Online Project-based Language Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: University EFL Students' Perceptions of Content, Process and Development of Competences

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Abstract

In the updated version of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – Companion volume* (Council of Europe, 2020), the action-oriented approach is highlighted as the most viable approach for learning languages. To translate this approach into practice, we applied the method of project-based language learning (PBLL) and devised two collaborative language learning projects for a group of second-year students enrolled in the EFL course (C1 language proficiency) at a technical university in the Baltic region. The projects were implemented online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure rigorous implementation of the method, we designed them on the basis of the research-informed Essential Project Design Elements for Gold Standard PBL (Boss & Larmer, 2018). Because PBLL projects aim to go beyond mere linguistic development of learners, the present study explores the students' reflections in terms of three aspects: 1) acquisition of their major-related knowledge, 2) procedural aspects, and 3) development of general and communicative linguistic competences. Data was collected through the participants' individual reflective learning journals. The inductive thematic analysis of their content revealed that the projects were perceived to be instrumental in gaining additional major-related knowledge in a meaningful way. Although online collaboration was a new experience, the students experienced it as a beneficial hands-on introduction to this way of working. While the learners were poor judges of their communicative linguistic development in an online environment, they indicated a number of general competences that the projects helped to develop. Importantly, the study draws attention to the research-informed project-based language learning elements and other aspects that need to be considered when implementing this method online.

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1. Introduction

Across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated the unprecedented speed of apparently irreversible changes in education, including foreign language education. First and foremost, having moved online, it has embraced a number of new technological solutions opening doors to online communication and online teaching, which have become the new norm of language classes. As most language educators were unprepared for it, this change must have caused them to feel like beginning teachers again. On the other hand, this situation has not only accelerated the use of new technology-based solutions, but also created a space for reconsidering long-standing language teaching and learning approaches and methods as well as the overall purpose and meaning of language teaching, learning and assessment.

Importantly, language educators have recently been criticized for teaching too much about language rather than ensuring learners' learning through language (Cammarata et al., 2016; Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Jordan & Gray, 2019; Piccardo & North, 2019). The teaching of language as the ultimate goal in itself is seen as inadequate and the need to integrate EFL and development of 21st century skills is emphasized. To achieve this integration, language educators need to search for new language learning approaches and methods that ensure a holistic development of learners and their better readiness for the job market.

The updated version of *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – Companion volume* (Council of Europe, 2020; hereafter CEFR CV) is an important language policy document advising on teaching, learning and assessment of languages, especially in Europe. In comparison to its earlier version, the current one includes a number of significant changes, e.g., enriched 'can-do' descriptors, the introduction of online interaction, elaborate notions of mediation and plurilingualism. Notably, the updated CEFR CV marks a methodological paradigm shift to the action-oriented approach (hereafter AoA) and highlights it as the most viable approach for learning languages (Piccardo & North, 2019). In the AoA, language learning is seen as an activity of purposeful communication while performing open-ended and authentic action-oriented tasks (e.g., projects and scenarios) that require creation of concrete project outcomes via collaborative work (Piccardo & North, 2019).

According to Harmer's (2015) classification, the concept of approach in language education refers to theories related to the nature of language and its learning in general. Conversely, methods are practical realization of language learning and teaching achieved by applying specific techniques and procedures. Since projects are action-oriented tasks (Piccardo & North, 2019), we assume PBL to be

the most suitable method to implement the AoA. In language education, it is called either project-based learning (e.g., Dressler et al., 2020) or, more explicitly, project-based language learning (e.g., Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Thomas, 2017). In this study, we adopt the view that PBL is a method which represents the adoption of the AoA in language education and refer to it as project-based language learning (hereafter PBLL).

While literature praises PBLL as a suitable method in language education (Boss & Larmer, 2018; Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Montgomery, 2018; Stoller, 2006; Thomas, 2017), research into online PBLL, including students' perceptions of it, is lacking. Therefore, the aim of the study is to investigate how university students perceive online PBLL. More specifically, as PBLL projects do not solely focus on linguistic outcomes, we collected students' perceptions of the following elements: 1) acquisition of their major-related knowledge, 2) procedural aspects, and 3) development of general and communicative linguistic competences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Online Project-Based Language Learning Based on Research-Informed Elements

For many years, PBL has been used to organize learning in the context of projects in a variety of disciplines. A number of researchers and practitioners (e.g., Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Dressler et al., 2020; Montgomery, 2018; Thomas, 2017; Vaca Torres & Gómez Rodríguez, 2017) have indicated that PBL is also an efficient method to ensure both meaningful language learning and holistic development of learners. Currently, there is a renewed interest in this method because of its suitability to equip learners with deep content knowledge in a meaningful way and to open up possibilities for mastering various 21st century success skills, such as communication and collaboration with diverse people, critical thinking and problem solving, self-management and project management, creativity, readiness to tackle increasingly complex challenges of the world (Boss & Larmer, 2018; Buck Institute for Education, 2019; Cox & Montgomery, 2019).

In this study, to refer to the use of PBL in EFL, we adopt the term PBLL, which, according to the National Foreign Language Resource Center (2014), can be defined as:

> A transformative learning experience designed to engage language learners with real-world issues and meaningful target language use through the construction of products that have an authentic purpose and that are shared with an audience that extends beyond the instructional setting. PBLL can be conceived as a series of language learning tasks that are articulated toward a common goal: the construction of a public product. (para. 1)

The use of PBLL has already been translated into practice in various different forms (Montgomery, 2018; Stoller, 2006). Evidence also suggests that in some cases educators simply ask learners to do so-called projects by simply highlighting the creation of the final product and mere practicing of language in this process instead of following rigorous elements of the method, which prevents them from harnessing the full potential of the method (Buck Institute for Education, 2019;

Montgomery, 2018). To avoid this and ensure more successful application of the method, as suggested by Boss and Larmer (2018) and the Buck Institute for Education (2019), it is important that research-informed PBL models are utilized. To this end, we employed the model of Gold Standard PBL including seven Essential Project Design Elements: Challenging problem or question, Sustained inquiry, Authenticity, Student voice and choice, Reflection, Critique and revision, Public product (Boss & Larmer, 2018).

To ensure the implementation of the aforementioned elements in PBLL, language learners need to be engaged in a series of real-life tasks that immerse them in a sustained inquiry into a challenging problem or question, where they share ideas and co-construct new knowledge while working in small groups. In the university context, students should deal with challenging questions or problems that are related to their major and/or are personally relevant. Additionally, the inclusion of student voice and choice might be implemented by giving freedom to choose group members, topics and tasks for projects, information sources, tools and formats of their final products (Cox & Montgomery, 2019). Furthermore, students should be encouraged to reflect on their learning during entire projects and this could serve as a tool to boost their own personal agencies (Boss & Larmer, 2018). For critique and revision, it is vital that learners receive ongoing feedback and are given opportunities to refine their project outcomes based on either teacher or/and peer feedback (Montgomery, 2018). Crucially, language-learning projects should result in learning artefacts for which learners feel ownership and which can be shared with a real-life authentic audience and thus be driven by an authentic purpose (Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Piccardo & North, 2019). For example, if learners are asked to make a brochure or video without a clear understanding for whom they are creating it and for what purpose, it does not reflect the essence of high-quality PBLL. In addition, high-quality PBLL expects language learners to collaborate with some community partners in order to investigate real-life issues (Montgomery, 2018).

For the language part of PBLL, educators might benefit from the descriptions of communicative language activities and communicative competences (linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic as well as sociocultural) expressed through 'can-do' illustrative descriptors matching each language proficiency level in the CEFR CV (Council of Europe, 2020). The descriptors might be useful for planning more concrete language-learning tasks and material selection, assessment and result reporting. On the other hand, educators should search for more interesting, creative and authentic tasks; learners might experience such tasks as more engaging than traditional textbook-led tasks. For example, the meaningful language-learning context that PBLL creates might include tasks such as asking learners to find some language usage examples related to the theme of the project in trending song lyrics. Another type of task might be the creation of audiovisual texts as multimodal content with the mix of audio and visuals is much appreciated by learners nowadays. Importantly, when designing tasks, language educators should move away from the dominance of written material.

Moreover, it is crucial to consider aspects of online PBLL, especially the ones related to the

new mode of communication. With the aim to broaden the scope of language education and even without predicting the emergence of the pandemic, online communication (referred to as online interaction, i.e., co-construction of discourse among two or more parties through the use of technology) is also reflected in the CEFR CV (Council of Europe, 2020) as a core language learning activity. As it is not identical to oral interaction or written interaction, the CEFR CV (Council of Europe, 2020) adds the third type of language activity, i.e., online interaction, which is subdivided into two types: 1) online conversation and discussion, and 2) goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration. Both types of online interaction are illustrated with the descriptor scales matching each language proficiency level from pre-A1 to C2, which can be utilized for the planning, implementation and assessment of online PBLL. While asynchronous interaction is relatively similar to what students typically do in written tasks (e.g., no time pressure, possibility to use a dictionary, etc.), synchronous (happening in real time) interaction might cause new challenges because technology transforms communication.

Since the introduction of PBLL in the EFL classroom in the mid-1970s (Stoller, 2006), considerable research has been conducted into its use. However, as online communication only became frequent in mainstream language classes in March 2020, studies on the implementation of online PBLL are still sparse. In addition, some projects described in the literature do not include all the core elements of the method, which differentiates them from research-informed PBLL. Consequently, empirical research centering on high-quality language learning projects that would be of use to language educators worldwide remains limited. Importantly, there is also a lack of research conducted into EFL in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study aims to fill these research gaps by examining how university students perceive this type of learning and showcasing examples of projects that were designed using research-informed elements.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted at a leading technical university in the Baltic region, i.e., Kaunas University of Technology in Lithuania. Its participants were 36 second-year Bachelor's students (14 males and 22 females) from the Faculty of Chemical Technology following the course of Academic and Professional Communication in English (Level C1). The groups consisted of Lithuanian (32 students) and foreign students (four students; one from India and three from France) and represented two academic groups: one majoring in Food Technology (21 students) and the other majoring in Biotechnology (15 students). Generally, students starting this course are required to have level B2 language proficiency. In order to test their level, all first-year students are obliged to take a language proficiency test.

3.2. Procedure

The first project was designed for the students with a major in Food Technology and the

second one for those with a major in Biotechnology. The projects lasted three weeks (i.e., eight online lectures of 90 minutes and 2-5 individual meetings). The table below summarizes both projects.

Table 1

Summary of the PBLL projects

PBLL elements based on the seven key elements of Gold Standard PBL (Boss & Larmer, 2018)	Our help for foreign students: Bon appétit in Kaunas!	Through the eyes of future biotechnologists: the COVID-19 pandemic
1) Challenging problem or question	How can students of Food Technology support international students in selecting local restaurants best suited for their needs?	How can students of Biotechnology assess various aspects of the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and inform society about it?
2) Sustained inquiry	Searching for information about local restaurants in Kaunas; conducting interviews with international students; selecting and applying data for making brochures.	Searching for information about the COVID-19 pandemic; selecting and applying data for the creation of videos.
3) Authenticity	Authentic audience: international students coming to study in Kaunas. Authentic purpose: to facilitate their search for restaurants in Kaunas.	Authentic audience: general audience. Authentic purpose: to inform society about the current situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
4) Student voice and choice	Self-assignment into groups; self-selection of collaborators (international students as interviewees), brochure formats and tools to create brochures.	Self-assignment into groups; self-selection of video formats, tools to create video content and criteria to evaluate videos.
5) Reflection	Reflections on learning in the learning journals during the entire project.	
6) Critique and revision	Revision of drafts after peer feedback based on a tuning protocol.	
7) Public product	A digital brochure or website with	Stories in the format of videos with

restaurant reviews and other	still and/or moving images and
information.	voice narrations.

As online classes were conducted via Zoom conferencing tool, the teacher assigned students into breakout rooms at the start of each lecture; she then visited each room to follow the groups' progress, encourage them to reflect on both the process and outcomes as well as to provide other scaffolding.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Since reflective learning journals are considered both as a way to promote active learning and generate valuable data about students' learning (Thorpe, 2004), we utilized this tool to collect students' individual perceptions of their learning during the project. At the beginning of the project, the participants were provided with a template of the journal including three groups of questions related to the aforementioned aspects of online PBLL. The students were instructed to continuously reflect on the project, e.g., to consider aspects such as the benefits that collaboration has generated, difficulties related to collaboration, differences between online and face-to-face communication.

For the language-based qualitative data gathered, we applied one of the pattern-based methods, i.e., thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), in order to identify themes and subthemes reflecting how students perceive online PBLL. Specifically, we did an inductive thematic analysis which "aims to generate analysis from the bottom (the data) up; analysis is not shaped by existing theory (but analysis is shaped to some extent by the researcher's standpoint, disciplinary knowledge and epistemology)" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 175).

The data analysis was done as follows: first, the entries from each individual journal were collated into one document. Following one of the principles of triangulation, we coded and did the initial analysis of the qualitative data separately and collated our findings afterwards. Thus, we did complete coding (Braun & Clarke, 2013) of the whole dataset individually. As a result, we had lists of both data-driven or semantic codes and researcher-driven or latent codes. After coding, we combined codes to look for larger patterns across the dataset, i.e., candidate themes or central organizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For the later revision and development of the analysis, we collated our candidate themes to agree on the ones that answer our research question: How do students perceive online PBLL in terms of content-knowledge acquisition, procedural aspects and development of competences?

4. Results and Discussion

This section is divided into three parts and each presents the results and discussion related to students' perceptions of the three groups of aspects related to the implementation of PBLL as reflected in their learning journals: 1) acquisition of major-related knowledge, 2) procedural aspects (related to project management and collaboration), and 3) development of general and communicative linguistic competences.

4.1. Acquisition of Major-Related Knowledge

In individual reflective learning journals, the students often referred to the projects as helping them to acquire additional major-related knowledge in a meaningful way. In addition, the students of Biotechnology that were researching various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted an increased perceived value of and satisfaction with their chosen major. Although the participants highlighted different aspects of major-related knowledge that the projects enabled them to acquire, the majority of them confirmed the usefulness of this task, as illustrated by the comments below:

> The creation of videos was very useful as it allowed me to better understand what is behind this virus and what we can do to protect ourselves. (S4)
>
> I have realized the importance of the information about your restaurant or café online; otherwise, you risk losing potential customers. I understand now what needs to be included to be successful. (S9)

As the reflections reveal, the sense of meaning lies in the fact that these projects allowed to understand various portions of major-related knowledge more thoroughly. These findings also suggest that language education that allows students to co-construct and apply new knowledge purposefully makes the process of learning more meaningful. As PBL is usually considered to be the method of deep content acquisition (Boss & Larmer, 2018; Buck Institute of Education, 2019; Cox & Montgomery, 2019), this finding shows that it can be achieved in online PBLL, too.

A common reflection among those who were engaged in the biotechnology-related project was related to their altered attitude towards their major:

> I realized the role of biotechnologists in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, such as finding a vaccine against the virus and developing disinfectants and reagents. (S17)
>
> I have understood that I have chosen the right major. I feel proud of it, especially at this time. (S19)

These content-related reflections imply that if challenging questions are closely related to students' field of study, PBLL contributes not only to the acquisition of major-related knowledge in more meaningful ways, but can also enhance overall student satisfaction.

4.2. Procedural Aspects

In terms of the reflections on the process of working on the project, the students were given more specific questions related to the experience of online project management and social or collaborative aspects of these tasks. The most pronounced theme concerning project management was that online PBLL helps broaden the understanding necessary for online project management. The majority of the participants agreed that it was a new experience which will prove necessary in the future. Two students commented:

> I gained very useful project management experience. It was also interesting. (S7)

It was a new kind of experience. I think it is a universal skill and we will definitely need it later. (S21)

In addition, the participants were able to spot a number of subskills necessary for successful project management, such as an enhanced capability to plan and implement steps of a project, better time management as well as increased self-discipline and responsibility, including shared responsibility:

I have learnt to divide tasks and plan as a group member. (S28)

I think we have become more responsible. We felt responsibility not just for the completion of the project, but also felt accountable to each other. (S1)

The majority of students (n=27) also complemented the new technological project management wall, i.e., the tool *Trello,* for helping them better focus on the projects.

The board we used was divided into three sections of 'to do', 'doing' and 'already done', which enabled us to track our group's progress. (S5)

We used it to save our material for the video. It is useful to have everything in one place. (S13)

I have understood the value of a visual scheme for planning both group and individual work; I downloaded a similar app on my phone and started to visualize my own plans. (S8)

Considering these reflections, students seem to appreciate the use of a visual organizer for project work online. Most importantly, the project wall facilitated the enhancement of metacognition or the processes of planning and monitoring the group's performance.

Social or collaborative aspects of the process included recurring themes of online PBLL providing opportunities both to develop collaboration and to better grasp it.

As reflected in the quotes below, online collaboration contributed to becoming better at perspective taking or seeing the situation through the eyes of others as well as learning to share responsibility and achieve consensus.

I learnt to listen to my groupmates. (S2)

While collaborating, you can learn what needs to be done and what needs to be avoided in group work. Personally, I learnt that everyone needs to listen to each other's ideas. (S30)

Although it was complicated, in our group we learnt to reach consensus. (S32)

I think most importantly I have learned to share responsibility. I usually find that quite difficult, but this time I managed to rely on my team and trust their abilities. (S24)

From the first day onwards, we were forced to put our egos and differences aside so we could achieve a common goal. (S3)

The reflections below imply that this type of engagement contributed to students' understanding of the peculiarities of collaboration. They appreciated both its advantages and additional opportunities to self-assess their own ability to collaborate. Among the advantages, the participants listed their ability to achieve higher quality goals and work more efficiently. Ultimately, PBLL leads to a higher satisfaction with this type of work:

The whole collaboration process allowed me to understand what I still lack and need to learn.

(S11)

This experience was useful as it allowed me to realize the advantages of teamwork. (S12)

Collaborative work has its benefits; […] we were much quicker in achieving our goals; also, it was more interesting. (S5)

We were much more focused and achieved a better quality in comparison to what we could create separately. (S31)

I realized that the more people look at a given project from the beginning, the easier and faster the work can be done. I liked it. (S17)

Regarding the perceived difficulties of collaboration, the participants indicated both temporary and persistent difficulties throughout the entire process. In terms of temporary challenges, they listed the use of English for collaboration:

In the beginning, it was hard to understand each other. Later we got used to it and it was no longer difficult. (S15)

It was not easy to collaborate in English for so long and not to see each other in real life. I think we all got used to it. It helped to get this kind of experience. (S1)

In terms of persistent difficulties, the learners pointed out the process of reaching consensus because of the presence of various perspectives on diverse steps of the projects, e.g., tools for the creation of either videos or brochures, their format, final topics of the videos or lists of places to eat in brochures. However, this learning experience contributed to becoming better at consensus making and perspective taking:

Working together in a group, we learnt to find compromises. (S29)

We frequently faced different opinions; it was especially difficult to decide on the final list of the restaurants we should include in the brochure. In such situations, we learnt to listen to each other attentively and make the decision that could satisfy all of us. (S19)

When choosing the final formats and tools of our videos, there were a lot of disagreements, the same goes for the other things. It was not easy to find common opinions. (S22)

I learned to be more open-minded and take criticism from others more easily. (S6)

The quotes show that PBLL helps enhance both project management and collaboration skills in an online environment.

4.3. Development of General and Communicative Linguistic Competences

In relation to the students' perceived growth through these projects, one main theme emerged, i.e., online PBLL merges the development of general and communicative linguistic competences. First, while reflecting on communicative linguistic competences, the learners focused on two types of improvement most frequently, i.e., enhancement of speaking skills and an increased vocabulary range as well as its control:

Even though I became better at expressing myself, it was not easy at the beginning of the project.

I was afraid to speak and thought that they would not understand me, but later I realized that making mistakes does not matter. (S11)

This helped me express my thoughts in English without fear. I was able to use more vocabulary related to biotechnology and found myself using more words in general. (S20)

In comparison to our earlier classes, these series of tasks gave us many more real opportunities for speaking and vocabulary improvement. (S29)

As reflected by the two participants above, the projects helped some students to overcome communication anxiety in English. Moreover, as observed in one of the comments, this type of speaking practice was more natural and intense in comparison to traditional classes.

These findings point to at least two major aspects. First, students use very restricted language to describe their communicative linguistic development. Second, they still attach considerable importance to vocabulary enlargement and speaking skills. Some possible explanations for this might be that they lacked opportunities to reflect on their language learning earlier and their previous language experience was based on explicit vocabulary enlargement and division of learning merely into the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Moreover, it might be that learners equate their perceived improvement of language proficiency with vocabulary enhancement and ability to speak because of the fact that they can or are used to notice it best. These findings imply that if students want or are used to more explicit training of vocabulary, language educators might also consider highlighting these aspects in PBLL.

When it comes to the students' reflections on the development of general competences, the comments differed. Apart from the development of skills and subskills related to collaboration and project management, the participants indicated a number of other general competences that the projects helped to develop, such as online communication, digital literacy, design thinking as well as creativity and divergent thinking.

Regarding online communication, the students' opinions diverged. Some of them complained that it was more difficult; the limited view of body language was the main obstacle. While one student defined online communication as lacking emotions, two others noticed cases of using additional verbal cues or tones of voice to compensate for the lack of body language:

Some of us turned cameras off from time to time; it is difficult when you cannot see body language; in real life nobody is able to 'turn' himself or herself 'off. (S15)

Even though it was hard in the beginning, later we got used to it and became better at it. (S27)

No body language made online communication very complicated. Very cold, no feelings. (S13)

In my opinion, to better understand our messages, the lack of body language was substituted with relevant verbal cues and tones of voice. (S4)

Other students indicated that online communication posed no difficulties or they got used to it quickly. For them, the attractiveness of being online lied in having all information and tools at their fingertips:

I did not feel any real difference. I think we were more productive when we had our devices during every meeting. It was better than in real life. (S21)

For me, it was very good; no difficulties. (S23)

Maybe a bit of time was necessary to get used to it, but then it was OK. We could learn this type of communication. (S5)

These two distinct perceptions of online communication need further investigation. Possibly, some students have already had this experience or are simply quicker to adapt to a new environment. Importantly, as reflected in the statements, this task also helped to become better at communicating online.

Next to using *Trello* for project management, the students listed a number of newly mastered technical solutions, which proves the enhancement of their digital literacy. The solutions included tools for creating brochures and websites as well as tools for video content editing. Apart from technology, the enhancement of digital literacy was reflected in the answers about being able to navigate digital content more quickly as well as master new applications more efficiently in the presence of others:

The best thing about this project was finding information quickly, the same as finding out quickly how programs work. (S10)

Reflections on the enhancement of creativity and divergent thinking were also common among the participants. The following statements illustrate this gain:

I enjoyed this project and its tasks as we could choose everything and show our creativity as a group. (S1)

The task was interesting and I was able to rely on my originality without constraints. (S3)

I liked the idea of not being told exactly what format we should finish with. (S18)

The quotes suggest not only the enhancement of creativity but also point to the students' satisfaction with their projects and PBLL as a method for EFL. We consider these findings to be the most valuable. The majority of our findings related to online PBLL are corroborated by literature with the focus on this method in face-to-face language-learning environments (Cox & Montgomery, 2019; Dressler et al., 2020; Montgomery, 2018; Thomas, 2017; Vaca Torres & Gómez Rodríguez, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The study presents research on university students' perceptions of online PBLL. Given its multifaceted findings, it is evident that online projects represent an enhanced vision of language education in higher education, which merges additional major-related knowledge acquisition with the development of a useful real-life readiness skillset. Such skills include project management, collaboration, online communication, digital literacy, creativity and divergent thinking, with the latter still being overshadowed by too frequent training of convergent thinking (i.e., learning the right procedures or being able to get the only right answer) in formal education. PBLL prepares students for an increasingly common project-based reality and thus helps to bridge the gap between what they learn in formal

education (too much focus on content knowledge and solo working) and what they need in real life. Indubitably, when the pandemic is over, individuals will continue working online. Future working situations may also include international collaboration and communication in a foreign language, where a wider range of perspectives and collective knowledge may lead to better results and innovations.

Online PBLL in the form of the projects described does not present any serious challenges to university students and allows moving away from common language-learning environments consisting of isolated tasks without an emphasis on collaboration with co-construction of knowledge and inclusion of real-life tasks. For language educators, all stages of the preparation, scaffolding and assessment of such socially and cognitively complex tasks might be challenging at first. However, practice makes perfect. Crucially, online PBLL-based projects should be prepared in accordance with the research-based elements discussed.

6. Pedagogical Implications

This study represents our intention to make the EFL learning and teaching more authentic and engaging in higher education. We hope that the projects described and students' perceptions of them will contribute to increasing language educators' awareness of both how to implement rigorous online PBLL and what results it may yield.

As the action-oriented approach represents the most promising language teaching approach (Council of Europe, 2020; Piccardo & North, 2019), we view PBLL as a suitable method to put this approach into practice. It posits that language learning is driven by actions when learners are engaged in purposeful collaborative tasks, which result in the creation of some meaningful learning artefacts or products (Piccardo & North, 2019). PBLL is also underpinned by the same foreign language learning principles. In addition, PBLL follows two important trends in education in general, i.e., the move towards more active methods that ignite students to learn on the one hand and their encouragement to create more diverse learning artefacts on the other (Cope & Kalantzis, 2017).

We also consider PBLL to be particularly suitable for the context of higher education as it merges language learning through learners' sustained purposeful communication, collaboration, co-construction and acquisition of new (major-related) knowledge with the development of a wide range of the 21st century skills. Furthermore, we see online PBLL as a modern EFL learning method, which can sometimes be easier to implement than in the traditional classroom because groups of learners can communicate more efficiently without the restrictions of physical spaces and time. Considering the growing popularity of online communication, online PBLL offers the perfect opportunity to hone skills and tools necessary for online communication.

Importantly, the implementation of online PBLL projects can be applied at universities worldwide, including the Asian context. We believe that projects with real-life scenarios might exemplify an important non-cognitive aspect, i.e., increased motivation and engagement because of having an authentic and real-world purpose. Regardless of the geographical context, online projects

teach learners to be more successful while acting and collaborating online, which has already become the major form of communication and will remain relevant in a post-COVID world.

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