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### DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION, COOPERATION AND GLOBAL INTEGRATION IN THE NEW NORMAL

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## EXPLORING EFL LEARNER IDENTITIES IN PROJECT-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING AT A HIGH SCHOOL IN AN GIANG PROVINCE

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### **Abstract**

*In an increasingly internationalized world, learning a foreign language is essential for understanding distinct cultures and facilitating effective communication. English, in particular, has evolved beyond merely a language to learn and has become a language to utilize in various aspects of life. As a result, people seek to acquire foreign or second languages for reasons ranging from securing steady employment and advancing educational growth to adapting to contemporary societal demands and personal fulfillment. In this study, the researcher examined the impact of Project-Based Language Learning (PBL) on the language learner identity of 91 10th-grade EFL students in An Giang Province. The findings revealed that PBL positively influenced language proficiency, learner autonomy, and language practice, contributing to developing learners' identities in the language classroom. Students demonstrated improved language skills, autonomy, and motivation through active engagement in real-world projects. The study highlights the practicality of PBL in enhancing language learner identity. It provides valuable implications for learners, teachers, and educational administrators in fostering a supportive learning environment for EFL students.*

**Keywords:** EFL learners, learner identities, new English textbooks, PBL.

### **Background to the study**

In an increasingly internationalized world, learning a foreign language is essential as it provides knowledge of distinct cultures. English has become not only a language to learn but also a language to utilize. People acquire foreign or second languages for various reasons, including securing steady employment, enhancing educational growth, adapting to the demands of contemporary society, or simply finding personal gratification.

Project-based-language learning (PBL) is a learner-centered approach where the teacher is primarily a facilitator and motivator. Student-centered learning methods are optimal because they permit learners to arrange their learning contents. PBL empowers learners to seek down-to-earth and complicated matters, propose resolutions, and show collaborative investigations to deal with issues (Lee et al., 2015). In changing teaching methods to meet educational demands, PBL attracts attention from educators, researchers, and teachers (Beckett, Slater & Mohan, 2020; Stoller & Alan, 2005). PBL emphasizes student-centric learning processes integrated with real-world concerns, utilizing projects or activities to acquire knowledge, attitudes, and competence. However, applying PBL to teaching EFL in Vietnam, specifically in An Giang Province, is uncommon.



During the learning process, learners also develop various identities. The development of an identity is seen as a process rather than a final result (Giddens, 1991; Bourdieu, 1998). Identity is not a general concept or a label but a living feeling of belonging and establishing relationships with others based on shared histories, experiences, affection, and joint commitments (Wenger, 2000). Language learners construct fresh identities encompassing various dimensions and intricacies linked to their language acquisition journey and other societal factors, including social status, gender, historical context, and physical capabilities.

The concept of learner identity received little attention from researchers and theorists of second or foreign language instruction until the 1990s (Block, 2007). However, some studies provide insights into learner identities. Learner identity can be seen as forming beliefs and behaviors that affect the learning process and how learners perceive themselves (Whitaker, n.d.). It can also be broadly defined as how a person perceives themselves as a learner (Hewitt et al., 2010).

Studies on learner identity have been conducted at the primary and secondary levels of education in various parts of the world. For example, the Center of Learner Identity Studies (CLIS) at Edgehill University, England, employs a comprehensive concept of learner identity based on various sociocultural characteristics such as gender, generation, place, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and spirituality/religion (CLIS, 2014). However, some researchers argue that a “learning identity” encompasses a person’s entire identity as a learner rather than just a portion of it (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

Through careful observation at Chau Phu High School in An Giang Province, the researcher identified several problems related to low English proficiency among students. Lack of confidence was the most widespread issue, leading to struggles performing English skills and modest achievements in English learning. The second and third most prevalent problems were the lack of problem-solving skills and collaboration with classmates working or problem-solving. Students had limited opportunities to actively engage with tasks and collaborate with their peers in learning and problem-solving. The teaching methods mainly involved one-way knowledge transmission, exacerbating these issues and the monotonous teaching and learning approach.

A more communicative teaching model is needed to address these challenges and provide more opportunities for language learners. PBL, one of the best language learning models, has been extensively studied globally in recent decades. However, its application to teaching EFL in Vietnam, particularly in An Giang Province, is still uncommon. PBL is a learner-centered approach where the teacher is a facilitator and motivator. It emphasizes student-centric learning processes integrated with real-world concerns, utilizing projects or activities to acquire knowledge, attitudes, and competence.

Recognizing the positive contributions of PBL, the researcher conducted a study on implementing PBL to explore EFL learner identities through PBL. The study focused on 10<sup>th</sup> grade students at a high school in An Giang Province, aiming to shed light on how learner identities are formed and constructed within the PBL process.

For above mentioned reasons, this research explores EFL learner identities through PBL in the context of a high school in An Giang Province. The specific research objective is:

- To scrutinize EFL learners’ identities in PBL.

The following research question must be addressed to achieve the above research objective:

What are EFL learners’ identities in PBL at a high school in An Giang Province?

### *Literature Review*

#### *Project-based learning*

Project-based language learning extends PBL, a pedagogical approach encouraging students to investigate significant real-world problems and seek solutions. PBLL is a development of William Heard Kilpatrick's "Project Method" and John Dewey's idea of experiential learning from the early 20th century (Peterson, 2012).

#### *Project-based language learning*

Project-based language learning (PBLL) is an active approach that produces projects and planned activities encouraging learners to utilize English and be inventive and critical thinkers about their knowledge while working independently and cooperatively (Thomas, 2017; Alcalde, 2019). As a result, the core of this technique is that it engages students in a process in which students may investigate, think critically, be inventive, and build genuine communication in English (Kelsen, 2018).

PBLL places learners at the center of the language learning process, actively engaging them in real-world tasks to expand their knowledge (Alcalde, 2019). It emphasizes experiential learning and collaboration, enabling students to effectively develop their understanding by working on real-world projects with their peers (Kelsen, 2018). This study seeks to enhance PBLL intervention by integrating the existing literature on PBLL and conducting research within the specific EFL teaching context. By drawing on their previous experiences in various subjects, students can enrich their language learning in the new course.

#### *Learner identity*

The idea of identity has significant heuristic value. It has been theorized in many ways in recent years in disciplines of study such as cultural studies, social and communication theories, psycholinguistics, and others. Many theorists, researchers, and educators give different perspectives on learner identity. According to the Centre for

Learner Identity Studies' (CLIS, 2014), learner identity is a broad construct centered on six bases: gender, generation, socioeconomic class, geography, ethnicity, and spirituality/religion. In contrast, Falsafi (2010) disagrees with this preliminary model of learner identity, stating that it addresses numerous social identities rather than establishing a definition of learner identity based purely on the activity of learning.

Kolb & Kolb (2009) characterize one's complete identity as a learner rather than only having a learner component. People who identify as learners "see themselves as learners, seek and engage life experiences with a learning attitude, and believe in their ability to learn." Similarly, Crick and Wilson (2005) assert that developing one's self-awareness and sense of personal worth are necessary conditions for learning and that one's sense of self as a learner is established through connections and acknowledged when the person tells their own experience. "As a participant in the conversation of the learning community." According to Coll and Falsafi (2010), learner identity is the conceptual artifact that includes links and permits reflection on the emotional and cognitive experiences of becoming and being a learner in the past, present, and future.

Meanwhile, Hewitt, Hall, and Mills (2010) state that a 'learner identity' can be broadly defined as how an individual feels about himself/herself as a learner and the extent to which they describe themselves as a 'learner.' From this perception, it can be seen that learners in a particular learning situation try to pursue and engross life experiences with their learning attitude and are confident in their ability to acquire or learn the target language. Furthermore, the perception also shows that learning context can affect a learner's identity.

Overall, learners build their conceptions of themselves based on their interactions with formal and informal educational environments, and their identity as a learner has generalized implications of how a person is perceived internally and externally. Understanding the diverse conceptions of learner identity is crucial to support and empower learners in their learning journey effectively.

#### **Constructs of learner identity**

Learner identity is a complex and dynamic construct influenced by various factors, such as individual experiences and sociological factors within a historical moment (Egan-Robertson, 1998). It involves three critical components: language proficiency, learner autonomy, and language practice. These components shape the learners' interactions with the target language and culture and contribute to their identity as language learners (Bourdieu, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Wenger, 2000).

**Language proficiency** is one of the critical components of learner identity as it involves the learners' ability to use the target language effectively. Learners' language proficiency is influenced by various factors such as their language learning background, motivation, and exposure to the target language (Egan-Robertson, 1998).

**Learner autonomy** is another essential component of learner identity, as it refers to the learners' ability to take control of their learning process (Benson, 2011). It enables learners to shape their learning experiences according to their interests, needs, and goals, thus contributing to their identity as active and independent learners.

**Language practice** is the third critical component of learner identity, as it involves how learners use the target language in their everyday lives (Tajfel, 1981). By practicing the target language, learners construct a sense of identity intertwined with the language and culture, contributing to their social identity and membership in language communities (Shakouri, 2012; Tajfel, 1981). Language practice encompasses various language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing and involves language proficiency and learners' attitudes, motivations, and beliefs about the target language (Egan-Robertson, 1998).

In conclusion, learner identity is a multifaceted construct influenced by individual and societal interactions and shaped by various factors such as language proficiency, learner autonomy, and language practice. Educators should be aware of these components and create a supportive learning environment that fosters positive attitudes and beliefs toward language learning and contributes to the learners' sense of identity as language learners (Boxer & Corets-Code, 2000).

#### *EFL students' identities in project-based language learning*

The link between identity and language learning has garnered significant interest among researchers, educators, and individuals interested in exploring the role of learner identity in the language learning process. According to Hoffman (2005), identity has become integral to our educational focus (cited in Falsafi, 2010). Sfard and Prusak (2005) define identity as a collection of meaningful stories about a person that are affirming and endorsable (p. 14). Similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning and identity are inseparable, representing different manifestations of the same phenomenon. They emphasize that learning is an identity-building experience, and involvement in communities of practice facilitates learning and the development of a sense of belonging (cited in Falsafi, 2010).

Several studies have investigated learner identity in second language (L2) learning. Classrooms are often viewed as sites of struggle in EFL teaching and learning, as the challenges of language acquisition influence the construction of learners' identities (Kim, 2003; Lee, 2014; Teng & Bui, 2018). Kolb and Kolb (2009) describe individuals with a learning identity as those who perceive themselves as learners, actively seek learning opportunities, and believe in their capacity to learn. Forming a learning identity is a dynamic process that evolves, progressing from a tentative learning stance to a more confident learning orientation and eventually to a comprehensive learning self-identity that permeates all aspects of an individual's life. Similarly, Crick and Wilson (2005) argue that becoming a learner requires self-awareness and self-worth.

Learner identity is a fundamental concept encompassing the various identities constructed by learners as they participate in distinct communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). The present study aims to explore

and identify how learner identity is built throughout the language-learning process. Specifically, the researcher applies the PBL approach to investigate how learner identity is formed and transformed. PBL is chosen as a teaching method because it has been proven to motivate learners to actively engage in the learning process and become more confident participants (Krajcik et al., 1994). Dewey (1959) also suggests that students can achieve deeper comprehension by implementing meaningful tasks connected to real-world problems. Additionally, scholars assert that education plays a crucial role in forming learner identity (Little & Erickson, 2015, p. 121), and language serves as a vehicle for learners' identity construction (Norton, 2013). From these perspectives, it is evident that EFL learners' identity and the language learning process have an inseparable interrelation, where language learning helps shape learner identity, and conversely, identity influences language learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In conclusion, EFL learner identity and the PBL approach are closely intertwined, influencing each other. Through PBL, learners have more opportunities to express their positions and identities as they actively participate in various communities, including the classroom and the broader social world. By engaging in projects and language learning, learners shape their identities by collaborating with others, solving problems, exercising autonomy, and relating their prior knowledge to real-world contexts. These features contribute to constructing learner identity, encompassing language learner identities and other forms of identity. The study will further investigate how PBL impacts the construction of learner identity and how learner identity, in turn, influences attitudes toward PBL.

### **Previous studies**

This section presents previous research on how EFL learners form their language identities through PBL. A summary of this section highlights the research gap between this study and existing research in both the Vietnam context and other countries. This study explores how learner identity is formed through the language learning process, specifically using the PBL approach. PBL has been proven to impact learners positively; therefore, understanding how learner identity is formed is also essential. Scholars from different countries, including Vietnam, examined several prior studies to address these objectives.

In the international context, the following studies will be discussed. Dolores García-Pastor (2018) conducted a study titled "Learner identity in EFL: An analysis of digital texts of identity in higher education" to investigate learner identity in learners in college learning English as a second language (ESL) through digital texts of identity (DTI). The study aimed to explore the connections learners made between their learning experiences over time and in different settings and how these experiences influenced their learner identities.

Similarly, Coll & Falsafi (2010) discussed the concept of learner identity, arguing that learner identity, based on engagement experiences in learning activities, deserved careful consideration in educational contexts. They suggested that learner identity was a symbolic mediating resource that should be systematically organized and managed in educational practice. They also emphasized that learner identity was a foundation for creating other identities.

Fen Teng, M. (2019) investigated how learners constructed their identities by studying three Chinese colleges' English significant students. The results revealed that students' identities fluctuated within and between different groups, and learner identity influenced their investment in English learning. Similarly, Anwaruddin (2015) surveyed 18 first-year undergraduate students participating in an e-autobiography class project in Bangladesh. The findings indicated that the majority of students self-identified as "English users," acknowledged the privilege of studying the language, and held the belief that their geographical location played a crucial role in shaping their identities and achieving success in English language acquisition.

Within the realm of second/foreign language education, scholars and theorists have given minimal focus to the concept of learner identity. Similarly, research focusing on identifying learner identities among EFL high school students has been scarce until now. According to Block (2007), before the 1990s, there was a lack of studies examining identity as a site of struggle, the negotiation of difference, ambivalence, structure and agency, communities of practice, symbolic capital, or any other constructs associated with poststructuralist identity. This study addresses this gap by delving into the understanding of English language learners' identities and contributing to the ongoing discourse on learner identity, an aspect often overlooked in language education. The study explores learner identity within the context of the learning process, specifically through implementing PBL as the researcher/teacher instructs EFL at his high school.

This study utilized a concurrent triangulation design, incorporating quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire consisting of 15 items to assess EFL learner identities. Approximately 91 students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade participated in the survey to gather information about learner identities in PBL. The researcher chose the 10<sup>th</sup> graders because they were the first learners studying the newly published Tieng Anh 10. Simultaneously, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews to scrutinize EFL learner identities. The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed concurrently to understand the research question comprehensively. In this study, the concurrent triangulation design aimed to triangulate the data and gain a more complete and accurate understanding of the research topic.

The researcher employed a concurrent mixed-methods design to investigate EFL learner identities. Two primary instruments were used: questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. According to Denscombe (2002), combining multiple methodologies can enhance qualitative and quantitative data collection since no single method is universally applicable. Creswell (2009, p. 204) also recommended “converging and triangulating different quantitative and qualitative data sources” to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth view of the study. Before collecting qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of learners' identities and how they construct their identities through PBL during project work, the researcher concurrently collected and analyzed quantitative data, such as the shared activities EFL high school teachers engaged in when implementing project activities. A non-probability, purposive sample was chosen based on the study's objectives and population characteristics. Purposive sampling can involve multiple stages, allowing researchers to examine data across different demographic groups.

### **Research methodology**

#### *Research site*

This research was conducted at a high school established in 1984 under the supervision of the Education and Training Department of An Giang. The school is in a rural area with a relatively limited environment for teaching and learning English. English is a mandatory subject for students, with three weekly periods for instruction. Students are expected to acquire basic grammar and vocabulary and develop their language skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Despite English being taught as a mandatory subject for an extended period, it remains challenging for the students. The syllabus is organized thematically in the textbook, covering topics closely related to daily life contexts such as home, school, leisure, community, and the natural and social world. Each unit in the textbook consists of eight lessons, including Getting Started, Language, Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, Culture/CILL, and Project. Each lesson is allotted one period. The new curriculum has shown significant improvements compared to the previous seven-year program. However, the existing exams, particularly the final ones, primarily consist of multiple-choice questions that focus on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading comprehension, and some controlled writing, with minimal emphasis on speaking skills (generally, only two items for communication language in the form of MCQs), which has resulted in less motivation and boredom among students during classroom activities for specific skills (listening, writing, speaking, and project lessons) in English classes. At the same time, teachers are unsure about how to teach effectively to achieve the best outcomes.

Moreover, in rural areas like the researcher's hometown, students have limited exposure to native speakers in language centers or during their travels. They possess limited cultural knowledge when communicating in English. Rural students primarily focus on grammatical and lexical points, as that is how they have been taught English in primary and high school. Some students lack confidence in using English for communication or giving presentations in front of the classroom, particularly during presentation tasks. Furthermore, learners in the researcher's setting have limited opportunities to express themselves in the classroom through language lessons. As a result, the researcher has been using PBL to conduct project lessons in recent years. However, this year marks the first experience of the 10<sup>th</sup> graders, who are the participants in this study, with the PBL approach.

### **Research participants**

Ninety-one 10th-grade EFL students participated in the study. Among them, fifty-six were female (61.5%), and thirty-five were male (38.5%). A convenient sampling method was used to collect qualitative data, and ten students from the researcher's English class in the 2022-2023 academic year were selected for semi-structured interviews. The table below provides preliminary information about the students involved in the study.

**Table 1: Participants' general information**

No.	Information	N=91		
			F	%
1	Gender	Male	35	38.5
		Female	56	61.5
2	Age	15	3	3.3
		16	86	94.5
		17	2	2.2
3	Number of years learning English	7	2	2.2
		8	89	97.8
		>8	0	0
4	Learning English in a language center	Yes	3	3.3
		No	88	96.7
5	Experiencing PBL lessons	Yes	79	86.8
		No	12	13.2

*N: number; F: frequency; %: percent*

A total of ninety-one 10th-grade students aged 15 to 17 participated in the study. The majority of students (94.5%) were around 16 years old, while a small number were 15 (3 students, 3.35%) or 17 years old (2 students, 2.2%). Most students (97.8%) had been learning English for eight years, with only two students (2.2%) having fewer years of English learning. The study included two classes taught by the researcher and a colleague. Out of the participants, 86.8% reported prior experience with project-based learning in subjects other than English, while 13.2% had no previous exposure to this teaching method. Only three students had previous experience learning English in a language center, indicating that the majority (96.7%) had no prior exposure to such centers. It is worth noting that the school where the study took place is far from city centers with language centers, which may impact students' English learning performance.

#### *Research instruments*

The study employed a mixed-methods design, starting with a quantitative approach using a 15-item questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: the first collected personal information, and the second investigated EFL learners' identities through PBL. In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data. The collected data from both quantitative and qualitative methods were analyzed using SPSS software for quantitative data analysis and content analysis for qualitative data analysis.

#### **The questionnaire**

The first phase of data collection used a questionnaire with two sections. Section A, Personal Info, gathered demographic data like gender, age, English learning experience, years of learning English, and learning language center experience. Section B had 15 items to gauge EFL learners' identities through PBL. Students used a Likert scale (1-5) to express their views. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to understand better and overcome language barriers.

#### **The semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather deeper insights into EFL learner identities in the project-based approach beyond the questionnaire's scope. The interviews aimed to understand what EFL learners' identities are. Only ten students who understood the approach well were chosen from the first phase. The interview data were analyzed to investigate students' attitudes toward PBL.

### **Procedure for data collection**

*The questionnaire underwent a pilot test to ensure validity and reliability (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). The English and Vietnamese versions of the questionnaire were developed with the assistance of an expert and a high school teacher who experienced project activities in his teaching. The Vietnamese version was piloted with English teachers from the same school, with the researcher providing immediate assistance if needed. The collected questionnaires were analyzed using the SPSS software (version 20.0).*

*Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure clarity and accuracy. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes and followed established interview techniques. The interview data were thematically analyzed using the Ritchie et al. (1994) framework, supporting the statistical findings. The process included familiarizing with participant responses, transcribing, comprehending, and indexing the data for more accessible analysis. The analysis marked the final step in this process.*

### *Data Analysis*

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods for data analysis. Quantitative analysis of questionnaires was conducted using SPSS version 20, focusing on frequency and mean scores. The questionnaire data were interpreted on a scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (1-1.80 = strongly disagree, 1.81-2.60 = disagree, 2.61-3.40 = neutral, 3.41-4.20 = agree, 4.21-5.00 = strongly agree). An analytical method based on the phases outlined by O'Connor and Gibson (2003) was used for qualitative interview data. This involved transcribing, reviewing, categorizing, and assigning codes (S1 to S10) to the data for analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **EFL learner identity through project-based language learning**

This study measured learner identities using language proficiency, learner autonomy, and language practice. The study included ninety-one participants. Table 2 presented descriptive statistical data for these variables, including their means, standard deviations, and overall average.

The findings indicated that EFL learners' identity in PBLL was characterized by an elevated level of language proficiency, with a mean score of 4.05 and a standard deviation of .71. Learners also demonstrated considerable learner autonomy, with a mean score of 3.85 and a standard deviation of .72. Additionally, language practice was seen as an essential aspect of EFL learner identity in PBLL, with a mean score of 3.95 and a standard deviation of .78. The overall mean score for EFL learner identity in PBLL was 3.95, with a standard deviation of .74. These findings highlighted the significance of language proficiency, learner autonomy, and language practice in shaping the identity of EFL learners in PBLL, suggesting that these factors played a crucial role in their development in a PBLL context.



**Table 2: Total mean scores of EFL learner identity through PBL**

No.	EFL learner identity in PBL	N=91	
		M	SD
1	Language proficiency	4.05	.71
2	Learner autonomy	3.85	.72
3	Language practice	3.95	.78
<b>Average</b>		<b>3.95</b>	<b>.74</b>

*Note: N: number; M: mean score; SD: Standard Deviation*

#### ❖ Language proficiency

Language proficiency is the first element of EFL high school learner identities. As shown in Table 3, Language proficiency was measured using five items ranging from item 1.1 to item 1.5. The average mean score for language proficiency was 4.05, with a standard deviation of .71, which indicated that students perceived positive improvements in their English learning through PBL.

Based on the data in Table 3, the participants' responses suggested that they perceived their language proficiency as positively impacted when they experienced PBL. The mean scores for all five statements (ranging from 3.99 to 4.13) indicated that the respondents generally agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, implying that PBL effectively enhanced their English language skills.

Specifically, the respondents believed PBL is conducive to improving their English language proficiency, as indicated by their agreement with item 1.1 (M=3.99; SD=.71) that PBL has improved their English skills. They also strongly expressed that they "can know more about English knowledge after implementing PBL" (item 1.2; M=4.13; SD=.64), indicating that PBL helped them gain more knowledge about the English language. Furthermore, the participants felt more confident in their English language skills when engaging in PBL, as shown by their agreement with the statement "I feel better at English when I work with PBL" (item 1.3; M=4.00; SD=.76). They also perceived PBL as an active and engaging approach to language learning that results in increased learning outcomes (item 1.4; M=4.09; SD=.68). Additionally, they believed that PBL effectively enhances their English language skills, as indicated by the high mean score for the statement "My English has been enhanced much since I worked with PBL" (item 1.5; M=4.03; SD=.75).

The relatively low standard deviations for all the means (ranging from .64 to .76) indicated consistent and less variable responses, suggesting agreement among the respondents in their perceptions of PBL's impact on their language proficiency.

**Table 3: Language proficiency**

No.	Language proficiency	N=91	
		M	SD
1.1	I can improve my English skills through PBL lessons	3.99	.71
1.2	I can know more about English knowledge after implementing PBL	4.13	.64
1.3	I feel better at English when I work with PBL	4.00	.76
1.4	I can learn more things actively through PBL lessons	4.09	.68
1.5	My English has been enhanced much since I worked with PBL	4.03	.75

*Note: N: number; M: mean score; SD: Standard Deviation*

Qualitatively, most study respondents expressed appreciation for PBL, which has helped them significantly improve their English studies. They provided positive comments such as:

“After experiencing PBL, I have improved positively, both in communication and in doing exercises. I am more confident when standing in front of the class to present an opinion.” (S1)

“Frankly speaking, I highly support PBL. It has improved my English proficiency in a better way, specifically my pronunciation and vocabulary skills.” (S3)

“PBL has helped me improve many things. First, my knowledge has been significantly enhanced. Second, my English skills have improved, and my ability to search for information has become faster and more accurate.” (S10)

In summary, the data collected from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews suggested that the participants perceived their language proficiency as positively impacted when they experienced PBL. It is evident from their agreement with statements related to English language improvement, increased knowledge, confidence, active learning, and enhanced language skills.

#### ❖ Learner autonomy

The second element of learner identity for EFL high school students is learner autonomy. As shown in Table 4, learner autonomy was measured using five items ranging from item 2.1 to item 2.5. The average mean score for learner autonomy was 3.85, with a standard deviation of .72, which indicated that students expressed positive support for the impacts of PBL on their English learning.

Based on the data in Table 4, the participants' responses suggested that they positively perceived PBL to impact their autonomy as learners. The mean scores for all five statements (ranging from 3.41 to 4.23) indicated that the respondents generally agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, suggesting that PBL was perceived to promote learner autonomy.

Specifically, the participants believed that PBL allowed them to develop problem-solving skills and take ownership of their learning by independently resolving issues that arose during projects (item 2.1;  $M=3.41$ ;  $SD=.82$ ). Likewise, the participants felt confident in their ability to create plans to complete projects autonomously (item 2.2;  $M=3.70$ ;  $SD=.76$ ).

Furthermore, the participants felt competent in their information retrieval skills, which enabled them to independently search for relevant information to support their project work (item 2.3;  $M=4.10$ ;  $SD=.62$ ). In addition, the participants felt a sense of responsibility toward the tasks assigned to them in the projects, reflecting increased autonomy in managing their project-related responsibilities (item 2.4;  $M=4.23$ ;  $SD=.60$ ).

Moreover, the participants perceived PBL as a way to develop time management skills, an essential aspect of learner autonomy in managing their learning process (item 2.5;  $M=3.81$ ;  $SD=.80$ ).

The relatively low standard deviations for all the means (ranging from .60 to .82) indicated that the responses are consistent and not highly variable, suggesting a degree of agreement among the participants in their perceptions of PBL's impact on learner autonomy.

**Table 4: Learner autonomy**

No.	Learner autonomy	N=91	
		M	SD
2.1	I can solve problems in the projects by myself	3.41	.82
2.2	I know how to make plans to complete projects by myself	3.70	.76
2.3	I know how to search for information for the projects by myself	4.10	.62
2.4	I find myself more responsible for the project tasks given to me	4.23	.60
2.5	I have learned how to manage time to do the projects	3.81	.80

*Note: N: number; M: mean score; SD: Standard Deviation*

Aligned with the quantitative data, the qualitative data from interviews also proved that PBL helped learners enhance their autonomy in studying English. Students reported the following:

“I must be active enough to search for information for my projects or group’s work. I will also research and gather basic information before sharing my ideas with my peers; then, we can discuss to find more comprehensive solutions.” (S3)

“When projects are assigned to me, I proactively seek information sources, and if it is difficult, I will ask for help from my colleagues. However, I search for information myself before asking for help.” (S4)

“I have more responsibility for my projects. When I receive a project, I should assign tasks to my friends so that they can complete them on time. And then, alongside that, I should also research more deeply to ensure the project’s success.” (S5)

In summary, this study presented quantitative and qualitative data findings on the impact of PBL on learners’ autonomy in studying English. The qualitative data from student interviews align with the quantitative data, indicating that PBL has helped students become more autonomous in their learning. Students reported that PBL helped them solve problems independently, be more responsible for assigned projects, manage their time effectively, search for information, and take more responsibility for their learning. The students expressed satisfaction and fulfillment from being more responsible and gaining more knowledge.

#### ❖ **Language practice**

In this section, language practice is mentioned and discussed as one of the learner identities in PBL. Five items, ranging from 3.1 to 3.5, were investigated to assess learners’ language proficiency.

From Table 5, it is evident that the participants’ responses suggested that PBL was perceived to promote language practice among the learners. The mean scores for all five statements (ranging from 3.50 to 4.26) indicated that the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, suggesting that PBL encouraged language practice.

Specifically, the participants demonstrated that they actively used English as their primary language for communication and collaboration during PBL projects, as indicated by their agreement with the statement, “I make an effort to use English as much as possible when working on PBL projects” (item 3.1;  $M=3.80$ ;  $SD=.81$ ). Similarly, the participants recognized the need for increased English-speaking practice to prepare for their presentations in PBL projects effectively. The statement “I have to practice speaking English more to prepare for my presentation in PBL” (item 3.2;  $M=4.26$ ;  $SD=.73$ ) reflected this need.

Furthermore, the participants felt the need to engage in extensive reading in English to gather information relevant to their project tasks and complete them, as supported by the statement, “I must read more English information on the Internet that relates to project tasks to complete them” (item 3.3;  $M=4.14$ ;  $SD=.68$ ). In addition, the statement “I try to write an outline in English so that I can present the projects easily” (item 3.4;  $M=3.50$ ;  $SD=.85$ ) indicated that the participants recognized the importance of English writing skills in creating an outline for their project presentations.

Moreover, the participants perceived PBL as a way to apply their previously learned English knowledge in preparing their project presentations, emphasizing the importance of language practice in PBL (item 3.5;  $M=4.02$ ;  $SD=.82$ ).

The standard deviations for the means (ranging from .68 to .85) indicated moderate variability in the responses, suggesting that there may be some differences in participants’ perceptions of the extent of language practice in PBL.

**Table 5:** *Language practice*

No.	Language practice	N=91	
		M	SD
3.1	I make an effort to use English as much as possible when working on PBLL projects	3.80	.81
3.2	I have to practice speaking English more to prepare for my presentation in PBLL	4.26	.73
3.3	I must read more English information on the Internet that relates to project tasks to complete them	4.14	.68
3.4	I try to write an outline in English so that I can present the projects easily	3.50	.85
3.5	I must use much English knowledge that I had learned before to prepare for the presentation in project tasks assigned by the teacher	4.02	.82

*Note: N: number; M: mean score; SD: Standard Deviation*

Shifting attention to the qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews, respondents agreed that PBLL helped them promote their language practice. Some comments are listed below:

“Before giving project presentations, I always practice speaking English in advance to complete projects as well as possible. I often stand in front of a mirror and practice speaking English.” (S1)

“Before completing a presentation in class, I have to practice a lot for my presentation at home. I must understand the presentation deeply to explain the problem I want to discuss clearly to my classmates and teachers.” (S5)

“I think outlining is a good way to make a presentation well-organized and attractive. Therefore, I will outline the main points and sub-points I must cover to present my project in the best possible way.” (S8)

In conclusion, the findings suggested that PBLL promoted language practice among learners. The participants in the study generally agreed that PBLL encourages language practice through various activities, such as using English for communication and collaboration, practicing speaking and writing skills, engaging in extensive reading, and applying previously learned English knowledge. These results highlighted the importance of language practice as an integral part of PBLL and its potential benefits for language learners.

### **Discussion**

The discussion section aims to comprehensively understand the study results regarding its impact on their language learner identity. The sample consisted of 91 10<sup>th</sup> grade students, most of whom were 16 years old and had been learning English for eight years.

The findings revealed that PBLL positively impacted students’ language proficiency, autonomy, and language practice and impacted the development of learners’ identities in the language classroom.

#### **Learner identity in project-based language learning**

Regarding learner identity in PBLL, the findings of this study revealed that EFL high school students formed certain aspects of language learner identity through PBLL, including language proficiency, learner autonomy, and language practice.

Regarding language proficiency, the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews indicated that EFL learners expressed strong positive sentiments regarding improving English learning through PBLL. They reported significant enhancements in their language skills and overall proficiency in English. This result is partially supported by Kettanun (2014), whose findings demonstrated a link between PBLL and increased language proficiency. A study conducted with 21 EFL students at a Thai University indicated that project-based EFL classrooms yielded positive language results and helped enhance cognition and interpersonal skills. The current study’s findings and Kettanun’s (2014) suggested that PBLL is a viable approach to

developing language proficiency. Furthermore, the results align with previous studies by Marwan (2015), Sapan et al. (2019), Sirisrimangkorn (2018), and Zhang (2015), which also indicated improvements in EFL speaking skills and overall language abilities. EFL students in this study became more fluent in speaking English, and the findings were consistent with those of Sapan et al. (2019), Tabaku and Ecirli (2014), and Chinwonno (2016), which emphasized the positive impact of PBL on students' productive, receptive, and other language abilities.

The findings regarding learner autonomy in this study align with those of Truong (2017) (cited in Tran & Tran, 2020), who found that the project-based approach improved learner autonomy in speaking classes at Vien Dong College. Furthermore, the results of Tran and Tran (2020) support the findings of this study regarding learner autonomy. Both studies demonstrated that learners could take responsibility for their projects, effectively manage their time, and independently search for necessary information. These consistent findings indicated that PBL effectively develops learners' autonomy in English learning.

The questionnaire and semi-structured interview data revealed that PBL motivated EFL learners to use English more frequently, practice speaking, apply prior language knowledge to presentations, and create project outlines. Students improved their language practice and other skills after implementing PBL. These findings are partly consistent with Marwan (2015), who found that PBL positively impacted students' motivation to use English in international interactions via email. Additionally, the present study found that EFL learners were motivated to practice more in advance to make their project presentations more appealing, and they preferred outlining their presentations, indicating an enhancement in their creative skills through regular practice with project assignments.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggested that PBL is a practical approach for high school EFL students to develop various aspects of their language learner identity, including language proficiency, learner autonomy, and language practice. The results indicated that PBL helps students improve their language proficiency and actively engage in project tasks, which aligns with previous research on the relationship between PBL and increased language proficiency. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that PBL assists learners in developing autonomy in English learning by enabling them to take responsibility for their projects, manage their time effectively, and independently search for necessary information. Additionally, PBL motivated students to use English more frequently, practice speaking, and apply prior language knowledge to their presentations. Through regular practice with assigned projects, the EFL learners in this study became more creative and improved their language skills. These results emphasized implementing PBL in EFL high school classrooms to enhance learners' language learning and identity development.

Furthermore, the study found that through PBL, EFL high school students formed some aspects of language learner identity, which include language proficiency, learner autonomy, and language practice. The students showed a strong interest in improving their English language proficiency, became better at English in general, and were more active in dealing with project tasks assigned to them through PBL, indicating the development of their learner autonomy. Finally, they could practice and apply their language skills in a real-life context through the project tasks, which improved their language practice. Additionally, the study found that PBL contributed to the development of learner identity by enhancing students' positive attitudes toward language learning, a crucial aspect of learner identity.

The study's findings have important implications for learners, teachers, and educational administrators.

**For learners,** embracing PBL offers active engagement in language learning, enabling them to enhance their language proficiency and overall abilities. Learners can develop autonomy by taking

ownership of their learning, proactively manage projects, and seek information independently. PBL also provides real-life language practice opportunities, encouraging learners to apply their knowledge in authentic situations, leading to increased fluency and confidence. Additionally, learners should adopt a positive attitude toward language learning, recognizing PBL as a platform for growth and improvement.

**For teachers**, integrating PBL into EFL classrooms can enhance language learner identity, with project designs targeting various language skills and fostering proficiency, autonomy, and practice. Teachers play a vital role in facilitating learner autonomy by guiding students toward self-directed learning and providing opportunities for project ownership. Creating authentic project tasks reflecting real-life contexts is essential to promote meaningful language practice and application. Nurturing a supportive learning environment valuing learners' efforts and progress fosters a growth mindset, motivating students to embrace language learning challenges enthusiastically.

**For educational administrators**, providing ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers ensures effective PBL implementation. Integrating PBL into the language curriculum is crucial, emphasizing language learner identity development across classrooms. Adequate resource allocation supports teachers in delivering engaging PBL experiences. Working with teachers to develop appropriate assessment strategies that measure proficiency, autonomy, and practice ensures learners' progress is monitored, informing instructional decisions. By considering these implications, educational administrators can actively support and foster PBL implementation, ultimately enhancing language learner identity, fostering well-rounded language skills among EFL students, and ensuring a positive and enriching language learning experience.

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