


Chapter 4


Examining the Role of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in Enhancing Student Engagement and Learning in an EMI Context

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of Project-Based Learning (PBL) on student engagement in an English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) context at a transnational university in China. Using a mixed-methods design, pre- and post-surveys were conducted with 96 and 83 undergraduates, alongside a follow-up focus group. Quantitative results showed significant gains across five engagement dimensions—problem-solving, collaboration, self-directed learning, communication and language skills, and critical thinking—with the strongest improvements in problem-solving and collaboration. Qualitative findings revealed challenges, particularly in language, communication, and critical thinking. While offering valuable insights into PBL's role in EMI, the study is limited by reliance on self-reported data, a small

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qualitative sample, and the absence of a control group. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, include objective engagement measures, and expand qualitative data collection to strengthen these findings.

INTRODUCTION

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has become increasingly widespread in higher education, especially in non-native English-speaking countries. The term “EMI” referred to the practice of teaching academic materials in English, even when it was not the student's native language (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). McKinley et al. (2021) claimed that this shift was especially noticeable in transnational universities that sought to improve students' language skills and promote global competitiveness. By giving students the chance to learn the language, universities seek to prepare graduates for the global labor market, where fluency in English is becoming increasingly valued. Despite its potential advantages, EMI also presents challenges, especially in terms of student participation and engagement. Language barriers also hamper students' ability to fully engage with the learning content, particularly in academic contexts where communication clarity and precision are crucial. Additional levels of difficulty were added by cultural differences and the requirement to manage academic discourse in a non-native language (Frambach et al., 2012). These difficulties are especially noticeable in EAP courses, where students need to acquire the advanced language skills required for academic performance in EMI contexts in addition to subject-specific knowledge.

Considering these difficulties, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as an innovative teaching approach that stresses active, student-centered learning through collaborative projects. PBL involved students in real-world and inquiry-driven assignments that developed critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills (Peterson, 1999). Previous studies have shown that PBL could significantly enhance student enthusiasm and engagement, making it a promising teaching method in EMI settings, where both academic and language learning were prioritized (e.g., Amerstorfer & Münster-Kistner, 2021; Wijnia et al., 2024). However, research on its impact on EMI contexts remained limited. In particular, there is limited research about how PBL affects learning and student engagement in EMI settings, where students need to simultaneously learn language and content. This gap in the literature underscores the need for further research on the role of PBL in EMI contexts, especially in terms of how it influences student engagement and learning.

Even though PBL has promising pedagogical implication, the implementation of PBL is not without challenges. Getting used to teamwork is one of the main challenges PBL students have. Students were frequently used to working alone or in

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