

Project-Based Approach to Enhancing Iraqi EFL Learner's Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures has become a vital skill for English as a Foreign Language learners. However, traditional language instruction in Iraq predominantly emphasizes grammar and vocabulary over real-world communication and cultural awareness. The present study aims at: finding out the effect of the Project-Based Approach on English as a Foreign Language University learners' ability to communicate across different cultural contexts in the posttest.

A sample of fourth-year learners from the University of Tikrit was randomly selected and divided in two groups. The experimental group taught using Project-Based Approach, and a control group, instructed through conventional methods. Both groups exposed to identical course materials, designed to integrate cultural themes and promote cross-cultural understanding. The study employed pre- and posttests, including self-assessment questionnaires and an achievement test, to evaluate learners' intercultural competence. The results show that using the Project-Based Approach in is more effective than using the conventional method for developing intercultural communicative competence. learners in the experimental group demonstrated clear improvements in interpreting cultural differences, adapting

communication styles, and critically engaging with various cultural perspectives. Finally, the study ends with a number of conclusions, suitable recommendations for incorporating the Project-Based Approach into English as a Foreign Language curricula, and suggestions for further studies aimed at exploring other teaching strategies that may enhance intercultural communication skills in language learning environments.

Key words: Project-Based Approach, Intercultural Communicative Competence.

النهج القائم على المشاريع لتعزيز الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات لدى متعلمي اللغة

الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق

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الملخص

في عالم متزايد الترابط، أصبحت القدرة على التواصل الفعال عبر الثقافات مهارة حيوية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية. ومع ذلك، فإن التعليم اللغوي التقليدي في العراق يركز بشكل أساسي على القواعد والمفردات على حساب التواصل الفعلي والوعي الثقافي. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى معرفة تأثير النهج القائم على المشاريع على قدرة طلبة الجامعات الذين يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية على التواصل عبر مختلف السياقات الثقافية في الاختبار النهائي.

تم اختيار عينة من طلبة السنة الرابعة من جامعة تكريت عشوائياً وتقسيمهم إلى مجموعتين. تم تعليم المجموعة التجريبية باستخدام نهج قائم على المشروع، بينما تم تعليم المجموعة الضابطة باستخدام الطرق التقليدية. كلا المجموعتين تعرضتا لنفس المواد الدراسية، المصممة لدمج المواضيع الثقافية وتعزيز الفهم بين الثقافات. استخدمت الدراسة اختبارات قبلية وبعدية، بما في ذلك استبيانات التقييم الذاتي واختبار الإنجاز، لتقييم الكفاءة الثقافية لدى المتعلمين. تظهر النتائج أن استخدام النهج القائم على المشروع أكثر فعالية من الطريقة التقليدية في تطوير الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات.

أظهر المتعلمون في المجموعة التجريبية تحسناً واضحاً في تفسير الفروق الثقافية، وتكيف أساليب التواصل، والانخراط النقدي مع وجهات النظر الثقافية المختلفة. أخيراً، تنتهي الدراسة

بعدد من الاستنتاجات، وتوصيات مناسبة لإدماج المنهج القائم على المشاريع في مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية، واقتراحات لدراسات مستقبلية تهدف إلى استكشاف استراتيجيات تدريسية أخرى قد تعزز مهارات التواصل بين الثقافات في بيئات تعلم اللغة..
الكلمات المفتاحية: النهج القائم على المشاريع، الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات.

Section One

1.Introduction

This study examines the challenges faced by Iraqi learners of English as a Foreign Language in developing intercultural communicative competence, a crucial skill in today's globalized world. intercultural communicative competence enables individuals to communicate effectively across cultures, interpret cultural differences, and adapt to diverse perspectives (Byram, 1997). For Iraqi learners of English as a Foreign Language, mastering this competence is essential for both personal growth and professional success in multicultural settings.

However, language education in Iraq primarily emphasizes grammar, vocabulary, and memorization rather than real-world communication and cultural understanding (Beckett, 2005). While this approach may improve linguistic proficiency, it does not adequately prepare learners for intercultural interactions. A key issue is the lack of exposure to authentic cultural contexts, making it difficult for students to grasp cultural nuances, values, and nonverbal communication— essential aspects of intercultural communicative competence (Dewey, 1938). Additionally, Iraq's socio-political context limits direct intercultural experiences, further hindering learners' development in this area.

To address these challenges, this study explores the effectiveness of Project-based approach in enhancing intercultural communicative competence. Project-based approach engages students in structured, interactive projects that simulate real-world cultural interactions and communication tasks. By working collaboratively on culturally themed activities, students gain hands-on experience in language use, cultural

exploration, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Thomas, 2000). Incorporating role-playing, cultural research, and interactive assignments can foster intercultural sensitivity and adaptability, equipping Iraqi learners English as a Foreign Language with the skills necessary for effective cross-cultural communication (Byram,1997).

1.1 Aim of the study

The study aims at:

Finding out the effect of the Project-Based Approach on English as a Foreign Language University learners' ability to communicate across different cultural contexts in the posttest

Hypotheses of the Study It is hypothesized that:

There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group, which is taught by using project-based approach, and the mean scores of the control group, which is taught according to the conventional method in the posttest.

1.2 Limits of the Study

The study at hand is limited to the following:

1. EFL university students at university of Tikrit fourth/ stage.
- 2.A period of instruction was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2024–2025.
2. Materials: A course titled "Language and Culture" was designed by the supervisor and the researcher. It includes: Geography and Language Variety, Idioms, Gestures and Speech Analysis, Holidays, History of USA, UK and Iraq, Myths, Legends and superstitions.

Section Two

2. The Definition of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Intercultural communicative competence (Henceforth ICC) is the ability to effectively and appropriately engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, integrating knowledge of cultural norms and values, communication skills, and positive attitudes toward cultural

diversity (Byram, 1997). It encompasses the capacity to adapt one's communication style to suit different cultural contexts while being aware of and reflecting on one's own cultural biases and assumptions (Fantini, 2001). By developing these competencies, individuals enhance their ability to navigate cultural differences and foster meaningful interactions, ultimately improving interpersonal relationships and collaboration in a globalized society.

Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence

Designing assessments based on Michael Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence necessitates adherence to specific academic criteria to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of students' intercultural abilities. Effective assessments should encompass the fundamental components of ICC, including attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness, thereby facilitating a holistic appraisal of students' ability to engage in intercultural communication. Moreover, the authenticity of assessment tasks is essential; they should incorporate real-world scenarios, such as role-plays, case studies, and interactive problem-solving activities, to accurately measure students' practical competence in diverse cultural contexts. A well-structured assessment must also achieve balance by integrating receptive (listening and reading), productive (speaking and writing), and interactive skills, while simultaneously evaluating students' attitudes towards cultural diversity and their understanding of various cultural norms and practices. Furthermore, clarity and validity are crucial elements, requiring precise instructions and well-defined evaluation criteria to ensure transparency and fairness in the assessment process. The reliability of these assessments must also be established, ensuring consistency in measuring intercultural competence across different student cohorts and contexts. Additionally, providing constructive feedback is integral to the learning process, as it enables students to

identify their strengths and areas requiring improvement. Encouraging self-reflection further enhances their ability to critically analyse their intercultural experiences and apply their knowledge in future interactions. By implementing these assessment principles, educators can effectively measure and support the development of students' intercultural communicative competence, ultimately preparing them for successful engagement in multicultural environments.

2.1 The concept of Project-Based Approach

The project-based approach (Henceforth PBA) is an instructional method that promotes active, collaborative, and inquiry-driven learning. It emphasizes engaging students in extended tasks that lead to the creation of a final product or presentation. By integrating real-world applications, PBA fosters deep understanding and enhances essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication. This approach not only reinforces subject knowledge but also encourages students to take ownership of their learning through hands-on experiences and meaningful collaboration (Markham, 2011)

Project-Based Approach plan in the Classroom

Planning a project-based lesson involves several essential stages to ensure effective implementation and meaningful student engagement. The process includes establishing clear objectives, designing structured activities, preparing necessary resources, and continuously evaluating and refining the plan as needed (Larmer and Mergendoller, 2010).

The first step in this process is setting well-defined and achievable objectives that align with curriculum standards. These objectives should incorporate both subject-specific knowledge and essential skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving. Clearly outlining the intended outcomes helps ensure that the project remains focused and measurable, allowing for an effective assessment of student progress (Chin, 2020).

2.2 Procedures for Implementing the Project-Based Approach

The effective implementation of the project-based approach (PBA) requires a structured framework that facilitates both instructional delivery and student engagement. Adhering to a systematic process ensures that PBA remains pedagogically sound, fosters meaningful learning experiences, and achieves intended educational objectives (Markham, Larmer, & Ravitz, 2003).

The initial phase, planning and preparation, necessitates institutional support at both administrative and instructional levels. This includes securing collaboration with external stakeholders, piloting projects before full-scale implementation, and embedding real-world challenges as the foundation for student inquiry and problem-solving (Green, 2010).

Following this, student briefing and scaffolding are fundamental to ensuring clarity regarding project objectives, expected outcomes, and timelines. Structured briefing sessions, trial activities, and references to past student experiences provide essential guidance, facilitating a coherent understanding of project requirements and learning goals (Kahn & O'Rourke, 2004).

Sustaining student motivation is critical to the success of PBA. Selecting projects with real-world significance, integrating elements of competition, offering incentives, and providing platforms for students to present their work to external audiences serve as effective strategies to enhance engagement and commitment (Graham, 2010

, collaborative group work plays a pivotal role in the learning process. Clearly defining individual responsibilities, fostering cooperative learning environments, and implementing structured peer mentoring mechanisms ensure equitable participation and collective problem-solving, thereby strengthening both cognitive and social learning outcomes (Blumenfeld et al., 1991).

Assessment strategies within PBA must be multifaceted and aligned with

predefined learning objectives. A balanced combination of formative and summative assessments, incorporating peer evaluations, instructor feedback, and both individual and group assessments, ensures a comprehensive evaluation of student progress. Furthermore, continuous feedback and reflective practices are integral to fostering deeper learning and ongoing skill development (Barron & Hammond, 2008).

Finally, provision of adequate support and resources is essential for the effective execution of PBA. Ensuring access to relevant materials, digital tools, and academic guidance enables students to engage with projects more effectively. Moreover, institutional recognition of the additional time and resource investment required for PBA is necessary to support educators in sustaining the approach within curricular frameworks (Ayas and Zeniuk, 2001).

2.5 Byram's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

The Michael Byram model of Intercultural communicative competence combines language instruction with intercultural awareness. It helps define intercultural competence and how language learning might develop it. Byram (1997). Byram highlights that intercultural competence goes beyond language competence and includes the capacity to connect comfortably with individuals from other cultures Byram (1997).

He bases his approach on the assumption that Communicative Competence cannot match learners' demands in the current, global context Byram (1997). Byram tries to change the CC framework by emphasizing interculturality. Adapting van Ek's (1986) CC model, Byram's ICC model emphasized intercultural characteristics. Thus, Byram's (1997: 48–53) ICC model has four main competencies:

1. Language competence: the ability to produce and understand written and spoken language based on grammatical, lexical, and phonetic knowledge.

2. Sociolinguistic competency lets learners understand the language they and others use. Gender distinction, power dynamics, behavioral standards, and register are social factors their interlocutors take for granted, forming these meanings.

3. Discourse competence: learners' ability to create and interpret conversation or monologue texts while maintaining general coherence and cohesiveness according to target culture norms.

4. International competence (IC): Byram's paradigm requires learners to grasp international communication, be curious about otherness, and connect, interpret, and discover to overcome cultural differences and enjoy cross-cultural relationships. Intercultural competence—five *savoirs*—is essential for intercultural communication.

Here are five *Savoirs*:

1. Attitudes:

Openness: A readiness to interact with and comprehend other cultures. Learners should reject ethnocentrism and embrace cultural diversity (Byram, 1997).

Curiosity: A desire to learn about other cultures. Learners explore different cultures and question their own out of curiosity (Byram, 1997).

Respect: Honoring cultural differences. This involves embracing cultural differences without judgment and appreciating cultural variety (Byram, 1997).

2. knowledge:

Cultural knowledge: Understanding different cultures' social norms, values, and practices. Cultural identities are shaped by traditions, rituals, social behaviors, and historical settings (Byram, 1997).

Sociolinguistic Knowledge: Understanding cultural differences in language use. Byram (1997) explains how social and cultural variables affect communication styles, language choices, and non-verbal actions.

3. Interpreting/Relating Skills: Interpreting cultural behaviors and ideas

and applying them to one's own culture. This ability entails comprehending cultural knowledge and applying it to one's own culture (Byram, 1997).

4. Discover and Interact: Skills for actively engaging and adapting to new cultures. This involves communicating successfully across cultures, adapting one's behavior and communication style to cultural norms, and resolving cultural misunderstandings (Byram, 1997).

5. Awareness:

Knowledge of Cultural Customs: Developing critical thinking about cultural norms, practices, and implications. Cultural practises and their effects on intercultural encounters must be understood (Byram, 1997).

Contesting Stereotypes: Examining cultural biases. Critical cultural awareness encourages learners to question their own and others' cultural prejudices (Byram, 1997). Byram's methodology teaches complete abilities beyond language competency. Learning to connect skillfully and responsibly in international circumstances fosters true intercultural discourse and understanding. According to Byram (1997), intercultural competence requires knowledge, skills, and a critical awareness of cultural relationships and their repercussions.

Implementation: Educators may use Byram's Model in EFL situations by including cultural content into language instruction, studying the influence of different cultures on communication. Engage students in role-plays, simulations, and cultural exchange initiatives to practice intercultural communication.

Encourage learners to critically assess intercultural encounters and reflect on their cultural assumptions and experiences. Assess Competence: Assess language competency, intercultural communication, and cultural awareness.

2.3 Previous Studies

The strategies in this study have been employed by various researchers

to examine their effects on different linguistic and intercultural variables, not only in ICC. For instance, they have been applied to writing, speaking, and vocabulary development. Astawa, Artini, and Nitiasih's (2017) study investigates the impact of PBL on English productive skills, specifically speaking and writing, among seventh-grade students in Indonesia. An embedded mixed-method design is used, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The study sample consists of 28 students, and data is collected through speaking and writing assessments, interviews, and observation checklists. Aghayani and Hajmohammadi's (2019) research, on the other hand, examines the effect of PBL on EFL learners' writing skills. The study follows an experimental design, where two homogeneous groups of 28 male learners are randomly selected. A pre-test and post-test are conducted to assess the impact of PBL compared to traditional methods

Similarly, Al-Mafraji's (2020) study explores the role of culture capsule activities in enhancing Iraqi EFL learners' intercultural competence. A randomized control group pretest-posttest experimental design is utilized, with a sample of 70 students. The study integrates audiovisual and written materials with the existing academic English textbook. Ilyas (2021) investigates the ICC of Iraqi postgraduate EFL learners based on Byram's (1997) model. The study involves 34 postgraduate students from diverse ethnic backgrounds and employs a self-report questionnaire adapted from Fantini's (2012) AIC form. The findings reveal significant deficiencies in ICC, emphasizing the need for further enhancement through audiovisual materials.

The results of these studies collectively indicate the positive impact of PBA and intercultural strategies on students' linguistic and intercultural competencies. These findings support the current study's approach in utilizing PBA to enhance ICC among EFL learners at the preparatory school level.

Section Three

3. Experimental Design

This study used an experimental design, with a pretest and a posttest (Ari et al., 2010: 316). In this design, students were randomly assigned to an experimental group and a control group and underwent the same pretests. The study sample consisted of eighty students from the College of Education for Human Sciences, Department of English, Tikrit University. They were divided into two groups, each containing 40 students. The study population includes all fourth-year students in the English Department at the College of Education for Human Sciences, Tikrit University, for the academic year 2024–2025.

3.1 Groups Equalization

The two groups are equalized in terms of age, general English vocabulary level, and parents' educational attainment. The researcher ensures that there are no significant differences between the experimental and control groups in these variables, which may otherwise impact the validity of the study.

To achieve this, the researcher controls for extraneous variables that might threaten the internal validity of the experiment, such as maturation, history, instrumentation, selection biases, experimental mortality, and instructor influence

Instrument of the Study

The study instrument includes an achievement test in the ICC subject Five-Saviors Test (FST) (see Appendix A). The Five-Saviors Test (FST) is designed based on Byram's (1997) model, assessing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) through attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness. The test consists of five sections, each aligned with Byram's objectives. Part One (Attitudes) presents situational judgment questions to evaluate students' perspectives. Part Two (Knowledge) includes short-answer and multiple-choice items

assessing cultural understanding. Part Three (Skills 1) focuses on interpretation through situational and text analysis. Part Four (Skills 2) integrates short-response, text analysis, and situational tasks. Part Five (Awareness) requires students to analyze texts and hypothetical scenarios. The test ensures authenticity by aligning with scholarly principles of assessment.

3.2 Scoring Scheme of Five-Saviors Test (FST)

The test's scoring system is organized around five main elements: awareness, knowledge, skills to discover and/or interact, skills to interpret and relate, and attitudes. Situational judgment, text analysis, multiple-choice, and short-answer questions are among the several item types used to evaluate each component. This structured scoring system ensures a comprehensive evaluation of students' competencies across various cognitive and analytical skills.

3.3 Test Validity

The most important concept in language testing is validity, which guarantees that a test measures the things it is supposed to measure. Bynom (2001) asserts that a test's validity is a reflection of its honesty in evaluating the particular elements it is intended to analyze. In language testing, the validation procedure is essential to ensuring that test performance interpretations are reasonable and fair. Face validity and content validity are the two main categories of validity that are frequently addressed.

3.4 The Pilot Administration of Intercultural Communicative Competence

The FST was administered to a pilot sample of twenty randomly selected students from the College of Education for Human Sciences, Department of EnglishLanguage, Tikrit
average time required to complete the discrimination test was found to be between 45 and 60 minutes. The characteristics of the test items

were then analyzed, providing information about the difficulty level and discrimination power of each item in the test. The difficulty level was found to range between 0.31 and 0.70, and the discrimination power was found to range between 0.36 and 0.80, both of which were statistically acceptable.

3.5 Test Reliability

"Consistency, stability, and accuracy of a test's scores" are indicators of reliability (Spren and Risser, 2003: 37). The Alpha Cronbach formula was used to determine the reliability coefficient of the RC test, and the result is 0.80, which is statistically acceptable.

3.6 Final Administration of the Intercultural Communicative Competence Test

The experiment lasted eight weeks, starting on November 18, 2024, and ending on January 15, 2025. On Sundays and Mondays, two sessions were scheduled for the experimental and control groups each week. For a total of 32 sessions, each group had 16 sessions.

The same ICC post-achievement exam was administered to the experimental and control groups at the conclusion of the study. In 2025, the exam was given on January 25. Exam papers were gathered by the researcher for further marking once the examination was over.

Section Four

4. Analysis of collected Data and Results

To analyze the data related to the second hypothesis specifically: There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group, which is taught by using project-based approach, and the mean scores of the control group, which is taught according to the conventional method in the posttest, the independent sample test has been used. Therefore, the aim of the study namely: Finding out the effect of project-based approach on EFL university learners' ability to

communicate across different cultural contexts in the posttest, will be achieved.

According to the following results in table 4.2, the mean scores of the experimental group is 61.200 and standard deviation is 13.496. While the mean scores of the control group is 39.550 and the standard deviation is 13.079. The calculated t -value 7.285 is higher than the tabulated t -value 1.99 with a degree of freedom 78 at a level of significance (0.05).

Observing the values of T -calculated above, it is found that the calculated T -value 7.285 is much greater than the tabulated T -value of the field 1.99, and from this it can be concluded that there are statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the control group, who are taught according to the conventional method and the mean scores of the experimental group, who are taught by using project-based approach, for the benefit of experimental group. So, the second hypothesis is also accepted.

Table (1)

Means, Standard Deviation, and t -Values of the Two Groups in the Achievement Posttest

At the significance level of 0.05 with a degree of freedom of 39, Table (1) demonstrate that the calculated t -value (5.248) exceeds the tabulated t -value (1.68). This shows a statistically significant difference between the theoretical mean in the post-test and students' intercultural communication competency. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected, so verifying that the observed improvement results from the efficacy of educational interventions rather than random chance.

Group	N.	Mean	S.D.	T-Value		DF	Level of Sig.
				Calculated	Tabulated		
Experimental	40	61.200	13.496	7.285	1.99	78	0.05

Control	40	39.550	13.079				
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Section Five

5. Conclusion

In the light of the obtained results, the following conclusions have been drawn:

1. The members of the experimental group in the current study dealt with the PBA model positively, as they showed high interest and motivation.
2. The PBA model is useful, appropriate and effective in developing intercultural communication competence.
3. It helps fourth-year students in the English Department to improve their intercultural communication competence.

5.1 Recommendations

In term of the obtained results and drawn conclusions, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. It is crucial that Iraqi EFL instructors appreciate and carefully consider using the PBA model in their classes. EFL students can be exposed to language that is similar to what native speakers use in daily contexts by utilizing the PBA model.

As a result, the PBA approach is highly advised, especially in circumstances when speaking with native speakers in person is impractical.

2. When teaching Iraqi English, it's critical to highlight and discuss the language's cultural component. Thus, educators in Iraq must impart to their pupils the importance of culture and its inevitable influence on daily communication.
3. When talking about intercultural communication, cultural comparisons must be impartial and fair, without giving preference to one

culture over another. Students that are more interculturally aware are better able to grasp cultural differences and steer clear of potential misunderstandings, communication issues, and conflicts. **Suggestions**

for Further Studies

In the light of the findings of this study, the following suggestions are put forward:

1. A comparable study might be carried out using various samples and middle school grades.
2. Research may be done to find out how well PBA works as a teaching tool. vocabulary to secondary school students who speak English.
3. A study can be carried out to look at the results of teaching speaking to Universities learners who speak English utilizing PBA.

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