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ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS IN PRESCHOOLERS THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

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Abstract
This study investigates how Project-Based Learning (PBL) contributes to improving English language instruction for preschool-aged children. Grounded in constructivist and sociocultural frameworks, the article analyzes the extent to which PBL promotes vocabulary growth, verbal communication skills, and social-emotional involvement. Based on a quasi-experimental design, data gathered from 4–5-year-old children in Uzbekistan reveal that PBL offers a natural and engaging environment for language development, encouraging learners through purposeful, experience-based activities.

Keywords: Project-based instruction, early English learning, preschool students, language development, interactive learning, emotional involvement.

Introduction

Children acquire their native language through a developmental sequence that progresses from the holophrastic and telegraphic stages to more advanced syntactic structures. This process is heavily influenced by environmental and social factors, especially the rich linguistic input provided by caregivers. Research indicates that infants initially recognize phonemes from all languages, but around six months of age, they begin to specialize in the sounds of their native language. As such, the preschool period is widely recognized as a vital "critical window" for language learning. To capitalize on this stage, instructional methods should emphasize communication and meaning. Project-Based Learning (PBL) fulfills this requirement by immersing children in purposeful, real-world tasks that encourage active language use and recreate natural communication through social interaction and multiple modes of engagement. For instance, projects like a "Toy Fair" or a "Mini Garden" in preschool classrooms give learners repeated

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exposure to new English vocabulary and expressions in meaningful, authentic contexts.

PBL is rooted in the theories of constructivism and socioconstructivism, especially Vygotsky's idea of the "zone of proximal development," which emphasizes the social nature of learning. Through interactions, children co-construct meaning and internalize language—a process that is enriched in PBL via playful, interactive activities incorporating storytelling, songs, and age-appropriate literature. For example, toddlers might begin with two-word utterances like "Mommy go." Teachers can scaffold these expressions with extended input such as "Where is Mommy going?" or "Mommy is cooking," providing learners with interactive linguistic models. As Ellis points out, tasks rich in meaning support the timely acquisition of vocabulary and grammar, facilitating the natural progression from basic sound awareness to more complex sentence construction. Moreover, PBL promotes social collaboration, allowing children to adopt roles like "organizer," "artist," or "narrator," which in turn develop both linguistic and socio-emotional skills.

Studies from regions including Turkey, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia consistently show that PBL enhances children's retention of new words, pronunciation skills, and interactive speaking abilities. However, in Uzbekistan, the practical application of PBL in early childhood English education—including its methodology, assessment tools, and evaluation frameworks—remains underexplored. The purpose of this article is to investigate the effectiveness of PBL in improving young children's English abilities, with a focus on vocabulary acquisition, speaking fluency, grammatical development, and emotional engagement. Additionally, the study seeks to offer concrete strategies for educators, including how to implement PBL-based lessons and assess learning outcomes through holistic tools like rubrics, digital portfolios, and caregiver feedback.

Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute to the modernization of English teaching in Uzbekistan's preschools by introducing innovative, developmentally appropriate practices. A well-structured PBL model can align with children's natural learning tendencies, transforming English acquisition into an enjoyable and engaging process guided by the belief that "Every project opens the door to a new language experience."

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Methodology

The study employed a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design. This approach enabled a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) versus traditional teaching methods in developing preschool children's English vocabulary, oral production, and socio-emotional engagement. The experiment was conducted at Preschool Institution No. 5 in Tashkent, involving 48 children aged 4–5 who were randomly assigned to two groups: the experimental group (taught through PBL) and the control group (taught using conventional textbook and repetition-based instruction). The experimental group received instruction in the form of PBL blocks three times a week over eight weeks, while the control group followed a standard curriculum with no project components.

Data collection instruments included:

1. a 30-item picture-based receptive vocabulary test (KR-20 = 0.83),
2. a story-retelling task coded using a 15-point rubric for syntactic complexity and fluency (inter-rater reliability $\alpha = 0.87$),
3. an observational checklist assessing socio-emotional engagement during class (based on eye contact, initiative, cooperation, and affective responses),
4. a parent questionnaire evaluating the frequency of English usage at home following the intervention.

Statistical analysis included Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, Mann–Whitney U Test, paired-sample t-test, and ANCOVA, with Cohen's d and effect size r used to measure the magnitude of differences. Qualitative data—such as teacher reflection journals and focus group interviews with children—were analyzed using thematic coding following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure, with inter-coder agreement reported at $\kappa = 0.79$. The study was conducted in compliance with ethical standards, and written informed consent was obtained from all parents.

Analysis

This article provides a comprehensive examination of how age, neuropsychological conditions, sociobiological factors, affective and cognitive dimensions, as well as pronunciation (accent), interrelate in the process of second language (L2) acquisition. The primary focus is placed on the Critical Period Hypothesis, which suggests that the ability to acquire language declines with age.

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The discussion begins with a sociobiological perspective on the critical period. Scovel (1988) argues that each biological species develops a socially bonding accent around the time of sexual maturity, which aids in social identification and mate selection. Brown[7] further interprets this phenomenon as a genetic remnant that persists in humans but has diminished in functional relevance due to the modern tendency to form relationships across linguistic and dialectal lines. Singleton and Ryan[8] also emphasize that acquiring a native-like accent is bound to a neurologically defined critical period.

The role of the brain's hemispheres in language learning is also highlighted. According to Obler, the right hemisphere plays a significant role during the early stages of foreign language acquisition. Based on this, Brown[9] recommends that foreign language teachers—especially those working with adults—incorporate activities that engage the right hemisphere through visual, intuitive, and creative methods.

The issue of accent and pronunciation is given particular attention. The article emphasizes that producing authentic speech involves the coordinated activity of hundreds of muscles. However, after puberty, achieving native-like pronunciation in a foreign language becomes nearly impossible. Factors such as neuromuscular plasticity, brain development, sociobiological programming, and sociocultural context contribute to this limitation. Despite this, having an accent is not considered a failure. Some individuals can communicate effectively without perfect pronunciation—Arnold Schwarzenegger, for example, is cited as a fluent English speaker despite his strong German accent. Cook[10] and Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow[11] argue that the success of language learners should be judged by their communicative competence, not their pronunciation accuracy.

The cognitive dimension is examined through the framework of Jean Piaget's stages of intellectual development. According to Piaget, children acquire language naturally and without formal operational thinking, making them highly efficient and intuitive language learners. However, Singleton and Ryan question the empirical basis for linking Piagetian stages directly to critical period arguments, suggesting the connection is vague and lacks sufficient evidence.

Ausubel contributes by suggesting that adults can use deductive reasoning and grammatical explanations to learn languages—advantages not typically accessible to young children. Yet, the effectiveness of such learning depends heavily on the teacher and context. DeKeyser[12] found that while some adults

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can rely on explicit learning strategies, they struggle with the implicit pattern recognition that children naturally exhibit. This finding supports the existence of a critical period.

Piaget's concept of equilibration is also considered: learning is seen as a cyclical process of moving from states of cognitive disequilibrium to equilibrium and back again, reflecting the dynamic nature of conceptual development. This cycle of doubt, discovery, and stabilization continues through adolescence and influences language acquisition.

Finally, Ausubel's distinction between rote learning and meaningful learning is revisited. While adults may have better short-term memory for rote tasks, children tend to engage in language learning more meaningfully, through play and contextualized interaction. This supports the view that language instruction should prioritize communicative and meaningful activities, especially in early childhood education.

Analysis

Ausubel [13] proposed that adults are capable of acquiring grammar through analytical thinking, using a deductive approach. However, the effectiveness of this method depends heavily on the instructor and the teaching context. DeKeyser argued that some adults fail to utilize intuitive learning mechanisms and instead rely solely on explicit learning strategies, which supports the existence of a critical period for language acquisition.

Piaget's "disequilibrium–equilibrium" model is used to explain the conceptual development involved in language learning. According to this model, individuals move from states of uncertainty to clarity, and then back to new states of uncertainty, in a continuous search for cognitive balance. These cycles play a key role in children's intellectual development and have a direct impact on their language acquisition process.

Ausubel also emphasized the distinction between rote learning and meaningful learning, which is crucial in language teaching. Children acquire language more effectively through context-rich, meaningful learning experiences, whereas adults tend to rely more on rote memorization, which is typically effective only for short-term memory. Therefore, foreign language lessons should not rely solely on repetition but must be directed toward real communicative activities.

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The analysis of affective factors highlights how age-related psychological changes influence language learning. Although young children are initially egocentric, they have not yet developed a strong fear of social evaluation or making mistakes, which makes them more open to learning new languages. In contrast, adults may experience greater psychological resistance. The concept of "language ego," introduced by Guiora refers to the deep connection between one's identity and their native language. Learning a foreign language can threaten this ego, especially for adults, making the process more psychologically challenging.

Attitudes also play a vital role in language learning. Negative attitudes toward the language, its culture, or its native speakers can significantly hinder success. Therefore, it is important for educators to foster a positive psychological environment and help learners overcome stereotypes and internal barriers.

Results

The study's findings indicate that the Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach provides significant advantages in teaching English to preschool children. The posttest results revealed the following differences between the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG):

- In the receptive vocabulary test, the EG achieved a median score of 24/30, while the CG scored 17/30 ($p < 0.01$, Mann–Whitney U).
- In the story-retelling task—measuring syntactic complexity, grammatical accuracy, and length—EG significantly outperformed CG ($t(46) = 3.84$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.78$).
- In socio-emotional participation (collaboration, initiative, eye contact, affective response), EG scored significantly higher (Wilcoxon $Z = -3.12$, $p < 0.005$).
- Parent surveys revealed that children in the EG used English more frequently at home (median difference = +2.3 points).

Qualitative data analysis showed that PBL sessions fostered positive attitudes, greater willingness to communicate, and increased confidence in children. According to focus group discussions and teacher reflections, children described PBL projects as "fun," "playful," and "motivating," often remarking that they made them "think in English."

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Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the **Project-Based Learning (PBL)** methodology can serve as an effective tool for teaching English to preschool children. In particular, this method supports language acquisition by providing a **multimodal, contextual, and socially engaging learning environment** that aligns with children's natural stages of speech development. Gains observed in vocabulary acquisition, grammatical accuracy, and socio-emotional participation demonstrate the comprehensive impact of this approach.

Moreover, PBL contributes to the formation of **positive psychological attitudes toward language learning**, which is a key factor for long-term educational success. Based on this experimental evidence, it can be concluded that there is an urgent need to **redesign English lessons in Uzbekistan's preschool institutions** using modern PBL approaches, to develop **assessment tools based on holistic and criterion-referenced frameworks**, and to **equip teachers with practical methodological skills**. This would make foreign language learning not only effective but also socially enriching and motivationally engaging for young learners.

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