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Enhancing Intercultural Awareness through Project-Based Learning in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract:

This study investigates the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in a Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) class to enhance students' intercultural awareness and English communication skills. The research was conducted in the English Education Department, involving undergraduate students enrolled in a CCU course. The main part of the project was an International Sharing Session, in which students spoke with speakers from different countries online to learn about their cultures, values, and daily lives. A qualitative descriptive design was used to gather data from classroom observations, students' project outputs, reflective responses, and records of learning activities. The findings indicate that PBL enhanced cultural comprehension, fostered empathy and open-mindedness, and elevated students' language and communication abilities through genuine, interactive activities. Students showed more confidence speaking English during discussions and presentations, and they also learned how to think critically and work together. Nonetheless, difficulties concerning information organization and linguistic constraints were also recognized, underscoring the necessity for instructional scaffolding and ongoing feedback. The study concludes that integrating PBL into CCU instruction effectively transforms passive learning into active inquiry, fostering the development of intercultural competence and 21st-century skills, thereby establishing it as a pertinent pedagogical approach for EFL contexts in higher education.

Key Words: *Project-Based Learning, Cross-Cultural Understanding, Intercultural Competence, EFL Higher Education, Communication Skills.*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengkaji penerapan Project-Based Learning (PBL) dalam mata kuliah Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) untuk meningkatkan kesadaran antarbudaya dan keterampilan komunikasi bahasa Inggris mahasiswa. Penelitian dilaksanakan di Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, dengan melibatkan mahasiswa sarjana yang mengikuti mata kuliah CCU. Bagian utama dari proyek ini adalah International Sharing Session, di mana mahasiswa berinteraksi secara daring dengan narasumber dari berbagai negara untuk mempelajari budaya, nilai-nilai, dan kehidupan sehari-hari mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dengan pengumpulan data melalui observasi kelas, hasil proyek mahasiswa, refleksi tertulis, serta dokumentasi aktivitas pembelajaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa PBL mampu meningkatkan pemahaman budaya, menumbuhkan empati dan sikap terbuka, serta mengembangkan kemampuan bahasa dan komunikasi mahasiswa melalui aktivitas yang autentik dan interaktif. Mahasiswa menunjukkan peningkatan

kepercayaan diri dalam menggunakan bahasa Inggris selama diskusi dan presentasi, serta mengembangkan kemampuan berpikir kritis dan bekerja secara kolaboratif. Namun demikian, ditemukan pula kendala terkait pengorganisasian informasi dan keterbatasan linguistik, yang menegaskan pentingnya pemberian scaffolding pembelajaran dan umpan balik berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa integrasi PBL dalam pembelajaran CCU secara efektif mengubah pembelajaran pasif menjadi inkuiri aktif serta mendukung pengembangan kompetensi antarbudaya dan keterampilan abad ke-21, sehingga relevan diterapkan dalam konteks pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing di pendidikan tinggi.

Kata Kunci: *Project-Based Learning, Pemahaman Lintas Budaya, Kompetensi Antar Budaya, Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Keterampilan Komunikasi.*

INTRODUCTION

The shift toward Project-Based Learning (PBL) in the Cross-Culture Understanding class (CCU) arises from the growing recognition that the ability to understand and navigate cultural differences is not only a skill but also a necessity for fostering empathy, collaboration, and mutual respect. PBL is a teaching method that involves a dynamic classroom in which students are believed to acquire deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems. According to (Gabuardi, 2021; Öndeş, 2024) Project-Based Learning is a method that systematically plans to engage students in acquiring and learning knowledge and skills through "an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic (real-life) questions and carefully designed products and tasks". It can be explored that, by integrating PBL, students will not only learn from the curriculum and learning materials provided but also apply what they have learned to solve problems and produce results, integrating knowing and doing, focusing education on students, not just on the curriculum.

Its roots lie in constructivism, which holds that students actively construct knowledge through experience and interaction (Piaget, 1954, in Halim et al., 2023). PBL is assigned to students to design, plan, and present an extended project, as shown in the figure below.
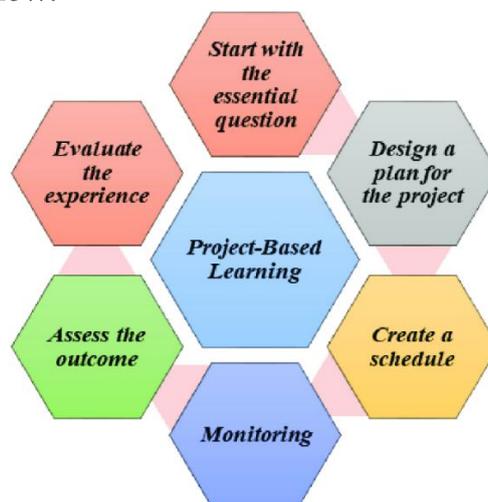

Figure 1. The process of Project based Learning (Wahyu, 2016)

This course adopted the PBL approach with aims to encourage students to be active in investigating real-world cultural issues. Rather than passively receiving information. Like other normal classes, learners most of the time receive information and knowledge from lecturers, complete all assigned tasks, and engage in reading and writing. In contrast, by applying the PBL approach in this class, learners will engage in tasks such as designing cultural exhibitions, conducting interviews with key persons from different backgrounds (New Zealand, USA, South Korea, Taiwan, and Denmark), and creating multimedia presentations.

By integrating PBL into the CCU class, students not only deepen their understanding of cultural diversity but also develop critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills. The hands-on nature of the project fosters personal reflection and social awareness, empowering learners to become culturally responsive citizens in both local and international contexts. This pedagogical shift is particularly relevant in the context of English as a Foreign Language education, where traditional methods often prioritize linguistic accuracy over cultural competence, potentially leaving students ill-equipped for the demands of global communication (Garim et al., 2023). Recent studies underscore the potential of PBL to bridge this gap by contextualizing language learning with authentic, culturally rich scenarios that require active collaboration and inquiry (Aguskin & Maryani, 2020a; Kofoed et al., 2018).

This investigation involved students from the English Education Department at the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, University of Papua, Manokwari, West Papua, Indonesia. The Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) course used online sharing sessions to introduce students to international cultures, including those from English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries. Guest speakers from New Zealand, the United States, South Korea, Taiwan, and Denmark shared their experiences related to academic life, cultural adjustment, and culture shock. Students actively participated by asking questions to improve their understanding of different cultures. Building on these interactive exchanges, the implementation of PBL has been identified as a powerful pedagogical tool for fostering critical cultural awareness and meaningful engagement among EFL learners (Mahaputri, 2022). The Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) course facilitated exposure to diverse international cultures, encompassing both English-speaking and non-English-speaking nations, via online collaborative sessions. Guest speakers from New Zealand, the United States, South Korea, Taiwan, and Denmark shared insights on academic experiences, cultural adjustment, and the phenomenon of culture shock. Students demonstrated active engagement by posing inquiries designed to enhance their intercultural comprehension.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) was integrated into the CCU course through an "International Culture Sharing Session," a component of the semester's curriculum. This project featured presentations from speakers from Switzerland,

New Zealand, Taiwan, South Korea, the United States, and Denmark; most were affiliated with the University of Papua and engaged in academic or professional pursuits internationally. Consequently, these sessions facilitated learners' exploration of diverse cultural practices, values, and communication styles, thereby fostering intercultural awareness, enhancing communication skills, and cultivating respect for cultural diversity (Halim et al., 2023).

The PBL activities fostered the development of competencies across several areas. Cognitive competence was cultivated through the investigation of cultural practices and values. Communicative competence was strengthened via discussions and question-and-answer sessions. Social competence was enhanced through collaboration with peers from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, affective competence was developed by cultivating empathy and openness to cultural differences. Despite the promising potential of Project-Based Learning in fostering intercultural competence, a review of recent literature reveals a persistent research gap regarding the specific mechanisms by which PBL enhances critical cultural awareness in EFL contexts, particularly within the diverse educational landscape of Indonesia (Shadiev et al., 2015). While existing studies have demonstrated that PBL can enhance cross-cultural understanding and speaking skills through collaborative tasks (Bastola, 2021; Tarigan & Tarigan, 2024), there remains a limited understanding of how these projects specifically influence students' critical cultural awareness and translation accuracy when utilizing digital tools.

RESEARCH METHOD

This investigation utilized a descriptive qualitative research methodology to explore the application of Project-Based Learning (PBL) within a Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) course. The study emphasized detailing instructional methods, learning dynamics, and students' reactions to PBL exercises, rather than establishing cause-and-effect relationships (Mutanga, 2024; Zhang & Yin, 2025). A qualitative framework was deemed suitable, given the study's objective of documenting learners' experiences, levels of engagement, and achievements in intercultural learning within a genuine classroom setting.

The subjects of this study were students enrolled in the Cross-Cultural Understanding course, part of the English Education Department in the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training at the University of Papua, Manokwari, West Papua, Indonesia. These students were participating in the course as a component of their standard academic curriculum.

Data were gathered throughout the semester's Project-Based Learning implementation. Classroom observations, documentation of learning activities, and students' project outputs, including written reports, presentations, posters, and multimedia products, constituted the primary data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Markula & Aksela, 2022). Furthermore, students' participation in question-and-answer sessions during the international sharing sessions, along with their

reflective responses to guided reflection questions, was employed to corroborate the data through triangulation. These data sources collectively offered a thorough understanding of student engagement, intercultural awareness, and communication practices throughout the PBL implementation.

The Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) class's Project-Based Learning (PBL) initiative began with the Initiation and Inquiry phase, designed to establish students' foundational understanding and readiness for the project. During this phase, students engaged in a brainstorming activity to familiarize themselves with the concept of culture, its importance, and the tenets of intercultural communication. To stimulate prior knowledge and encourage self-reflection, students were prompted to articulate the distinctive features of their own cultures.

The lecturer subsequently elucidated the International Sharing Session initiative, detailing its aims and anticipated results. Instruction was provided on the specific data students were to gather, the formulation of pertinent inquiries, and the significance of note-taking or session recording for educational purposes. Ultimately, students were apprised of the selected nations, the invited speakers, the session timetable, and the online delivery method, thereby ensuring their readiness for active engagement. Following the initiation phase, the study proceeded to the information Gathering and Compilation stage, where students actively collected and synthesized cultural data from the international sharing sessions (Aguskin & Maryani, 2020). The cross-cultural understanding sharing session schedule is described in the table below (the names of keynote speakers are hidden to maintain the anonymity of this research).

Table 1. Cross-Cultural Understanding Sharing Session Schedule

NO	Day / Date / Time (West Papua Region)	National	Keynote
1	Saturday / 25th Oct '25 / 08.00 AM	USA	Speaker 1
2	Saturday /11th Oct '25 /09.00 AM	Taiwan	Speaker 2
3	Wednesday / 22nd Oct '25 / 08.00, AM	New Zealand	Speaker 3
4	Wednesday / 15th Oct '25 / 08.00 AM	Swiss	Speaker 4
5	Monday / 20th Oct '25 / 07.00 PM	Korea Selatan	Speaker 5
6	Monday / 27th Oct '25 / 04.30 – 06.00 PM	Denmark	Speaker 6

During the exploratory phase, learners interacted directly with international speakers, absorbing comprehensive accounts of their experiences abroad, encompassing both academic and professional contexts. These speakers provided perspectives on cultural adjustment, the dynamics of campus or professional environments, the challenges of culture shock, the practicalities of daily life as expatriates, and local customs, including culinary traditions and celebratory events. Drawing on this acquired knowledge, learners were prompted to investigate cross-cultural understanding more deeply by formulating questions and actively participating in discussions. This interactive process facilitated a deeper understanding of cultural distinctions and

commonalities, while concurrently fostering the development of inquiry-based skills (Hellerstein & Sindiani, 2025). Throughout this phase, learners meticulously recorded essential information through note-taking, which subsequently served as the foundation for their project work.

The concluding phase emphasized reflection and evaluation to assess students' intercultural learning experiences. The instructor facilitated reflective inquiries, prompting students to consider their insights into diverse cultures, the similarities and distinctions observed, shifts in their viewpoints, and the difficulties faced during the international sharing sessions. Furthermore, learners were prompted to reflect on their intercultural communication and the potential of the experience to equip them for future international endeavors, such as additional study-abroad opportunities. This reflective undertaking fostered enhanced self-awareness, strengthened intercultural competence, and established a foundation for assessing both cognitive and affective learning outcomes (Halim et al., 2023).

The data analysis employed a qualitative descriptive approach. The acquired data underwent organization, review, and categorization, focusing on recurring themes pertinent to student engagement and collaboration, the cultivation of intercultural awareness, and the enhancement of language and communication proficiencies (Sulis, 2022). The analytical process encompassed data reduction, data display, and the formulation of conclusions, all aimed at discerning patterns and pedagogical implications (Qin, 2024). To bolster the study's trustworthiness, data from diverse sources were compared and interpreted, thereby ensuring the consistency and credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) through the "Sharing Session for International Culture" provided valuable insights into how experiential, student-centered learning can enhance intercultural competence and communicative ability in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. The discussion below focuses on three main aspects: (1) student engagement and collaboration, (2) development of intercultural awareness, and (3) improvement of language and communication skills.

Student Engagement and Collaboration

The project results indicated a high level of student engagement throughout the learning process. Unlike traditional teacher-centered lessons, the PBL approach encouraged learners to take ownership of their learning by selecting a culture of interest, conducting research, and designing creative presentations (Hamid, 2025). This sense of autonomy contributed to increased motivation and participation. Students reported feeling more enthusiastic because they were able to explore real-world topics that connected classroom learning to authentic cultural contexts.

Collaborative learning also played a central role in the project's success. Working in small groups allowed students to exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, and divide responsibilities, which aligns with previous findings that PBL promotes teamwork and problem-solving skills (Abrudan, 2025). During group discussions, students practiced English communication not only for presentation purposes but also as a working language to coordinate tasks (Jelodari et al., 2025). This suggests that PBL can foster both social and linguistic interaction, enhancing the overall learning experience.

The project's collaborative nature required students to resolve conflicts and navigate group dynamics, thereby enhancing their social and emotional development (Simões et al., 2023). Moreover, the project's interactive setting cultivated a sense of community and reciprocal support among peers, which is vital for maintaining motivation in language acquisition (Syafryadin et al., 2024). Studies show that being actively involved in experiential learning situations helps students engage more deeply with the material, which leads to better attitudes toward school and better long-term memory retention (Beckett, 2005). This experiential engagement helps students better understand difficult ideas because they have to apply what they know in real-life situations rather than just take in information (Guerra et al., 2017; Sedubun & Nurhayati, 2024).

Development of Intercultural Awareness

One of the core goals of the Sharing Session project was to cultivate students' understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. The findings showed that students developed a more reflective attitude toward both their own and others' cultural practices. By comparing similarities and differences among various international traditions such as greetings, festivals, and social norms students became more aware of the values underlying cultural behaviours.

This aligns with (Byram, 1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, particularly the dimensions of knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, and attitudes of curiosity and openness. Students learned to avoid stereotyping and to interpret cultural behaviours from a perspective of empathy and respect. The "sharing session" itself provided an authentic space for intercultural exchange, enabling students to experience cultural diversity as a lived and dialogic process rather than as abstract knowledge.

This practical application of language skills in a collaborative environment supports the idea that language acquisition is most effective when learners participate in meaningful, goal-directed interactions that reflect real-world communication requirements (Probert, 2024). This dynamic is further illustrated by the students' mobilization for cultural exchange events and collaborative performances, which showcased a diverse array of cultural backgrounds through shared elements such as songs, dances, recipes, and traditional attire (Musirini et al., 2025). This active participation in cultural exchange not only made the classroom a better place to learn but also showed the cognitive and social benefits

of working together, as students said they felt validated, safe, and more confident when working in groups.

Improvement of Language and Communication Skills

The project also contributed significantly to improving students' English language skills. Preparing and presenting information in English required students to apply vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in meaningful contexts. Through scaffolded stages of research, scripting, rehearsal, and presentation, students had multiple opportunities to practice descriptive and comparative language related to culture.

Furthermore, the interactive nature of the Sharing Session promoted spontaneous communication. During question-and-answer sessions, students had to listen actively, formulate responses quickly, and use polite expressions appropriately. This communicative practice aligns with the principles of task-based and content-based language learning, where language serves as a medium for authentic communication rather than a purely academic subject.

According to this study, PBL significantly improved students' English language and communication skills, as evidenced by increased opportunities to use meaningful vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation during research and presentation activities. This aligns with recent research demonstrating that PBL enhances EFL learners' communicative competence, especially in fluency, lexical richness, and interactive skills during authentic tasks (Wati & Gunawan, 2024). Students need to formulate questions and respond spontaneously during interactive sharing sessions, which is consistent with findings that PBL fosters active engagement and fuller participation in English-speaking activities, including expressing opinions and engaging in dialogue with peers and external speakers (Irawan & Ahmad, 2025). Such authentic communicative practice supports the shift from viewing language as abstract knowledge to using it as a tool for real communication, an essential principle of task-based and content-based language instruction.

Challenges and Pedagogical Implications

Despite its overall success, several challenges were identified. Some students initially struggled to find reliable cultural information and to organize it into coherent presentations. Others faced linguistic limitations that affected their confidence during the sharing event (Maulina, 2024). These challenges highlight the need for adequate scaffolding, including research guidelines, language support materials, and continuous formative feedback.

Furthermore, the pedagogical implications of this research underscore the transformative role of teachers in PBL environments. Rather than serving as primary sources of knowledge, teachers in PBL settings act as facilitators and guides, helping students navigate inquiry, collaboration, and reflection. This conceptualization of teacher roles corresponds with reported benefits of PBL in

cultivating *21ˢᵗ*-century skills, including communication, collaboration, and critical thinking, as well as global competency (Prastiwi et al., 2024). However, implementing PBL effectively requires not only teachers' facilitation but also preparatory training and material design that accommodate diverse proficiency levels. Addressing both learner and teacher challenges through professional development and instructional scaffolding can optimize PBL's impact on language acquisition and intercultural competence.

Reflection and Broader Impact

Overall, the *"Sharing Session for International Culture"* project proved to be a meaningful platform for promoting intercultural learning in an EFL classroom. Students not only gained factual knowledge about various cultures but also developed empathy, openness, and confidence in expressing cultural ideas in English. These outcomes suggest that PBL can serve as an effective pedagogical approach for bridging language learning and global citizenship education.

CONCLUTION

This study demonstrates that the international Project-Based Learning (PBL) sharing session, involving participants from five different countries, highlights the transformative potential of collaborative, inquiry-driven education. By engaging in authentic projects and presenting outcomes across diverse cultural contexts, the session emphasized the universality of problem-solving skills while simultaneously appreciating local perspectives. The exchange of ideas showed that PBL not only fosters critical competencies such as communication, creativity, and teamwork but also enhances intercultural understanding and global citizenship. This research reveals that international collaboration in PBL strengthens students' adaptability and resilience, preparing them to tackle complex global challenges while co-constructing knowledge across borders, resulting in innovative solutions that are both contextually relevant and globally informed.

The primary strength of this study lies in its contribution to the development of holistic education, particularly in using PBL to enhance intercultural awareness among students. The study underscores the importance of sustained cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration, which are essential for nurturing learners who are not only academically proficient but also socially responsible and globally engaged. However, the study has limitations, including a small sample size and potential biases in data collection methods that may affect the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research should expand the scope of this study by including larger sample sizes and exploring diverse international PBL contexts to further investigate the long-term impact of PBL on intercultural competence and global skills.

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