, 2013). Therefore, research and practice on L2 engagement should consider different dimensions or multiple levels of the social context in which engagement occurs because engagement is closely tied to the context of learning (Reeve, 2012; Sang & Hiver, 2020; Aubrey et al., 2021; Hiver et al., 2021). As sociocultural factors influence engagement, it is essential to consider the relationship between the learning environment, learner, and desired learning outcomes in an ecological framework, as Hoi (2022) suggested. This means that even though the individual aspects of engagement have often been emphasised, it is equally important to recognise its contextual nature (Christenson et al., 2012). Thirdly, as indicated by Hiver et al. (2021) and Skinner & Pitzer (2012), engagement is always considered a specific “object”. As an illustration, learners become involved with the subject, individual, circumstance, undertaking, or assignment. Engagement is also characterized by its nature of being changeable and adaptable (Fredricks et al., 2016).

2.3. Dimensions of engagement in language learning

Student engagement is commonly conceptualised through three main dimensions: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

Behavioural engagement is related to the quantity and quality of how actively learners participate in learning. In the early stages of L2 research, researchers gauged behavioural engagement by counting words and turns (Bygate & Samuda, 2009; Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Platt & Brooks, 2002). Behavioural engagement within the realm of L2 learning includes learners' willingness to be involved in interactional activities, time on task, speaking, or generating meaningful content during task assignment. Behavioural engagement is related to the persistence of functions, which is the ability to perform tasks without requiring assistance or guidance (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Fredricks et al. (2016) reinforced that this dimension of engagement refers to the involvement of learners in their learning process and classroom activities. It can be measured based on learners' participation, persistence, effort, attention, and the absence of disruptive behaviours.

Regarding *emotional engagement*, this dimension is often reflected in students' affective reactions as they take part in meaningful language learning tasks or activities. Emotional engagement occurs when learners experience strong interest, connection, and excitement in a task. An emotionally engaged student finds pleasure in the learning experience and feels that the topic is valuable, meaningful, and inherently engaging. Teaching materials that allow learners to discover, explore, and make choices based on their interests provide the autonomy necessary for establishing emotional engagement (Lam et al. 2012). Emotional engagement refers to learners' positive and negative reactions to the topic, their teammates, and teachers, and their valuation of and interest in the subject (Fredricks et al. 2016). According to Svalberg (2009), emotionally engaged learners have a positive attitude, purposeful learning, and a willingness to learn about their language process. Positive feelings included enjoyment and enthusiasm. Negative emotions, on the contrary, consist of frustration, anger, anxiety, or boredom. This may be referred to as “emotional disconnection” or “lack of interest” (Mercer, 2019). Emotional involvement has a significant effect on other aspects of engagement (Dao, 2019; Henry & Thorsen, 2020). It is worth noting that emotional engagement is tied to learners' feelings about their learning environments, the people involved, the task, and their involvement in those situations (Skinner et al., 2009; Reeve, 2012).

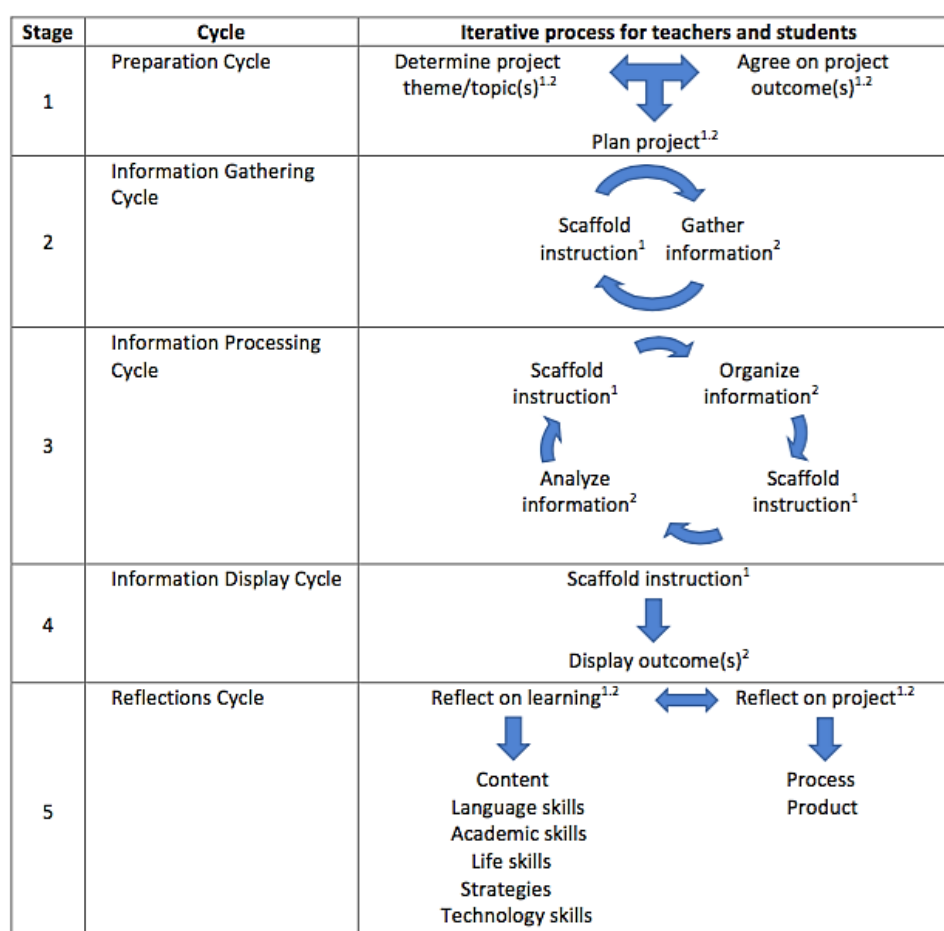
Cognitive engagement is a psychological investment that involves trying to understand complex ideas, self-regulating, exerting efforts to solve challenging tasks, and using deep-learning strategies (Fredricks et al., 2016; Sinatra et al., 2015). This type of engagement occurs when students make connections, justify arguments and reasons, exchange ideas, answer questions, and solve problems. Indicators of cognitive engagement use questions, connectors, or phrases that express personal opinions (Philp & Duchesne, 2016) or when they have thoughtful reflection (Svalberg, 2009). In other words, students are cognitively engaged when they think about what they want to say, commit target words to memory, and connect language patterns to previous learning.

Another facet of engagement that Finn & Zimmer (2012) and Linnenbrink-Garcia & Pekrun (2011) proposed is *social engagement*. This type of engagement relates to interactions with classmates and instructors, working together on learning, exchanging thoughts, and nurturing relationships with other classes or group members (Fredricks et al.

2016). Social engagement occurs when students interact, explain ideas, collaborate, and participate in group activities. When students engage socially with peers who listen attentively to their ideas, they enjoy the activity, spend more time on the task, and feel supported and positively encouraged (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). To socially engage students in learning activities, instructors can provide clear feedback, comments and praise, respect opinions, and value student input (Gettinger & Walter, 2012).

2.4. Project-based Learning

Project-based learning (PBL) has emerged as a novel, fitting method for organising and facilitating learning. A large body of research has been conducted to help teachers apply this innovative instruction in their teaching. In the field of ESL/EFL, Stoller and Myers (2019) introduced a five-stage PBL framework with five distinct cycles of student engagement and teachers' instruction in each cycle (Figure 1):



¹ = teacher;

² = student

Figure 1. The five-stage PBL framework by Stoller and Myers (2019)

The adoption of PBL in foreign language teaching has been growing globally and has been applied in different language learning contexts (Pham, 2018). To define PBL, Anderson (2021) examined several influential sources from both language teaching and mainstream education in order to construct a definition of PBL and identify essential components that are likely to be effective for language learning. Thus, according to Anderson (2021), "Project-based Learning in the additional language classroom involves learners working in fixed groups for a planned period to research a phenomenon or study a problem, and produce one or more 'products' in the target language (e.g., English) as evidence of their enquiry. It is cross-disciplinary (i.e. linked to other subjects), provides agency to learners (e.g. to choose their topic focus), develops higher-order cognition, and encourages the use of practical skills in collaborative environments that simulate real-world contexts (e.g. work, academic research)."

There are specific fundamental characteristics of the project-based learning (PBL) approach that scholars generally concur with (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2015). As a typical form of cooperative and enquiry-based teaching approach, PBL is characterised with students' active participation and comparative learning (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). In PBL, students often work in teams to solve their assigned problems. They work towards and develop a final product, and then share the product with a specific audience. Subsequently, the final product of the project is evaluated. This stage is referred to as the reflection stage (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). Project-based learning in the language classroom involves organising students in fixed groups for a period of time to work on a driving question and produce (at least) a product in the target language. Stoller & Myers (2019) identified ten characteristics of PBL in language learning settings (Table 1), as follows:

Table 1. The characteristics of PBL

Characteristics of PBL	Description
Time	The project lasts over a period of time
Group and individual work	Learners work individually or in groups. In other words, learners had opportunities to work collaboratively and independently.
Choice of topics/questions	Both teachers and learners have a choice over the topics/questions of the project, which leads to a 'sense of ownership' among learners.
Skills gained	Integrated skills
Language and content	PBL can enhance language and content learning
Sense of responsibility among learners	Learners are responsible for gathering, processing information, and presenting the project.
End-product	PBL is product-oriented.
Outcomes	The outcome of PBL is a project, a tangible product, and the knowledge and skills gained throughout the process.
Reflection	Students reflect on the process of doing the project and have an evaluation of the final product
Teachers' role	Teachers play the role of facilitators, not someone to teach learners to do something.

2.5. Research gaps

By conducting a systematic literature review and thematic analysis, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how PBL engages learners in language learning contexts, which also allows for the identification of specific gaps for further research in the domain of language learning and teaching. Despite the growing body of research on engagement and PBL in language education, several gaps remain in the existing literature. In terms of context, while PBL is growing in Vietnam, there appears to be limited empirical evidence regarding how to promote engagement among Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners. From a methodological perspective, the current literature relies on short-term interventions and self-reported measures. Moreover, few studies have examined the long-term impacts of PBL on integrated language skill development. The literature further indicates that longitudinal research that investigated the changing trends of engagement over time remains relatively scarce.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Search Strategy

The present study utilised qualitative thematic synthesis as a research approach to examine research articles on student engagement in project-based learning (PBL) within a language learning environment. Multiple search engines were used to identify relevant articles, including ERIC, Scopus, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Semantic Scholar, and Google Scholar. The search strategy involved Boolean combinations of terms such as "Project-based learning"

AND “L2 engagement”, “PBL” AND “EFL” AND “student engagement”, and “language learners’ AND “project work”. Initially, 328 articles, published between 2010 and 2024, were identified. This timeframe was selected to ensure a focus on the most recent studies which provides a contemporary understanding of learning outcomes and engagement in PBL in ESL/EFL contexts. After removing duplicates and reviewing the titles and abstracts, 72 studies were selected for comprehensive evaluation of their full texts. A final selection of 39 empirical studies was made for detailed analysis based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2). The selection included only peer-reviewed articles and conference papers that employed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method designs. Literature reviews, theses, and dissertations were excluded.

3.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Purposeful sampling was used because the investigators wanted to select a sample from which the most insightful perspectives could be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, the authors collected studies that focused on second/foreign language learner engagement in project-based learning for language education.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study

Inclusion criteria		Exclusion criteria
Context of the studies	Project-based learning in language learning	- Non-project-based contexts - PBL in general education - PBL in other disciplines
Research Design	- Empirical research - Methods: Qualitative, Quantitative, Mixed Methods - Participants: EFL/ L2 learners	- Literature Review studies - Empirical research with teacher participants
Genre	Journal articles and conference papers	Literature review papers, theses, dissertations

3.3. Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction was conducted systematically to ensure consistency across all included studies. After the data were extracted, thematic synthesis was used to identify and analyse possible patterns across the studies. The selected studies were analysed following the analytical process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was used to code data and identify recurring themes related to language learner engagement and the learning outcomes, or the effectiveness, of PBL in language learning and student engagement in this environment. With a “hybrid approach”, the researchers employed both deductive and inductive components. Deductively, codes related to each dimension of engagement (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social) were first categorized. Then, specific learning outcomes of PBL in ESL/ EFL contexts were coded as they emerged from the data analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Thematic Findings

Because engagement is malleable, greatly influenced by context, and shaped through interventions, instructional design plays a crucial role in shaping it. As an alternative approach to task-based language teaching, PBL promotes engagement. Thematic analysis of the included studies revealed several key themes related to student engagement and learning outcomes in PBL in language learning contexts.

PBL enhances learner engagement

Previous studies have shown that PBL promotes engagement in language learning contexts. PBL, as an alternative approach to task-based language teaching, is designed to foster engagement through meaningful and authentic tasks (Aubrey, 2021; Johnson et al., 2013). Particularly, project work is a typical activity that actively involves L2 learners in the learning process (Tomlinson, 2010). Projects are perceived to enhance student engagement thanks to the integration of content and language learning, students’ choice of topics, and hands-on data collection in authentic contexts (Bytyqi, 2022). As a result, PBL has been shown to enhance all three types of

engagement, including behavioural, emotional, and cognitive (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). More recently, a study by Li et al. (2024) involving 71 Chinese EFL students further confirmed that PBL is associated with increased emotional and social engagement during their learning process.

While some research indicates that PBL promotes engagement in general, a number of other studies underscore how PBL promotes a specific dimension of engagement.

Behavioral engagement involves students' active participation in using English authentically (Abubalar, 2015; Poonpon, 2017) and engagement in spoken performance (Riswandi, 2018; Wahyudin, 2017). PBL also promotes students' willingness to communicate (Cheng et al., 2023).

Cognitive engagement is significantly enhanced through improvements in students' critical reading skills (Yimwilai, 2020), reading comprehension ability (Shiraz & Larsari, 2014), and listening competency (Abu Bakar et al., 2019). PBL is found to motivate students to develop self-direction in learning (Omar et al., 2012), supports the development of self-regulated learning ability (Cao, 2024), and improves students' critical thinking, independent study skills (Essien, 2018), and problem-solving abilities (Nguyen, 2019).

Emotional engagement is reflected through students' motivation to study English and their interest in language acquisition and further training (Do & Tran, 2018; Guslyakova et al., 2021; Supe & Kaupuzs, 2015; Shin, 2018; Zhang et al., 2024). Students also report positive cognitive, affective, and behavioural attitudes towards PBL (Nguyen et al., 2022; Tran & Tran, 2020), greater enjoyment, confidence, creativity, and self-esteem (Astawa et al., 2017), and more positive attitudes towards language class (Duman & Yavuz, 2018). PBL is perceived as interesting and valuable, which enhances motivation (Ly et al., 2020); Also, it is perceived as challenging, motivating, enhancing their English, creativity, and collaborative work (Ilham, 2022). It also improves motivation and autonomy (Nguyen, 2020; Nguyen & Duong, 2022; Pham, 2018; Zhang et al., 2024) as well as learners' confidence (Omar et al., 2012; Poonpon, 2017).

Social engagement is strengthened through increased social development (Do, 2023), social responsibility, strong communication skills (Essien, 2018), collaboration skills or collaborative learning (Astawa et al., 2017; Musa et al., 2011; Ilham, 2022; Nguyen, 2019) as well as through enhanced peer and group relationship in support-enriched PBL contexts (Li et al., 2024; Ramón Tirado-Morueta et al., 2022).

PBL's influences on language learning outcomes

Learner engagement itself can be considered an important outcome of PBL. However, this literature review treats engagement and PBL's learning outcomes separately in order to examine the two themes clearly. The following section now presents the effects of PBL on language learning outcomes, as summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Key findings on how PBL influences language learners' learning outcomes

Language Learning Outcomes	How PBL influences language learners' learning outcomes & Supporting studies
Language/ Communicative Competence	Offers activities that enhance students' speaking skills through participation and performance when joining the projects (Abubalar, 2015; Dewi, 2016; Mafrudloh & Fitriati, 2020; Riswandi, 2018)
	Improves EFL learners' English writing skill (Arochman et al., 2024) and significantly improves ESL learners' listening competency (Bakar et al., 2019)
	Improves language competence, attitudes, and soft skills (Hoang, 2012), speaking skills of remote learners (Nguyen et al., 2022), writing skills and increased learning interest (Do & Tran, 2018)
	Acts as a practical approach for enhancing students' language macro-skills, vocabulary, and content-learning outcomes (Mohamad & Tamer, 2021). Thus, students participating in PBL report improvements in cultural awareness, language ability, academic achievement, communication, self-confidence, and critical thinking
	To be an instructional approach to enhance communication competence (Cheng et al., 2023)

Transferable/ Applied skills (Integrated Skills, 4Cs, Real-world Skills)	Brings successful outcomes in English-major courses when being integrated in courses and real-world applications (Giao & Nguyen, 2021).
	Increases learner agency, develops higher-order cognition and encourages the use of practical skills in collaborative environments that simulate real-world contexts (Anderson, 2021)
	Enhances language ability, content knowledge, and workplace skills (Essien, 2018), and promotes students' self-responsibility, and motivation in ESP classes (Le & Ho, 2021)
	Helps improve learners' language and real-world skills (Stoller & Myers, 2019) and higher-order thinking skills and skills in the 21st century, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (4C skills) (Musa et al., 2011; Yimwilai, 2020) and soft skills as well (Essien, 201)
Personal and Psychological Growth	Increases motivation and develops communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration (Nguyen, 2019)
	Develops confidence and self-direction in learning, and empowers students for learner autonomy and personal development (Saad et al., 2024)
	Provides a positive learning environment and helps enhance learners' sense of responsibility and confidence, motivation, and autonomous learning (El Moudden & Lamkhanter, 2024)
	Improves students' personal responsibility, and strong communication skills (Essien, 2018)
	Fosters autonomous learning through project planning, overcoming challenges, expressing ideas, and self-assessment (Nguyen & Duong, 2022)

4.2. Discussion

The findings of the studies indicated that the PBL has influenced language learner engagement and learning outcomes in specific ways. From the findings of the included studies, student engagement in PBL in language classrooms can be understood as a multidimensional construct that encompasses cognitive, emotional, social and behavioral dimensions. PBL not only influences language learners cognitively, emotionally, socially and behaviorally, but also creates conditions for language learners to achieve other prominent learning outcomes, such as language competence, academic skills and personal development. The findings also revealed that most of the studies conducted by Vietnamese scholars and in Vietnamese language learning contexts focused more on how effective PBL was and how PBL influenced the students' perceptions, attitudes, and learning outcomes rather than how students really engaged in the project work.

Behaviorally, language learner engagement manifests in several aspects when learners work on a project. By working on specific tasks in each phase of a project, language learners actively participate in the tasks and use target language to communicate in an authentic language environment. Cognitively, PBL was found to enhance cognitive development among language learners. Students developed autonomy, problem-solving skills, and higher-order thinking while actively engaging in independent learning practices. According to Mohamad & Tamer (2021), most research findings demonstrate that PBL is a practical approach for enhancing students' language macro-skills, vocabulary, motivation, and content-learning outcomes. Students who participated in PBL reported improvements in research, autonomy, cultural awareness, language ability, academic achievement, communication, self-confidence, and critical thinking. There was an integration of content and language learning, students' choice of topics, and hands-on data collection while they "implement the projects". These findings align with claims in the literature that PBL supports the acquisition of 21st-century skills, including critical thinking and creativity. PBL is often cross-disciplinary in nature. It provides agency to learners, develops higher-order cognition and encourages the use of practical skills in collaborative environments that simulate real-world contexts. PBL is more student-centred and product-oriented. Through PBL activities, students can overcome 'intrinsic factors', such as a fear of communication, a lack of confidence, and an inadequate environment for using the language, as well as several skills, including problem-solving and teamwork. In doing so, students' language skills are developed. As Stoller & Myers (2019) indicated, applying PBL in language teaching can bring significant benefits to students and the class atmosphere, including the development of critical thinking, independent learning, collaborative learning, creativity, confidence, planning, and communication skills.

Beyond the cognitive dimension, the reviewed studies consistently indicated that student engagement in PBL is also fostered through the emotional dimension. Specifically, emotional engagement was facilitated through motivation, confidence, and enjoyment. These emotional outcomes not only sustained students' participation but also encouraged them to pursue these project-based activities, especially when they are perceived as meaningful and connected to real-life contexts. Encountering a native language speaker gives learners motivation triggers. The type of intercultural encounter in project work is one of the most prominent sources of motivation for several L2 speakers. Existing literature also supports the idea that PBL enhances students' motivation to study English and stimulates their interest in language acquisition because it promotes outside-classroom learning and authenticity in real-world situations. A learner might appear disengaged in a particular task during a language lesson, but be highly invested in language learning outside the classroom. Through PBL, students are exposed to real-world situations and encouraged to learn across different subjects.

As an engagement-oriented, innovative approach to learning within or outside educational institutions, PBL can affect student social development. In PBL, when furthering the research enquiry into language learning, learners work in fixed groups for a planned period to research a phenomenon or study a problem and produce one or more 'products' in the target language as evidence of their enquiry. The review of the existing literature indicates that social engagement emerged as another significant factor in the PBL language learning environment. As reported in the studies, the participants highlighted group cohesion, collaboration, and communication as central to their PBL experiences. This suggests that PBL fosters a language learning environment where peer interaction and teamwork drive deeper engagement. Such scholars as Aubrey (2021) and Dörnyei et al. (2016) indicated, group projects, when organised effectively, give students intensified engagement as the outcomes of the project approach, and the perspective of educational psychology, Hiver, Al-Hoorie, & Mercer (2021) explained that learners' performance is the results of a learner's psychology interacting with social and contextual variables over time.

In addition to engagement, the review of literature revealed that PBL also promotes successful learning outcomes for language learners. Being perceived as interesting and valuable, PBL helps enhance students' motivation, autonomy, language competence, integrated skills, and other essential skills of the 21st century which are beneficial to their future jobs. PBL also brought language students opportunities for personal development, growth mindset, and creativity while working on language learning projects. These outcomes point towards the potential of PBL not only in promoting immediate academic engagement but also in equipping learners with lifelong learning competencies.

4.3. Implications for the Vietnamese Language Learning Context and Future Directions for Study

With the primary purpose of reviewing the existing literature, this study attempts to highlight what is missing in the reviewed studies and where future work could go.

First, from a contextual perspective, while a large body of studies have been conducted in different contexts across the globe, the review shows that only a handful of empirical studies in PBL in Vietnamese language education have been conducted. Additionally, the existing research mainly focuses on how students engaged in PBL in a particular course setting, leaving a gap in our understanding of how engagement trajectories vary in a project-based language learning environment at the tertiary education level in Vietnam. Although there has been growing concern about PBL among Vietnamese scholars, there is still insufficient evidence on how PBL specifically fosters engagement of these types of learners in our national context.

Besides, most studies focus on learners' perspectives, leaving a gap about the influential factors that impact Vietnamese language learners' trajectories in this environment. Investigations into how such factors as teachers' role, teachers' beliefs, teacher training, instructional design and institutional conditions such as class size, assessment system, curriculum design, and resources affect language learner engagement remain under-explored.

Lastly, many of the existing studies focus on the cognitive side (language skills), emotional (motivation and attitudes), social (collaboration), or personal (autonomy). Specifically, while the existing studies often report findings within separate dimensions, little research has systematically investigated how these dimensions interrelate in project-based language learning contexts. For example, the relationship between increased social collaboration and emotional engagement, between higher emotional engagement and learners' willingness to participate in project works and the relationship between autonomy and other dimensions have not been fully explored. Thus, future studies could investigate these interdependencies to examine how each dimension contributes to learning outcomes

and how they reinforce each other in the project cycle. Approaching these dynamics in an integrated perspective would allow educators to design a PBL environment that balances and strengthens all four aspects of engagement, rather than treating them as isolated categories.

5. CONCLUSION

Working on projects is just like a journey. The PBL journey unfolds innovative and authentic teachers' teaching style and students' learning process. As a comprehensive instructional model, the PBL approach engages students in their learning path by enabling them to invest in their interests and create projects that result in meaningful learning experiences. By using PBL in language classrooms, instructors can aid students in building various skills and abilities crucial for success in a constantly evolving world. This can enhance language learning and increase students' career prospects. It provides opportunities for learners to use the language they learn while working on projects related to real-world contexts and problems. Preparing and developing job-ready skills are essential for success in today's global workforce.

The systematic review and thematic analysis highlight that the existing studies in PBL in language education focused on how students engaged in PBL behaviorally, cognitively, emotionally, and socially. Project work has affected students holistically. It affects not only the development of students' language skills but also attitudes, autonomy, and collaborative learning. The social aspects of engagement, such as peer influence, collaboration, and leadership are acknowledged. However, more empirical investigations like classroom observations and interaction analysis are needed to understand how emotional and social factors shape PBL engagement.

By summarising the key findings of the existing literature, the current study aims to provide a comprehensive picture of student engagement and the learning outcomes in PBL in a language learning context and identify certain research gaps that inform a future agenda for further research in the field. These findings are expected to help teachers and language practitioners in designing practical projects that balance skill development and collaboration. Additionally, it is helpful for curriculum developers and educational policymakers who aim to embed PBL into broader educational reforms. PBL, as shown through different studies, is not merely an instructional method, but a transformative learning approach that prepares students for real-life learning, lifelong learning, and global citizenship. Figure 2 below presents a brief summary for the review:

The future of PBL in Vietnam: Closing the Research Gap

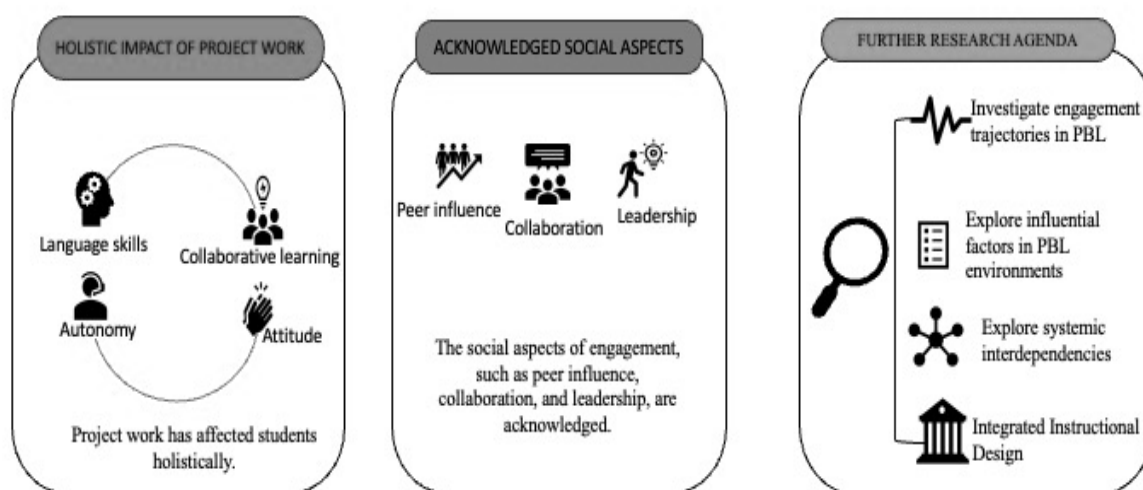


Figure 2. PBL in language education and future research agenda (Source: The authors)

Although the findings of this study yield contributions to the field, certain limitations should be addressed. First, this study gathered data only from the studies conducted in the timeframe from 2010 to 2024. To further assess student engagement and the learning outcomes of PBL in language learning, a more up-to-date and comprehensive review could be conducted to provide additional evidence on how language students engage in PBL and the more

sophisticated achievements this instructional method enables. Secondly, the review was limited to studies retrieved from specific databases. This may exclude relevant research needed for the scope of this study. Finally, despite the systematic procedure, the selection of related research, the interpretation and the narrative approach adopted by the researchers in this study inevitably involved some degree of subjectivity.

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