Engaging Arabic Language Learners

through Project-Based Language Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to introduce attendees, and more particularly Arabic language teachers, at the 2018 ISNA Education Forum to Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL). Considering the critical role of learners’ motivation, the inquiry is on PBLL’s potential to increase learners’ engagements in Arabic language learning. The author hypothesizes that students’ interest prompts learning but posits that current teaching practices fall short of providing stimulating Arabic language classes. This paper will demonstrate that PBLL motivates students and helps them develop language proficiency, 21st Century skills, and global competence. Though Arabic language learning is currently challenging, it can significantly be improved, and learners’ motivation and proficiency enhanced through PBLL. This work presents PBLL as an effective teaching alternative with a holistic teaching approach that attracts learners and accelerates language acquisition, increases learner-learner and learner-teacher interactions, and enhances intellectual growth. A comparison of PBLL and classroom projects and PBLL alignment with national standards for second language education will reveal PBLL’s effectiveness, flexibility, and ability to develop 21st Century skills. To engage learners and foster faith-based academic growth, the study recommends the integration of PBLL in a main curriculum and recommends teacher training in implementing PBLL adequately.

*Keywords*: [project-based language learning](http://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Project+Based+Learning), higher order thinking, Arabic, language learning

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Arabic language study is a non-negotiable educational element in Muslim schools. Considered a critical language, it is also essential in other institutions’ language programs. Due to the importance of this academic subject and for growth purposes, educators need to evaluate current instructional practices and curricula in light of several teaching effectiveness criteria including learners’ needs and interests. Although much has been achieved in TAFL, in K-12 Muslim schools, frustrations abound about students’ low proficiency. Often this issue is attributed to learners’ lack of interest. Understandably teacher/researcher Smith (1978) declared that “Nothing can be taught unless it has the potential of making sense to the learner.” (p. x).Besides the issue of learner motivation, our students need to develop 21st century skills and intercultural competence to keep abreast with today’s complex world. But, how well are these needs attended to in Arabic classes? We need to inquire about how well Arabic curricula and teaching practices are equipping learners to succeed in their future careers. Which learning opportunities are we creating for greater student engagement today? Teaching can no longer be confined to the usual practices that emphasize the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical structures. Our schools must not only provide effective language education, but also prepare learners for future professional, economic, and social demands in a rapidly changing world. In view of these critical issues, it is high time for stakeholders to direct their attention to Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL), a language teaching method that addresses those needs. With its dynamic inquiry process, PBLL trains learners to develop inquisitive and deeper thinking practices that will serve them in school and beyond. PBLL has already attracted educators and learners of other world languages worldwide as it facilitates a methodical exploration of countless authentic topics, relevant to learners’ world.

Literature Review

To gain a clear perspective A brief overview reveals that PBLL is derived from Project-Based Learning (PBL), a teaching method in which students, guided by their teacher, accomplish projects that address authentic needs. In PBLL classes, learners gain knowledge and skills by investigating complex questions, challenging issues, or real-life problems over an extended period. To achieve such projects, students engage in a variety of organized, scaffolded, collaborative, level and age-appropriate tasks, create an authentic product, and present it to a public audience.

The ideas that heralded Project-Based Learning (PBL) have appeared during the reform movement, in the early 20th century, as world renown philosophers, educators, and researchers like Lev Vigotsky, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and others focused their attention on children’s learning processes. These scholars were among those who emphasized the importance of learning from experience and advocated for holistic educational approaches (Beckett & Miller, 2006). Dewey’s views on experiential education have been particularly influential in the development of PBL (Itin, 1999) though William Heard Kilpatrick is the actual pioneer of the method. Kilpatrick focused his interest on cognitive development that results from collaborative work and suggested multidisciplinary projects to enrich students’ learning experiences. He also emphasized the intrinsically motivating role of purposeful learning in which tasks are based on learners’ inquiries and choices of activity (Wolk, 1994).

In the United States, PBL was first used to teach agriculture in vocational classes. Later, it was adapted to Science and Math and other areas of learning. About two decades ago, as student-centered teaching and the communicative approach took center-stage in language education, PBL was adopted in foreign or second language (L2) classes as well, hence the name Project-BasedLanguage Learning.

Much has been said and written about PBLL in the last two decades and today a wide variety of print and digital resources are available online. A comprehensive and research-based reference worth consulting is Project-Based Second and Foreign Language Education: Past, present, and future (Beckett & Miller, eds., 2006). This sizable volume provides lengthy information in support of PBL in L2 learning. Another important resource about PBL and PBLL, quite appropriate for our digital age, is the frequently updated website [www.bie.org](http://www.bie.org) created by the Buck Institute for Education.

**Second language Acquisition.** Literature review of Second Language Acquisition theory (SLA) reveals that, although PBLL focuses on learning language and skills in real-life contexts, it facilitates meaningful and contextualized learning that motivates learners and helps enhance background knowledge, thinking skills, and personal growth.

Progressivists like Kilpatrick, Vigotsky, and Dewey believed that children learn best in meaningful social contexts and through experiences that interest them and take into consideration their individuality (Wrigley, 1998). Interestingly, these are some of the characteristics of Project-Based Instruction (PBI). To demonstrate the beneficial features of PBLL, Wrigley (1998) examined SLA, in K-12 and adult literacy, then presented some commonalities between PBI on one hand and inquiry learning, community action research, participatory education, and functional contexts on the other hand. By engaging learners in sustained inquiry and higher-order thinking, PBI offers significant advantages in L2 acquisition. It emphasizes the communicative approach and collaborative nature of learners’ activities. Students engage in listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks that help develop linguistic skills and cognitive abilities. PBLL is also considered a “comprehensive approach to classroom teaching and learning” (Blumenfeld, et al., 1991, p. 369) because it connects language to other academic contents.

**Theoretical foundation**. Due to an increasing worldwide interest in PBLL, a significant number of publications have examined the theoretical foundations of PBL. Depending on their areas of expertise, scholars have connected PBL to many theories. However, this paper will focus on constructivism and constructionism. In his article, Michael M. Grant (2002) discusses the constructivist and constructionist theoretical basis for PBLL to posit that the idea of learning by doing advanced by John Dewey (Grant, p. 2) and shared by Piaget, Vigotsky, and Papert is relevant to today’s educational approach. Psychologist Jean Piaget’s views on the theory of constructivism (which is based on cognitive and affective developments) explain how learners construct knowledge through their interactions with their social environment (Wadsworth, 1996). On the other hand, constructionism learning theory, which is derived from constructivism, states that learners construct mental models to understand the world around them and use information they already know to acquire more knowledge. Also, constructionism describes how learners’ activity, in a society, is conducive to effective and meaningful learning as they create real objects for real purposes. (Papert and Harel 1991, p. 193). Indeed, active learning, the creation of tangible things, and authenticity are some of the fundamental tenets of PBLL. Both theories support strategies for discovery and experiential learning which are facilitated best by student-centered teaching practices. Learning as advocated in PBLL is not only “conceived as an active process” (Jonassen & Land, eds., 2012, p. ix) but also facilitated in social contexts (Grant, 2002).

Methods

PBLL, in its principles and practices, is characterized by precision, collaboration, and authenticity. To implement this method successfully, teachers need to plan each project according to the Essential Project Design Elements, adopting the model Gold Standard PBL. These elements provide an instructional and assessing framework that supports effective L2 learning and development of knowledge, skills, and cultural competence. The seven Essential Elements of Project Design are: 1) Challenging problem or question, 2) A sustained inquiry, 3) Authenticity, 4) Student voice and choice, 5) Reflection, 6) Critique and revision, and 7) A final product presented to a public audience. Typical PBLL projects are a lot more elaborate than the usual classroom projects often assigned in language classes. Keeping in mind the Essential Elements of Project Design that characterize PBLL, and main features of usual classroom projects, one can evaluate how the two types of projects compare. By examining their similarities and differences one can easily infer which type of project offers more opportunities for L2 learning, cultural understanding, skills development, and extra-curricular knowledge. Which approach is likely to motivate and engage students more, and consequently which method will serve in long-term learning more effectively. The following table compares both project types.

Table 1: Common Projects and Typical Projects in PBLL

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Classroom Projects | Projects in PBLL |
| can be done by individual students outside the classroom. | more elaborate, require teacher’s guidance, learners’ collaboration, and individual components. |
| focus on a non-authentic end-product (e.g. poster, poem, book report, etc.) | focus on learning & in sustained inquiry; produce an authentic final product. |
| Teacher chooses topic  Same projects every year per learning level. | Students’ open-ended questions determine topic; Projects differ. |
| topics from the curriculum (therefore repetitive); remain within class context. | topics from real-life situations, real-world context. |
| done after a learning unit or chapter. | Learning process occurs during work on the different stages of the project. |
| All projects have the same goal. | teacher provides a framework for learning objectives and assessment. |

The table shows the limitations of a classroom project in contrast with a typical PBLL project. The latter is more student-centered and more engaging to learners. It helps develop responsibility and empowerment in students, offers opportunities for authentic and autonomous learning, and encourages deeper thinking, and richer learning connections.

**Aligning PBLL with the Standards.** To be in conformity with state requirements and advance the quality and scope of L2 learning, teachers must integrate national and state standards. The standards provide a measurable, relevant, and efficient teaching and assessing framework. Since school districts emphasize the importance of standards-based instruction, we need to examine how well PBLL integrates them in learning activities.

The national standards, also called the five C’s, have been created by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Updated and renamed World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, they are: Communications, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2004). They emphasize both the communicative and functional roles of world languages. From the beginning of a project, the target language is used for both communication and functional purposes. The Communications standard occupies a central position in PBLL and creates opportunities for interpretation of texts, class interactions, contacts with native speakers, and presentations. PBLL is all about authenticity as students use L2 to communicate about real topics in authentic situations. PBLL targets L2 proficiency whereas current teaching methods limited to classroom, rehearsed uses of L2 are often limited to developing L2 performance.

In PBLL the standard of Communications (in the interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational modes), is at the center of instruction. It engages learners in the oral and written exchange of information, ideas, opinions, inquiries, etc. Keeping in mind that communication goes hand in hand with culture since culture and language mirror each other, learners’ ability to understand cultural perspectives helps them grasp linguistic nuances. From the first step of the project, PBLL exposes learners to the target culture and encourages analytical thinking. Each project offers opportunities to explore cultural products and practices as well as analyze cultural perspectives. As a main goal of language acquisition is to develop communicative competence, we need to realize that learners can only achieve this goal by knowing and understanding the target culture (Mikulec and Miller, 2011, p. 82). Learners in PBLL classes are more likely to investigate, in age-appropriate depth, cultural topics than in traditional language classes. Through methodical work on projects, Learners are exposed to aspects of the target culture(s) to understand a wide array of current issues. This type of learning helps develop learners’ global competence which is crucial today and to our children’s future.

The standard of Connections enables learners to see the link between the Arabic language and other subjects. This is particularly important in Islamic schools as students should be encouraged to build, reinforce, and expand their knowledge of Islamic Studies and Quran using Arabic to access authentic texts. Connections to other academic subjects is also very important to increase learners’ academic growth. Through PBLL, learners have a myriad of complex questions, challenging issues, and real-life problems to investigate. Such types of projects hold great potentials to make Arabic study innovative, relevant, and meaningful to today’s learners.

The standard of Comparisons allows learners to perceive the similarities and differences between their native language and culture, and the target language and culture(s). PBLL integrates this standard by engaging students in comparing and contrasting tasks that involve higher order thinking, deeper understanding, and appropriate inference making.

Through the standard of Communities, learners interact with Arabic language speaking groups and individuals worldwide. PBLL integrates this standard in real situations and through real and safe contacts, at the community level and beyond. Through these interactions, learners become familiar with and appreciative of the target language and culture(s). as a result, this standard enhances autonomous learning and a love for life-long learning.

**21st Century Skills.** The research-based PBL model includes in its core a set of higher order thinking skills considered important for success. In PBLL, these skills, meant to measure and improve language teaching practice, are 1) communication, 2) critical thinking and problem-solving,3) collaboration, 4) creativity and innovation. Moreover, Discipline and rigor in PBLL foster self-management. PBLL creates opportunities that nurture 21st Century skills, trains learners in deeper thinking and discipline, and prepares them for leadership roles in their future careers.

**Projects Stages.** Entry events introduce the project topics, prompt students to raise open-ended questions, and identify real-life issues. In sustained inquiry and through scaffolded teaching, they learn to articulate relevant questions, develop search strategies to seek information, analyze and interpret data, then critique and revise work. These tasks and others train students to develop critical thinking, responsibility, and time-management (Beckett and Miller, eds., 2006, p. 4).

**Assessment.** A fundamental pillar of true PBLL is a meticulous planning of a framework of learning objectives and assessment. Though PBLL projects are complex and involve many different tasks, formative and summative assessments are included within the teacher-provided instructions. Along with teacher’s monitoring of progress, learners’ portfolios, self and peer assessments are valuable assessment tools. Finally, the product itself is evaluated according to a rubric and the phase of revision and critique enables learners to make the necessary improvements. As learners work on completing the project and prepare to present it to an adult audience, learning opportunities are maximized. Even feedback from the audience is used to advance course objectives.

**Recommendations.** No doubt, PBLL implementation in Arabic language teaching requires training. But the benefits to learners and institutions exceed the efforts and expenses. PBLL, highly recommended for K-16 Arabic language learning, offers many advantages. Its great flexibility in integrating language, culture, and content makes project work an excellent vehicle to complement any content-based instructional model. As a matter of fact, PBLL can complement any mainstream language teaching method and at almost all learning levels. However, teachers interested in PBLL must realize that often, in current instructional practices, the emphasis is first on providing learners with knowledge, then prompting them to use it in exercises. In PBLL each stage of a project is part and parcel of students’ L2 learning experiences. So, planning to teach, scaffold, and differentiate instruction is necessary. Though PBLL may involve classes in *hands-on* activities, it is a lot more than just a *learning-by-doing* episode. Also, PBLL is not meant to be an alternative to class assignments or a culminating class project for an end of term summative assessment.

Conclusion

To advance Arabic language instruction in our schools, it is critical to conduct a needs analysis, evaluate the current teaching practices and curricula, based on the targeted educational goals. As other world language departments advance at great strides, so should our Arabic teaching programs. Witnessing, first-hand, the successful results of PBLL and the generated class projects at most levels of learning, one must admit that world language teachers’ training and enthusiasm for this method are gaining great momentum. Indeed, PBLL is a viable teaching method perfectly suited for our heritage and non-heritage Arabic language learners. Arabic language teachers, particularly in Muslim schools, ought to take advantage of PBLL professional development opportunities to receive adequate training. After all, PBLL has all the principles and features of an ambitious enterprise as it offers students opportunities to take their learning beyond classroom walls. For a faith-based education to advance, teaching the language of Al-Quran must not only be a unique privilege but also a great responsibility. PBLL, in K-16 Arabic language classes holds great potentials for motivating students, enriching and accelerating meaningful learning, and helping learners develop literacy, abstract reasoning, and global competence.

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