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**The Effect of Project Based Learning in Teaching EFL Vocabulary to Young Learners of English: The Case of Pre-school Children**

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**ABSTRACT**

English language teaching has newly been introduced to pre-school curriculum in Turkey. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of teaching EFL vocabulary to pre-school children through Project Based Learning (PBL). For this purpose, an experimental design, consisted of observation checklists, exam scores and a short survey, was adopted. Firstly, through a short online survey, 150 kindergarten teachers were asked to specify which techniques they commonly used in their English classes. The primary aim here was to define traditional techniques and the rate of PBL use in Turkey. After defining common techniques, 28 children were randomly assigned to experimental (PBL instruction) and control groups (traditional instruction) equally and the data was collected in real time classroom setting for 8 weeks. The results showed that (1) PBL was rarely adopted in EFL classes in Turkey, (2) PBL instruction could increase EFL vocabulary learning gains when compared to common methods and (3) young learners were observed to have been more active in PBL classes. The effect of PBL instruction was discussed in local, cognitive and motivational perspectives in the light of previous related research. The potential benefits of further PBL use for young EFL learners and implications were also discussed.

**Key Words:** Young learners, EFL vocabulary, Project Based Learning.

## 1. Introduction

Recently, teaching English to young learners in formal contexts and how they learn it have attracted a considerable amount of attention. Being the foci of the current study, Project Based Learning (PBL) is a constructivist and learner centred approach which organizes learning with concrete project outputs. In EFL, some research with young learners on PBL instruction came up with positive outcomes (Baş & Beyhan, 2010; Çırak, 2006; Köroğlu, 2010; Türker, 2007; Yıldız, 2009). Thus, in this study, it was hypothesized that PBL could also be a useful and effective way of teaching EFL to pre-school children in both cognitive and motivational perspectives.

## 2. Young Learners (YLS) and EFL Vocabulary Learning

Having different characteristic features, young learners (YLS) were generally defined as any individual below 18 (Ellis, 2014). In a more detailed perspective, Ersöz (2007) defines YLS as children

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at 5-12 years old. For both definitions, pre-school children fall into “young learners” category. There is a popular belief among people that children were better at learning a foreign language than adults (see Cook, 2008 for a larger review). As stated by Morrison (2004), the preschool years were regarded as the cornerstone of later learning. Kindergarten is a period in which children experience a rapid intellectual development and language growth with a tremendous capacity to learn new words (Senemoğlu, 1994). However, learning a language in a school environment is a very different experience due to social, individual and environmental factors (Copland and Garton, 2014). Social factors include sociocultural class and the status of English in the society. Individual factors include learners’ attitudes towards the target language and their motivation to learn. Environmental factors are the learner’s parental background and parents’ attitudes towards learning a language. Thus, even though young learners would have an age advantage, they still require special pedagogical care for learning a foreign language in a formal environment. Apart from developing blended 4 language skills, EFL vocabulary learning is of great importance at early ages. Upon the issue of learning a word in terms of children, Tomasello (2014) defines ‘word learning’ as a kind of mini-linguistic lesson in which objects are pointed for children. The child has to associate the word with what s/he hears and what s/he sees. Another form of learning a word is that children map words onto concrete entities. Both first language (L1) experience (Cameron, 2001) and the features of the new linguistic input of the second language (L2) are important (Cook, 2008). While word frequency is a distinguishing measure in choosing vocabulary, the ease with which the meaning of a word can be demonstrated and its appropriateness are also important criteria for the selection of vocabulary to be learnt at the beginning. Children build up their first language vocabulary that is intimately tied up with conceptual development. For L1 and L2 relationship, children may link new words with the existing equivalent words in their L1. During this process, their verbal behaviours should be encouraged and supported with opportunities engaging them in language activities such as storytelling, singing songs, drama and reciting poetry. When their short attention span (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990) is considered, children also desire to be involved in physical activities, enjoy working on projects and experimenting both collaboratively and individually (Diffily and Sassman, 2002) which can be provided by PBL instruction.

### **2.1. Project Based Learning (PBL) in EFL: What does it Offer?**

PBL is a both process- and product-orientated pedagogical methodology (Stoller, 1997) which basically blends learning with concrete outputs designed by learners themselves. In teaching English to young learners, PBL can offer varieties of efficient pedagogical solutions as it provides an easy link between linguistic input and its real world equivalent. Simply a project is a product which is concrete; it is basically formed as hands-on activities in which learners produce projects on various themes with the guidance of a teacher in the classroom (Thomas, 2000). PBL requires students to be active during the process and teachers lead the process, give feedback to students and assess the performances. Katz (1992) notes that what is important in PBL is not the title of the project, but its role in leading students to think, dream, question, and investigate. Additionally, he mentions some of the criteria about the requirements of projects such as realising learning that is stated in goals, including a title on a topic, but an interesting proposition or a question, being a part of real life or the ideal life of students, being attractive, and allowing interesting questions, being available to be studied in classroom or at school. In this respect, PBL has a strong constructivist perspective. Beside its constructivist nature, PBL requires students to become autonomous, designer, creative, and

productive during the process and aims to develop self-confidence and self-respect. According to Hamurcu (2003), PBL enables learners to achieve vital, cognitive, and self-control skills, forming attitudes towards learning, and the ability to use technology. This involvement also develops learner collaborative skills and collectivism in language classroom (Blumenfeld et. al., 1991; Erdem, 2002). In sum, PBL is a student centred constructivist approach in which EFL learners actively involve, discover, and produce both collaboratively and individually which then develop both their academic and socio-psychological skills.

## 2.2. Previous Research

International literature on young learners and language learning is developing and this topic has become trendy recently (Paquette and Rieg, 2008; Butler et. al., 2014; Coyle and Gracia 2014; Jin et. al., 2014; Sayer and Ban, 2014). Albeit, young learners and language learning/teaching is still a 'Cinderella' area of study in Turkey and studies on teaching foreign language to young learners are limited in Turkish context. The topics commonly included are the opinions of parents on language education in pre-school (e.g. Bezciöglu and Göktolga, 2013; İter and Er, 2007; Küçük, 2006) and the use of educational games and songs (e.g. Kalaycıoğlu, 2011; Şaktanlı, 2007). Different from these studies, Çırak (2006) investigated the use of PBL in teaching young learners' achievement level in teaching English as a foreign language. The study was carried out with two groups, experimental and the control, including 30 students in the 2nd grade at a private college. Both of the groups were pre-tested at the beginning and post-tested at the end of the study and the data was analyzed by t-test. The results of the study confirmed that making projects increased the achievement level of the students and helped them socialize and learn from each other by sharing. Thus, it was suggested that PBL can be used effectively in teaching grammar and vocabulary as an alternative to traditional methods. Similarly, aiming to evaluate the effects of PBL to speaking proficiency in foreign language use, Türker (2007) conducted a study with pre-test – final test control group research model. The participants in the study were 10<sup>th</sup> grade students at a high school. While in the experimental group the lessons were carried out according to PBL approach, in the control group traditional methods were used as teaching methods. In the study, pre-tests and final tests were applied and their points were recorded in a scale in order to evaluate students speaking proficiency. By the use of Student Observation Forms, students evaluated their classmates' projects. They also filled in the Group Self-Assessment Form to follow the process and to observe students works within their groups. The results of the study showed that courses with PBL revealed better results in terms of improving speaking abilities in foreign language teaching. In addition, making investigations, using technology, and making presentations in PBL made students feel more enjoyable. In another study, Yıldız (2009) investigated the difference between using PBL and traditional method in teaching vocabulary to 48 sixth grade students at a primary school. Applying a quantitative quasi-experimental study, the researcher used a pre-test before the instruction and a post-test control group design after the 4 weeks of instruction. The same target vocabulary items were studied by both experimental and control groups. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the scores and PBL was found to be more effective in vocabulary teaching to sixth grade students. Investigating the effects of (Multiple Intelligences) MI supported PBL and traditional foreign language teaching environment on students' achievement and their attitude towards English lesson, Baş & Beyhan (2010) carried out a study including 50 students totally in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of an elementary school. Showing a significant difference between the attitude scores of the experiment group and the control group, the results

revealed that students performed better with activities based on multiple intelligences. The study also resulted in more success and higher motivation level on behalf of multiple intelligences supported PBL method. The study conducted by Köroğlu (2011) focused on the effect of PBL method and portfolio assessment applied together on foreign language reading and writing skills of high-school students. Using a quantitative approach, four different methods were used in four different classes at the same time including PBL method, portfolio assessment method, PBL and portfolio assessment method and the traditional method. Among these methods, the first three methods were applied to the experimental groups and the last one to the control group. The study included 120 tenth grade students as participants. Pre-tests and post-test designs were applied before and after the implementation. The results revealed that on using PBL and portfolio assessment separately, students' reading and writing skills in English developed; however, this development was more positive on condition that these methods were used together.

These studies concluded that PBL studies are generally found to be effective in almost all areas and with young learners at a certain age (between 8 and 18).

### 2.3. Significance of the Current Research

Teaching of English has newly started to be part of the pre-school curriculum in Turkey and seems to be rising gradually year by year. In this respect, the current study targeted to examine the effect of PBL on pre-school children in EFL setting in a longitudinal design. Most importantly, no related research exist which evaluate PBL use in earlier ages (pre-school) and previous related research in Turkish context mainly focused on literate young learners from primary schools to high schools at an age range of 8 to 18. Conversely, the current research aimed to examine the efficiency of PBL in pre-school education with the participation of pre-school children with an age range of 5-6. For this aim, pre-school children were both observed in real-time classroom setting for motivational analysis and evaluated through tests. Three main research questions were addressed:

1. What are the common techniques used in English classes in pre-schools in Turkey? Do teachers of English use PBL?
2. Is there a relationship between motivation (observation scores) and learning gains (exam scores) of the PBL instructed group and the traditionally instructed group? If so, is there an effect of PBL instruction on learner motivation?
3. Is there an effect of PBL on vocabulary learning performance of young learners at the end of 8-week period?

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Design

The study was an experimental design including a control and an experimental group. Individuals in the experimental group received project based instruction while those in the control group received traditional instruction. Both instructional periods lasted for 8 weeks and each week, learner development was assessed by an exam and observer checklists.

### 3.2. Participants

The population of the study consisted of pre-school children with an age range of 5-6. The experimental group included 14 participants (6 boys and 8 girls) and the control group included 14 participants (8 boys and 6 girls). All of the participants were Turkish and with L1 of Turkish. As the kindergarten did not have any English classes for children, it was the first time the children met with English as a foreign language. Moreover, they did not have contact of English at home.

### 3.3. Observation Checklists

As observation instruments, two checklists were used during the classes. The first checklist used was an adapted form of observational checklist used for Elementary Spanish Student Progress Checklist included in Assessment, Articulation and Accountability, (1999).

The second observational checklist developed by Esther Eufinger for a bilingual preschool (2008), is a more comprehensive checklist involving children's receptive L2 skills and L2 knowledge. The list was also adapted by the researcher to include all the participants in English classes.

### 3.4. Weekly Vocabulary Tests

Both experimental and control groups took the same tests. After using appropriate methods and techniques for teaching during five days, the children were tested regularly on the fifth day (end of the week) after the instruction of the topic was completed. The exams were prepared and administered in accordance with the age range of the participants. Thus, the tests were kept simple and included the pictures and the art crafts of the vocabulary items as materials and real show of the students on the directed word. The pictures or the crafts of the related words (8 each week) were laid on the table and the students were asked to pin on the picture of the word they hear and see. The testing procedure was designed just like a game and the teacher gave 1 point for each correct answer. Total score that could be obtained was 8 points. Then these points were then arranged to 100-point grading system for more interpretable analysis and results.

### 3.5. The Selection of Vocabulary Items

The number of the vocabulary items for each week was determined as eight words for children. After examining the course books used for teaching a foreign language to preschool children, and the syllabus designed by the Ministry of National Education for teaching English to the students at private pre-primary schools, it was seen that the general topics were about family, numbers, colors, animals, school, etc. Hence, this study included the topics about fruits, farm animals and sea animals, body parts, parts of a house, transportation, clothes, and occupations.

As to the selection of the target words in each topic, two phases of selection procedure was applied. In the first phase, a number of vocabulary items on the related topic were determined with a limitation on the size of the letters of the words to include 3-8 letters. In order to obtain more reliable results, no cognates were included. In the second phase of the selection, high frequency words were chosen. A frequency analysis was made through COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) and words

less than 2000 frequency were removed from the list. Among the remaining words, eight of them were selected to be taught to children during the courses.

### 3.6. Weekly Lesson Plans and Instructional Methodology

Regarding instructional methodology, experimental group was instructed with Project Based Learning (PBL). For control group, traditional methodology was applied. However, what was meant by “traditional” was yet vague; thus, to determine common “traditional instruction” exactly for reliable results, a quick online survey was designed asking kindergarten teachers of English what they commonly used in their lessons. Traditional instruction was designed in accordance with the data obtained from 150 kindergarten teachers of English.

### 3.7. Procedure

For experimental group, the implementation of the PBL included almost all the phases of the project based approach. The implementer of both groups is the same teacher. The teacher introduced the topic and requested children to make suggestions about the content and design of the project. The children offered different views about the project and they decided on the content themselves. The teacher prepared the required materials for the courses. Beginning from the first day, the children and the teacher worked on the project which was sometimes a paper aquarium or an animal farm made of play-dough. The children were also introduced the vocabulary items of the topic, and these words were used frequently during the construction of the project. The courses did not include any of the traditional methods except for the introduction of the target words in pictures, flashcards, or as real objects. The projects were planned according to the (Buck Institute for Education (BIE), [available at <http://www.bie.org>] planning obtained from the website of BIE for the implementation of the project approach. The children got prepared for the project themselves and each child completed sometimes a different part and sometimes the same part of the product. After the completion of the project on the fifth day, the children presented the product to other children at school and to teachers of other classes. The products were also exhibited for the visitors at the school exhibition at the end of the semester.

For control group, traditional materials were chosen carefully depending on the most common techniques used in kindergarten for foreign language instruction in Turkey such as TPR, songs, games or flashcards. Additionally, the syllabus designed for English classes of private pre-primary schools was examined for this purpose. The results showed that traditional methods and techniques in foreign language teaching to young learners include a number of common activities. Among these methods Total Physical Response was the most used method. As materials and activities; drawing and painting activities, printable worksheets, art craft activities, flashcards, pictures, real objects, games, cartoons, songs, and animations were also included.

For both groups, the study lasted 8 weeks in parallel fashion, in which a new topic was provided to children per week. The courses took 35 minutes per a lesson each day and a total of 175 minutes per week for 8 weeks for each group. At the end of the 8 weeks, each groups took a total of 1400 minutes of instruction. During the application, the children and the classroom environment was observed by using the checklists mentioned above. On the fifth day of each week, the students were tested in order to measure the learnt vocabulary items related with the target words.

### 3.8. Data Analysis

The data was observed to have distributed normally. Beside descriptives (means and percentages), analysis used are Repeated measures, Independent Samples T-Test, and Pearson correlation. All assumptions were met.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Common Methods used in Teaching English in Pre-schools and the Rate of PBL Use

As EFL has newly been started to be introduced to pre-school curriculum, used techniques and methods have been yet vague. Thus, to investigate this matter, a short online survey was delivered to 150 teachers of English in Pre-schools in all regions of Turkey. The results are as follows:

Table 1: Preliminary Study on Common Techniques in Turkish Context

<i>Technique</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Course books</i>	<i>%95</i>
<i>Total Physical Response (TPR)</i>	<i>%55</i>
<i>Games</i>	<i>%54</i>
<i>Flashcards</i>	<i>%31</i>
<i>Songs</i>	<i>29%</i>
<i>Animations</i>	<i>%21</i>
<i>Drama</i>	<i>13%</i>
<i>Pronunciation Activities</i>	<i>9%</i>
<i>Fairy tales and stories</i>	<i>7%</i>
<i>PBL</i>	<i>3%</i>

The results showed that teachers primarily rely on coursebooks, however its efficiency is open to debate as these learners have still problems of literacy. It is then followed by TPR, games, flashcards, songs, animation videos. Last but not least, pronunciation practice and story telling were observed to have been valued less. Finally, PBL was found to be used rarely.

### 4.2. The Relationship Between Observation Scores and Test Performance

It was hypothesized that there was a relationship between learner average exam scores and their behaviour throughout the courses; either active or passive. 8-week observation scores and exam scores were averaged. Pearson correlation results showed a strong positive association between observation scores and exam performance;  $r = 0.968$ ,  $n = 28$   $p = ,000$ . In this respect, it could be emphasized that more active learners also scored better in exams while passive ones were mostly less successful.

Because a positive relationship was found between observation scores and exam results, next question focuses the effect of instruction on observation checklist scores. To examine this, an independent samples T-test was conducted with the instruction method as the grouping factor and observation scores as the dependent variable. According to the results, the control group which had traditional courses was less active ( $M=1,91$ ,  $SD=,23$ ) than the experimental group was ( $M=3,16$ ,  $SD=,25$ ) with a large effect size;  $t(26)=13,43$ ;  $p=,000$ ,  $d=,933$ . In other words, experimental group which had PBL instruction were more active and motivated while control group with traditional instruction preferred to stay passive.

#### 4.3. The Effect of PBL on Learner Vocabulary Learning Performance

To reveal the developmental effect of PBL on learner performance, a repeated measures ANOVA with 8 levels (8 weeks) was conducted with type of instruction as the factor and weekly exam scores as the dependent levels. The results showed a significant effect of PBL instruction on vocabulary learning gains;  $F(1,26)=406.591$ , (95% CI),  $p=,000$ ,  $\eta^2= .94$ . Thus, it can be inferred that experimental group, in which PBL was applied, scored higher and showed better vocabulary development throughout 8 weeks of instruction than the control group did. Descriptives were given in Table 2:

Table 2: Descriptives for Vocabulary Exam Performance

Week	PBL		Traditional	
	Mean Score	SD	Mean Score	SD
1	83	14	31	12
2	84	14	33	9
3	85	11	30	9
4	87	12	33	9
5	83	12	38	14
6	92	9	39	10
7	86	9	37	9
8	85	9	28	7

The findings showed that PBL use in Turkish pre-schools has been rare and teachers mainly rely on coursebooks and TPR. The main reason for not using PBL may derive from its being a relatively new technique. Additionally, PBL requires teachers and students to be more creative in the classroom and also is more demanding in terms of time allocated. Hence, eventhough teachers know how to apply PBL, they may avoid due to its demanding nature. However, it should be noted that teaching of English in pre-schools in Turkey is in its infancy, as the time passes, more recent techniques and methods including PBL may be introduced.



The results also indicated a significant effect of PBL on both learner motivation and vocabulary learning performance when compared to traditional techniques. These results further confirmed the similar previous research in Turkish context (Çırak, 2006; Türker, 2007; Yıldız, 2009; Baş and Beyhan, 2010; Köroğlu, 2011) and in international literature (Blemenfeld, et. al, 1991; Thomas, 2000; Srikrain, 2008; Beres, 2011; Simpson, 2011) emphasizing the facilitative effect of PBL on EFL language learning gains.

Depending on the motivational nature of PBL (Brunetti et. al., 2003; Solomon, 2003), the current study also investigated how active the learners were during the courses with PBL and traditional methods and techniques. In order to investigate the relationship, the results of the observation checklists and test results of the learners were correlated. In this respect, the results related to learner motivation revealed that active students outperformed less active ones. Moreover, learners were observed to be more active in PBL classes than the ones in traditional classrooms. Reviewing all these findings, these results confirmed the study by Kloppenborg & Baucus (2004) asserting that PBL enables a more active and successful learning environment than the use traditional methods and techniques. Firstly, the motivational success of PBL instruction might also be related to learner autonomy in language classrooms. Learner autonomy refers to learner's taking charge of his own learning process by taking responsibility (Benson and Voller, 1997; Trebbi, 2006). Throughout PBL instruction, learners design, create and present their own brand new products called projects which foster both motivation and learning. Throughout this progress, PBL also requires students to be more active and collective by emphasizing collaboration. Indeed, learning a foreign language is an interactive social process. Hence, PBL fits well with the term "Scaffolding" coined with Vygotsky (1991) which emphasized the social and interactive nature of language learning. Learners exchange more feedback with each other and the teacher in PBL classrooms which lead co-operation and social responsibility.

Additionally, the current findings supported some related international literature who found out that PBL enhanced students' language skills and learning performance. In terms of academic performance, the results supported Kloppenborg & Baucus (2004) and Poonpon, (2017) who proposed that learning becomes efficient for learners if they exhibited their abilities to plan, manage, and accomplish projects through their content knowledge and language skills. The findings showed that PBL could provide easier learning which positively affected test scores and exam performance. In a cognitive perspective, the results showed a better retention performance of students in PBL classrooms. Depending on noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990), learning starts with attention. Simply, people learn things they pay attention to and do not learn much about things they do not attend to (Schmidt, 2010). Thus, attention is a prerequisite of learning and a fire starter for working memory through which intake turns into input (Robinson, 1995). Recent eye tracking studies showed that retention of newly learned vocabulary highly correlated positively with the attention amount on them (Godfroid et. al., 2013; Dolgunsöz, 2015). In PBL classrooms, learners were found to be more active and took more control on their own learning which might lead them to pay more attention on linguistic forms and new vocabulary items. As a results, these learners outperformed learners who took relatively boring traditional instruction. This finding also asserted that PBL not only motivated learners but also provide better linguistic retention performance and cognitive efficiency.

The study was conducted with the aim of exploring and evaluating the effect of using Project based approach in teaching English vocabulary to pre-school children compared to using traditional techniques in Turkish context. The results revealed that PBL instruction positively affected both learner motivation and EFL vocabulary learning gains. PBL also observed to have provided a wealthy input including the natural use of language, imperatives during the activities, dialogues between the teacher and the children. Furthermore, PBL promoted active involvement of the children and increased motivation and cooperation among learners. As for the observation results, it is indicated that children were more active during the classes with PBL; however, they tended to be less active in classes with traditional methods and techniques.

Although PBL proved to be a beneficial approach in foreign language teaching, the survey findings indicated that PBL is rarely preferred in pre-school curriculum. The reason why PBL is not much implemented during foreign language classes may result from unawareness of teachers about the effectiveness and contributions of implementing PBL. Teaching English in pre-schools in Turkey is yet fairly new and requires development. Therefore, seminars can be organized for informing instructors to enrich their English courses with PBL. Those who use PBL in their classes may share their experiences and suggestions on how to utilize PBL effectively. Teacher may also benefit from online PBL sources (e.g. pblworld.org; bie.org.; prekinders.com) which are free and accessible. When PBL is integrated into the syllabus of English courses for young learners, it can easily improve the motivation and active involvement of children which also promotes more effective learning in foreign language vocabulary or other areas.

PBL is an outstanding approach as it is applicable to all grades of learners and almost in all areas of education. It provides an active process for children enabling them to cooperate with each other, and motivating them through the activities and with a product that is presented by children to real audiences. In essence, PBL supports learning by doing- that is one of the most effective learning principles. Considering the effectiveness of PBL in teaching English vocabulary to young learners, it can be offered that PBL approach should be integrated into English courses with a designation of a well-planned implementation process.

## 5. Conclusion

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