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Project-based learning in foreign language teaching and assessment: the story of a journey

Corina Georgeta BARNA [*]

Abstract: Project-based learning (PBL) has been widely used in education, including foreign language teaching. Our study examines its impact on foreign students studying veterinary medicine at a Romanian life sciences university. These students, mainly from France, take five semesters of compulsory Romanian, including cultural elements. To enhance integration, we designed a PBL assessment focused on preparing for a journey in Romania. Using mixed methods, we found significant improvements in language proficiency, teamwork, problem-solving, and innovation. Results suggest that PBL enhances both linguistic and cognitive skills, fostering holistic development in foreign language learners.

Keywords: project-based learning (PBL), foreign language teaching (FLT), foreign language assessment (FLA), teaching Romanian as a foreign language

1. Introduction

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a student-centered instructional method that emphasizes active learning through engagement with real-world problems and tasks. In foreign language teaching (FLT), PBL serves as a dynamic tool that supports communicative competence, cultural understanding, and learner autonomy through contextualized, collaborative projects.

The present study explores the implementation of a PBL-based Romanian language project at a Romanian life sciences university. The participants were foreign veterinary students, mainly from France, enrolled in a compulsory five-semester Romanian language course. This course integrates linguistic and cultural instruction to support students' academic and everyday communication in Romanian. Within this framework, a PBL unit was introduced to simulate a real-life task: preparing for travel in Romania. The project incorporated activities such as researching destinations,

[*] Assistant Professor, PhD, Department of Clinical Education II, University of Life Sciences 'King Mihai I' from Timisoara, Romania, E-mail: corina.barna@gmail.com

BUPT

creating survival guides, planning travel itineraries, and role-playing real-life situations.

The goal of this intervention was to examine whether PBL could enhance language proficiency and cultural preparedness by placing students in authentic, goal-oriented communicative contexts. The study further aimed to investigate student perceptions of PBL and its impact on motivation and practical language use.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical foundations of Project-Based Learning (PBL) are rooted in constructivist and sociocultural learning theories, which emphasize the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through social interaction and experience (Dewey 1938; Vygotsky 1978).

PBL has gained increasing traction in foreign language education, particularly at the university level, as a student-centered and experiential learning approach. It emphasizes the development of both linguistic and non-linguistic competencies through real-world tasks and collaborative problem-solving. Bilevicius et al. (2023) demonstrate that PBL fosters authentic learning environments that support comprehensive language development and learner engagement through meaningful project work.

A growing body of research supports the effectiveness of PBL in improving language learning outcomes. Karimova (2025) found that students participating in PBL activities experienced significant improvements in oral fluency and confidence, attributing these gains to the real-world relevance and communicative demands embedded in the project tasks. These findings are consistent with the notion that PBL encourages the active use of the target language in purposeful and interactive contexts (Karimova 2025).

While PBL enhances language learning, traditional assessment methods often fail to capture the full spectrum of skills developed through project-based work. Sawamura (2010) argues for the need to design assessment tools that address both language proficiency and broader competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, and project management. These more holistic approaches to assessment align better with the multidimensional learning outcomes typical of PBL environments (Sawamura 2010).

In higher education, PBL has been shown to revitalize foreign language learning by aligning instructional practices with students' real-life needs and professional goals. Tareva and Tarev (2016) highlight that PBL enhances learner autonomy, engagement, and motivation while simultaneously promoting the acquisition of transferable academic skills. Their study demonstrates that the integration of real-world applications within language learning increases the relevance and authenticity of instruction (Tareva and Tarev 2016).

When applied to Romanian language instruction, PBL has proven particularly effective in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers. Gheorghe and Oprea (2013) emphasize that successful project-based approaches must integrate cultural awareness

BUPT

and practical communication tasks. Their research supports the idea that embedding cultural content into project work enhances both language acquisition and intercultural competence (Gheorghe and Oprea 2013).

Despite the promising outcomes, implementing PBL presents several challenges. These include the complexity of assessment, time constraints, the need for sufficient resources, and the necessity of differentiating instruction based on varying student proficiency levels. Furthermore, the cultural adaptability of PBL must be carefully considered to ensure its effectiveness across diverse educational contexts (Bilevicius et al. 2023; Sawamura 2010).

Recent trends indicate a growing interest in integrating technology, particularly artificial intelligence, with PBL. Omar and Ghazali (2024) explore the potential of AI-enhanced PBL environments to create personalized and adaptive language learning experiences. Their systematic review suggests that emerging technologies can complement PBL by streamlining project design, enhancing learner support, and enabling more dynamic assessment strategies (Omar and Ghazali 2024).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methods approach to explore the outcomes and perceptions of a travel-themed PBL project implemented in a Romanian language course for foreign veterinary students.

The research was conducted at a Romanian university specializing in life sciences. The participants comprised 180 international students, primarily of French nationality, enrolled in the second or fourth semester of a five-semester Romanian language course. These students were part of either the French-language or English-language academic tracks. The students were organized into four classes, each consisting of 45 participants. The Romanian language course is compulsory and combines linguistic instruction with cultural education, aiming to foster students' academic achievement and support their integration into Romanian academic and social contexts.

The instructional intervention lasted 14 weeks and centered around the project "A Journey in Romania." Students were divided into small collaborative groups of five. Each group was tasked with researching Romanian travel destinations, creating survival guides (including transportation, accommodation, food, and budgeting), planning itineraries with cultural and touristic attractions, and presenting their findings orally to the class. These tasks were chosen for their relevance to real-life communicative needs in the Romanian context, aiming to develop both language skills and intercultural competence.

Preparatory activities were embedded into regular language classes to ensure that students had the linguistic tools and cultural background required for project success. For example, students participated in role-play simulations to practice buying train tickets of various classes—standard, first class, and sleeper. In another class, students used Romanian-language websites to locate and compare guest houses, evaluating accommodation options based on price, services, and geographic

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accessibility. These practical exercises targeted functional vocabulary, negotiation strategies, and reading comprehension in real-world digital contexts.

Teamwork was also explicitly addressed during in-class training. Collaborative activities such as shared information searches, co-writing survival guide drafts, and negotiating roles in simulated scenarios were used to model group dynamics. These experiences created a scaffolded environment in which students could develop coordination strategies and mutual support before independently managing their group projects.

Data collection employed both qualitative and quantitative tools. Weekly classroom observations captured engagement levels, use of target language, and group interactions. At the end of the semester, students shared their reflections describing their experiences, perceived progress, and challenges encountered. Following each group's final presentation, all students participated in a brief oral self-assessment, where they articulated what they had learned from the project. The feedback process was distributed equally among team members to ensure balanced participation.

Quantitative data were obtained through standardized pre- and post-intervention language assessments. These evaluated vocabulary range, listening comprehension, and oral fluency using CEFR-aligned descriptors (Council of Europe 2001). Assessments were adjusted for students' semester level, with benchmarks targeted at A2 for second-semester and B1 for fourth-semester learners.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using an inductive coding process to identify recurring themes related to learner autonomy, collaboration, and cultural awareness. Quantitative data were processed descriptively to compare pre- and post-project results and measure language development across cohorts.

4. Results

The results of the study indicate that the PBL intervention had a positive impact on student engagement, language performance, and intercultural awareness, with some variation observed between second- and fourth-semester students.

In terms of language proficiency, students demonstrated noticeable improvement across all skill areas, particularly in vocabulary development, listening comprehension, and oral fluency. Second-semester learners showed marked progress in acquiring and using everyday vocabulary, becoming more comfortable with basic communicative exchanges and classroom interactions. They also exhibited increased confidence in understanding spoken Romanian in structured and semi-authentic contexts, such as classroom dialogues and audio materials. Oral fluency improved as students began to use more cohesive and context-appropriate language during group discussions and presentations.

Fourth-semester students also experienced measurable progress, though the changes were often subtler, reflecting their more advanced starting point. They refined their vocabulary use, incorporating more nuanced expressions and culturally appropriate language into their speech. Their listening skills became more efficient,

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especially in distinguishing meaning in faster-paced or less scaffolded audio input. In spoken Romanian, they gained fluidity and accuracy, with reduced hesitation and improved pronunciation.

Overall, both cohorts benefited from the integrated use of Romanian in meaningful, communicative contexts. The project-based framework encouraged authentic language practice, pushing students to apply their linguistic knowledge in real-world tasks. This supported their transition from passive language receivers to active users capable of navigating everyday situations in Romanian with greater ease and autonomy.

Qualitative data further supported these findings. Observations documented increased use of Romanian during group work sessions, both for task negotiation and informal interactions. Students regularly attempted to apply classroom vocabulary in spontaneous exchanges and demonstrated greater confidence in using culturally appropriate expressions, especially in simulated travel scenarios.

Student reflections revealed several key themes: increased autonomy, improved collaboration skills, and deeper cultural understanding. Many reported that working in teams helped them remain motivated and provided opportunities to learn from peers. Several students noted that researching local destinations enhanced their appreciation of Romanian geography and traditions.

The self-assessment component offered valuable metacognitive insights. Students often linked specific learning outcomes to project tasks—for example, describing how writing the survival guide helped consolidate vocabulary for everyday situations. Others emphasized the development of soft skills, such as planning, responsibility-sharing, and time management, which they viewed as transferable to both academic and personal contexts.

In some cases, the skills and confidence gained during the project extended beyond the classroom. A number of student groups applied what they had learned to organize and undertake actual trips within Romania. These real-life experiences served as both a validation and reinforcement of their language learning. Students reported successfully navigating transportation systems, booking accommodations, and engaging in basic interactions with locals. In their reflections, they expressed appreciation for how the project had equipped them with practical tools for real-world use.

The diversity of travel themes chosen by student teams further highlighted their creativity and engagement with Romanian culture and geography. Popular destinations included the Black Sea coast, Transylvania, and the capital city of Bucharest—locations often associated with touristic and cultural interest. Several groups selected more distinctive or ambitious itineraries, such as planning *the most expensive travel in Romania* or organizing tent-based hikes in the Carpathian Mountains during March. Notably, the mountain camping trip was actually carried out by the group, underscoring the authenticity and personal investment in the task. These varied choices demonstrated not only linguistic application but also a growing curiosity about the host country and a desire to explore it independently.

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Despite the overall positive response, a few challenges were noted. Some students reported difficulty in coordinating schedules for group meetings outside of class, while others cited language anxiety during the oral presentation. These factors, while not widespread, suggest areas for instructional support in future iterations of the course.

Overall, the results confirm the pedagogical value of project-based learning in foreign language instruction. By combining linguistic goals with authentic tasks and collaborative work, the project fostered meaningful language use and intercultural engagement.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the impact of a travel-themed project-based learning (PBL) intervention on the language proficiency and cultural engagement of foreign veterinary students learning Romanian. The findings indicate that the PBL approach significantly contributed to the development of both linguistic skills and intercultural competence. By engaging in real-world tasks such as researching travel destinations, planning itineraries, and delivering presentations, students were able to apply their language knowledge in authentic contexts, fostering deeper learning and greater retention.

The results revealed consistent improvements in vocabulary, listening comprehension, and oral fluency, particularly in students' ability to engage in everyday communication. While students at different levels (second- and fourth-semester) showed varying degrees of improvement, all groups benefited from the task-based nature of the project. Additionally, students demonstrated increased autonomy and confidence, as evidenced by their successful application of learned skills in actual travel experiences within Romania.

The diversity of themes chosen by the student groups also speaks to the richness of the learning experience. While many students focused on popular destinations, others explored more unconventional or adventurous options, further enhancing their connection to Romanian culture and geography. The fact that some groups carried out their planned trips in reality underscores the authenticity of the project and the tangible outcomes it produced.

Overall, the study highlights the value of project-based learning as an effective pedagogical strategy in foreign language teaching. By incorporating authentic, student-driven projects, instructors can create dynamic learning environments that not only improve language proficiency but also inspire curiosity and engagement with the broader cultural context. Future iterations of this approach could be enriched by expanding the scope of collaborative activities and further integrating real-world tasks to increase both language and cultural learning opportunities.

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