



**INTERNATIONAL BLACK SEA UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY of EDUCATION and HUMANITIES  
PhD PROGRAM in EDUCATION SCIENCES**

**Enhancement of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) University Students'  
Reading Skills through Project-Based Learning Implementation  
(Iraqi Case)**

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Extended Abstract of Doctoral Dissertation in Education Sciences**

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## Introduction

English has become the most important international language, which is widely used throughout the world. People with different first languages try to use English as a *lingua franca* to communicate with each other. If people want to go ahead in their professional lives, then English is an unavoidable step in the process. Hence, the demand for a high proficiency in the use of English has become very important. Educators attempt diverse teaching approaches, to enhance the development of EFL students' language skills. Project-Based Learning is one of the approaches. Current researches (Ke, 2010; Rousová, 2008; Simpson, 2011; Thomas, 2000) show that Project-Based Learning can be more effective than traditional instruction and it is a valid approach to improve the English language proficiency. However, with each passing day, new electronic devices, a wide range of attractive mobile phones, innovations in technology have complicated teachers' job to attract students' attention to lessons, make them do their homework properly. Project-Based Learning is an effective way to help students understand, apply and retain information, involving these devices. Those who work on projects show an increased motivation and engagement in their studies.

Initially, Project-Based Learning was used in scientific disciplines, then, with the increased demands of professional English, the implementation of Project-Based Learning entered the language acquisition field, such as ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

The important cause of implementing Project-Based Learning in EFL context is its influence on life-long learning. After graduating from the school / university and facing with real life, learners often cannot use what they have learnt through long years. Even perfect English skills solely are not sufficient to improve and reach success in the competitive professional world because life-long skills are essential.

Project-Based Learning is also used very productively in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) context, because traditional English teaching methods are insufficient in this sphere. Project-Based Learning gives opportunities to students not just to learn English relevant to their specialties, but also helps to develop critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and self-direction. Furthermore, Project-Based Learning opens the door to enjoyable and effective ways to learn English and gain real-life skills.

Due to the rapid development of technology young people have become the “visual generation”, preferring pictures to reading, so students’ reading habits have decreased. National Endowment for the Arts (2004, p. 7), for example, published *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. The study showed that “Americans in almost every demographic group were reading fiction, poetry, drama and books in general at significantly lower rates than 10 or 20 years earlier. The declines were steepest among young adults”.

However, getting accomplishment in university academic life is directly and closely connected with students’ reading habits, reading comprehension level and possessed reading skills. The problem becomes more serious, when education requires reading in a foreign language. In our case the foreign language is English. Students’ education at Ishik University (Iraq, Erbil) is completely in English. Hence, to be able to read and understand written material in English is significant for students not only academically, but also for personal advancements. Therefore, various teaching approaches are being used to enhance students’ reading skills. Project-Based Learning is one of the teaching approaches that enables to integrate the 21<sup>st</sup> century technological age skills with the improvement of learners’ reading skills and reading in English as a foreign Language context (EFL). It helps to create an interactive student/s – student/s and teacher – student/s atmosphere. The above-said makes the topic of the research **important/urgent**.

Thus, the dissertation aims at making a smidgen contribution to English as a foreign language undergraduate students’ reading skills enhancement by Project-Based Learning implementation in Iraqi context.

The **goal** of this doctoral dissertation was to inquire:

- whether Project-Based Learning (PBL) implementation significantly increased EFL undergraduate learners’ reading skills;
- whether traditional teaching enhanced EFL undergraduate learners’ reading skills;
- whether reading test results increased significantly in the group, where PBL had been applied, compared to the traditional teaching reading test results.

The **hypothesis** formulated in the research is:

EFL undergraduate learners’ reading skills will be significantly enhanced through Project-Based Learning (PBL) implementation, if:

- at the initial stage, they start to do short-term projects and, with the increase of learners’ reading skills, they move to longer-term projects;

- the teacher's input in the projects decreases with time (first project done largely under teacher's guidance, later quite autonomously)
- during project work, development of higher order cognitive skills and important reading strategies are enhanced and emphasized.

The **methods of research applied** in the dissertation in order to assess the hypothesis were:

- Review and analysis of existing literature on the topic;
- Survey;
- Interview;
- Experiment,
- Statistical analysis of quantitative data obtained through experiment.

The methods of research were quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative and qualitative data were combined in a single study what enabled to explain the obtained results and to make their authentic interpretation.

### **Novelty**

The advantages of Project-Based Learning in EFL context, especially its great contribution to students' speaking and presentation skills have been supported by extensive literature with research evidence. However, there is almost no study on particularly reading skills enhancement via projects in Iraq, which are organized in such a way that reading skills are the main focus of practice and advancement in the process of PBL project generation. There are few studies concerning PBL projects' active application in particular English Language skills or sub-skills. The study is innovatively focused on identifying how Project-Based Learning projects improved Iraqi EFL undergraduate learners' reading skills. The projects that were designed and offered in the dissertation are original and detailed.

### **Theoretical Value**

The theoretical bases of the dissertation are:

- The eligibility of constructivist theory of learning to Project-Based Learning (PBL) application with a proper and apt structure (Doppelt, 2003; Gülbahar & Tinmaz, 2006; Sidman-Taveau, 2005; Simpson, 2011; Welsh, 2006);

- Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an approach which is advocated by theoretical principles of social constructivism (Helle, Tynjälä, & Olkinuora, 2006; Sidman-Taveau & Milner-Bolotin, 2001);
- Successful Project-Based Learning and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) integration (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Johnson, 2003; Thomas, 2000);
- The Project-Based Learning education philosophy and the learning by and through experiences(Aimeur, 2012);
- Project-Based Learning integration into Second and Foreign language context (Fried-Booth, 1986; Haines, 1989; M. Legutke, 1984; Papandreou, 1994;Sheppard & Stoller, 1995).

The theoretical value of the dissertation deals with the analysis of existing literature in Project-Based Learning and its application in EFL context. The effects of Project-Based Learning on EFL learners' reading skills are emphasized in the dissertation. Reading comprehension strategies in general and concerning Project-Based Learning and different assessment methods could be strong theoretical bases for EFL teachers to help language learners in enhancing their reading skills.

### **Practical Value**

There is no need to declare the place of social media and technology in current-age children's, teenagers' and even adults' life. The place of reading is insignificant, compared to it. Students' reading reluctance, reading comprehension difficulties and shortage of reading skills are clear and distinct; some of our university students might have never read any academic writings. The dissertation will help teachers to draw students' attention to a number of attractive reading projects. It should be noted that these projects are applicable for different types of students, with different language and cultural background, not only to improve their reading skills, but also to generate a positive learning environment in foreign language teaching.

### **Structure of Dissertation**

The dissertation includes the following parts: introduction, 3 chapters, conclusions, recommendations and appendices. It involves 39 tables, 5 figures and 2 graphs.

## **A Brief Content of the Dissertation**

The **First Chapter** of the research deals with constructivist and social constructivist theory as the underlying theories of Project-Based Learning. Besides that, psycholinguistic theories dealing with reading, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), communicative competence within Project-Based Learning, Project-Based Learning itself and its definition, description, Project-Based learning in EFL context and in reading, teacher's role in Project-Based Learning and challenges in implementing projects are discussed.

There are a lot of definitions of Project-Based Learning, but there are some properties that are constant with all versions of it. The assumption of Piaget's (1970) constructivist theory of knowledge was based on the idea that learners do not absorb or copy ideas from outside (external) world, which is an accustomed way of traditional class students like in Iraq, but learners must build their understanding and concept through active and individual observation and experimentation. To make the learning process more significant and eloquent, Project-Based Learning gets an edge on of the social dimension of constructivism by empowering student interactions.

Thomas (2000) explained Project-Based Learning as a model that orchestrates learning around projects, and it is an educational philosophy which, in order to provide more democratic and participatory community, targets at providing possible directions and ways. According to Bransford and Stein (1993), Project-Based Learning is a comprehensive instructional approach, which engages learners with constructive and cooperative investigation, many educators consider projects as displays of learning by doing (Blumenfeld et al., 1991), having been acknowledged as the most effective learning approach (Lombardi, 2007). Over the last decades student-centered approach comes into prominence. As Project-Based Learning is a student-centered approach, consequently, a lot of researchers and instructors develop a positive attitude towards it (Chang, 2014).

The continual progress of the world has its own effects on education field and causes the flourish and alteration of notions and concepts in education. In this sense, the definition of Project-Based Learning has also been changing. Every new day the scholars', educators', trainers', teachers' new observations, surveys, researches, and obtained results bring new possibilities to adjust the description of it. However, as to every approach, some ejections and insertions are possible. In a simple way, Project-Based Learning is a work that provides connections between a group of

learners and gives them some opportunities, like taking on an issue close to their hearts, step by step find out a response and be able to present the results to a wider audience. Project-Based Learning opens the door from disciplinary to authentic life. It assists learners to get competence in the field of study. Moreover, it correlates theory with practice.

In this chapter, the researcher also tried to put forth the causes of Project-Based Learning implementation in EFL context. Nowadays English is the most commonly studied foreign language in a lot of countries (Kitao, 1996). However, the applicability and practicability of English to real life are the most tragically lacking factors in English language instruction (Symonds, 2008). The contemporary education has asserted that learners cannot or are weak to master essential concepts and principles of foreign language and they are not able to use what they learn in daily life (Finn, 2008). Thus, from day to day demands are expanding concerning the usage of English language, how English could be taught more effectively, how language could be acquired easily and cozily to apply in each phase of real life. Hence, these demands have become essentials and objectives for English Language instructors. In order to fulfill these 21<sup>st</sup> century needs, various education approaches spring and educators attempt to implement them in the field of language teaching. Project-Based Learning is one of them (Noom-ura, 2013), which has got importance from the 1980s. Fried–Both (1986) was one of the forerunners who recommended the usage of projects in EFL context. She stated that a gap between language learned in the classroom and language used out of the classroom can be bridged with the project works.

In the table below traditional instruction and PBL instruction are compared, based on the information from Mapes (2009) with some modifications.

**Table 1. Comparison of traditional teaching style with Project-Based Learning**

<b>Traditional Teaching Style</b>	<b>Project-Based Learning</b>
Teacher-centered. Teacher is in charge with the process of language learning.	Learner-centered. Peer negotiation and Interaction. Teacher is a facilitator.
Holistic transmitting of language knowledge to a group.	Constructing knowledge of language.
Material memorization is essential.	Content understanding is prominent.
Cosmetic learning of language (shallowing information about a lot of concepts).	Deep language learning (through comprehending main concept, focusing on social and communicative language competence).
Learning out of the context.	Authentic learning in context.
Individual language learning.	Group language learning.

Traditional assessment.	Performance - Based assessment.
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Source: (Mapes, 2009: 9)

Literature review relevant to Project-Based Learning and EFL relations or the effects of Project-Based Learning in EFL context obviously shows that it gingers up the educational process of language teachers and learners, and, the most significant, learners are equipped with the required academic attributes as well as with well-developed not only language skills, but also real-life competences.

As it was previously stated, Project-Based Learning is a student-centered approach. That is why it requires the fundamental shift in the roles of teachers (Beckett & Miller, 2006, p. 144). The sub-chapter *Teachers' role in PBL projects* sheds light on the teachers' position, mission and responsibilities in Project-Based Learning implementation settings. Teachers can be a facilitator, an advisor, and a consultant in the process of project implementation.

Despite the numerous benefits of Project-Based Learning, it should not be overlooked that each successful and useful implementation presents several challenges, which should be considered and possible solutions put forward to minimize the effects of the challenges, which include the time and objectivity of assessment problems.

The **Second Chapter** presents the model of Project-Based Learning implementation for teaching reading. It explores the importance of reading for EFL students. As study was held for Iraqi students, the place of reading itself in Iraqi community was also examined in this chapter. The chapter also introduces reading comprehension strategies during the implementation of Project-Based Learning, steps of reading project development and the types of reading projects. In addition, it shares the Project-Based Learning assessment in EFL reading context.

Without enough reading it is impossible to get an academic level of language knowledge. Thus, in the sub-chapter *The Importance of Reading for EFL students*, the significance of reading was discussed. It was shown that reading is not only important in language acquisition, but also in academic contexts. This view is shared by Noor (2011), who found that self-teaching and development embodies reading as an integral concept, in terms of researching and investigating ideas and collecting knowledge. This is particularly true with regards to reading in foreign languages. To manage successfully with 21<sup>st</sup> century rapid innovations, challenges and complexities, reading is a valued crucial skill not only for students, but also for people from different parts of the society (Akanda, Hoq, & Hasan, 2013; Akarsu & Dariyemez, 2014). Holte

(1998) emphasizes the importance of reading, in that it amplifies the quality of life and gives opportunities to access culture and gain cultural heritage. He believed that reading strengthens, sets citizens free and brings people together. The importance of reading is evidently high and indisputable.

As the research was conducted among EFL learners' in Iraq, learners' reading habits and reading itself within Iraqi communities and the Northern part of Iraq, Kurdistan was analyzed in the sub-chapter *Reading in Iraq*, to get optimal awareness about experimental subjects. Iraq and Kurdistan are placed so that throughout the history war is the common word that everyone knows. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about students who are well-educated and have good reading habits, because it requires at least twenty years to educate the generation which is well-read, enlightened, lettered with good reading habits. With respect to 2013 reports, 18% of Iraq's population which is above 9 years old is illiterate. It has been poignant dropping in educational achievement and in school enrollment which reached a peak by 2014 attacks of ISIS on Iraq. Life circumstances removed reading from the Iraqi people's agenda. The absence of stability, continuous wars mainly affected education and, correspondingly, the people's reading habits. The most prominent determinant of poor reading habits is that the way of success is passing through rote memorization, even the mandatory exam, which is really a high external motivator for studying and has required readings, is based on rote memorization of problems, solutions, and questions' possible correct answers (Kavlu, 2015a). That is why once more it should be emphasized that new, innovative, path-breaking, seminal learning, teaching and technological approaches should be investigated, attempted to apply in order to generate a friendly, productive, enjoyable in-class and out-class environment, where students will have mutual understanding, regardless of their culture and religion. Project-Based Learning can be one of these approaches because it is a learner-centered approach, which, with diverse project incentives and blending of required data, knowledge and information from various resources to accomplish projects, will best present them useful information.

The majority of EFL students, probably seldom or never will have the opportunity to speak with native speakers (Rivers, 1981), but any time, in any place they have an easy access to English written material. Therefore, reading is feasible in foreign language case, while the target language meaningful oral input is limited (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2008).

A considerable amount of research studies in the last three decades have attested the importance of comprehension strategy instruction within multiple reading strategies in assisting students to

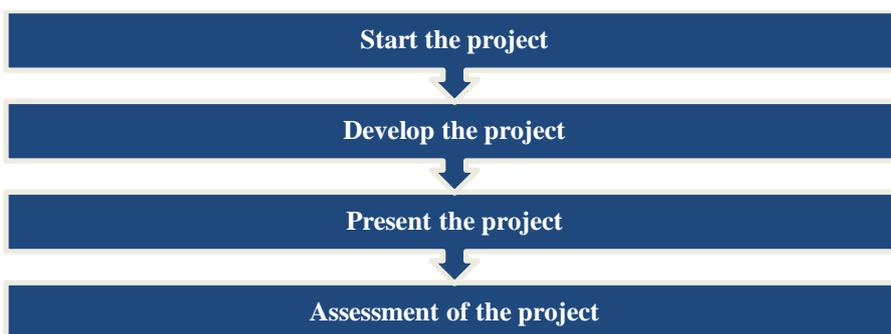
grow into strategic readers and to enhance their reading comprehension (Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998; Koda, 2005; Lee, 2003; Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2002; Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Pressley & Allington, 2014; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Song, 1998). Sub-chapter *Reading comprehension strategies during the project* describes reading comprehension strategies employed in the process of project generation: Collaborative Strategic Reading (preview, click and clunk, get the gist, wrap up), Reciprocal teaching (summarizing, question generation, clarifying, making predictions), direct explanation of the Comprehensions strategies and Transactional strategies instruction (TSI).

Projects in Project-Based Learning require a deep understanding which is closely linked with comprehension of the written material. Inherently, acquisition of the above-mentioned reading comprehension strategies is embedded in stages of PBL project generation process, because while working on projects, EFL learners typically use reading to investigate and pursue the assigned tasks' topics that enable learners to carry out their projects.

Sub-chapter *Steps of reading project development* illustrates the ongoing process which is undertaken by students with support provided by the teacher in the process of project preparation. The nature of the projects is varied, due to which various language skills are aimed to enhance. However, the main steps of project development process, whether it is a reading, writing, listening, or speaking project are almost the same. It should be emphasized that while fulfilling the project steps' requirements, the accomplishment process goes through the exposure to the target English language skill.

Steps in the project development are the sequence of principles which lead learners and teachers to the tangible outcome. These principles are planned on the basis of the language skills that students need to develop (Rost & Candlin, 2014). For students who need to enhance their reading skills, reading based projects are proposed. Project steps necessitate learners to read and utilize their reading skills to enhance them. Reading projects are the result of systematic methodology. After the review of the literature, the relevant steps of reading project development were summarized by the researcher as follows in Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1. Steps of reading project development**



Sub-chapter dealing with *Types of reading projects* shares the types of projects feasible for English Language reading. Teachers make an effort to improve learners' reading skill, but it is not easy within limited lesson time, with intensive and strict curricula. Lesson time is not obviously enough to improve and make foreign language reading enjoyable, especially for the community of students who do not like reading. In this case, Project-Based Learning projects come to teachers' and students' assistance. Since the reading skill is crucial, especially for undergraduate students, who use English as a Medium of Instruction, it should be integrated into students' real and academic life. There are some projects that help teachers to improve English language learners' reading skills. Debate itself and Debate Competition fosters efficient reading. EFL learners need to research debate topics in advance. Therefore, applied skills such as skimming, scanning and critical reading skills in order to be able to "selectively choose the relevant and useful evidence and reliable references to support their claims and arguments" (Zare & Othman, 2013, p. 1510) are improved. Furthermore, EFL learners enhance their summarization and outlining skills.

Another project worth mentioning is Quiz – games that make reading lessons more interesting and enjoyable. Students go through various celebrities' biographies to be able to prepare informative, attention-grabbing but at the same time specific questions. Reading biographies improves EFL students' scanning and skimming skills for specific information. In the period of data collection in Quiz-show EFL students improve their reading for information, recognizing text types and transforming information from one mode to another.

Third project is making short story movie being a source of entertainment and enjoyable way of reading skills acquisition for EFL students (Ismaili, 2013). With regard to reading, short stories allow EFL students efficaciously practice the speed-reading techniques, skimming, scanning, and finding the main idea (Zeraatkar & Hadipanah, 2013).

Another type of project in Project-Based Learning is student-made magazine (Poonpon, 2011). To prepare a magazine, similar nature printed material-magazines, news magazines, online magazines and articles should be read and analyzed. These materials are accepted as models, also they are ideal for practicing reading strategies such as skimming and scanning. They are series of reading skills which learners practice while reading to get information for their projects, to get the main point of the text, skimming through the text (Makhloufi, 2013), to look for specific information through the reading part, searching for a specific word or phrase, or scanning the reading part (Lindsay & Knight, 2006). Each type of project has its own effect on students' reading skills.

*Assessment during Project-Based Learning* sub-chapter explores the case of Project-Based Learning assessment in EFL reading context. It is a crucial and challenging phase. Compared to the traditional learning assessment, Project-Based Learning assessment is different as well as challenging. Various types of assessments are used for Project-Based Learning assessment, such as process self-assessment, peer assessment, case-based, performance-based assessment and portfolio assessment.

Comparison of assessment types which have been accepted substantial are generated by the researcher in the Table 2 below.

**Table 2. Comparison of self–assessment, peer–assessment and tutor, facilitator assessment**

criteria of assessment / types of assessment	<b>Self–Assessment</b>	<b>Peer–Assessment</b>	<b>Tutor, Facilitator Assessment</b>
<b>Popularity of reading</b>	Increases	Increases	Is obligatory
<b>Assessment Form</b>	Authentic, alternative, evaluates one's own work	Authentic, alternative, evaluates peer work	Traditional, evaluates learners' personal effort and teamwork
<b>Learner</b>	Active performer in the assessment process. Learner autonomy increases	Interactive and active performer in the assessment process. Learner autonomy increases	Feedback and evaluation receiver (student is passive)
<b>Approach</b>	Student – centered	Student – centered	According to the implemented assessment form, it can be teacher–centered or the equilibrium mixture of a teacher and a student-centered

			approach
<b>Information</b>	Obtained directly from the learner herself/himself (self-checklists, self-evaluation form)	Getting information, constructive feedback and enlightenment from peers or team members (peer-checklists, observation, peer-evaluation form)	Comments about learners' individual or intergroup progress. Gives feedbacks which assists learners to avoid misconception and to advance the process of learning
<b>Learning Process</b>	Active, responsible for his/her own learning, self-correction, self-directing, acquired different assessment techniques	Active, constructing knowledge, sharing information	Learner is passive, Instructor/Facilitator's positive feedback
<b>Questions</b>	<p>What is my progress and deficiencies?</p> <p>What is my responsibility to fulfill our project?</p> <p>What is original that can be done?</p>	<p>How should I provide constructive, effective and not offensive feedback?</p> <p>Are my feedback and rubrics' criteria able to increase her/his (or their, if one team evaluates another) motivation, enthusiasm to accomplish project rather than generating negative competitive environment?</p>	<p>If the requirements that should be accomplished while doing projects are clear.</p> <p>How to keep students on track and make them not to lose focus?</p> <p>Do students shift from spoon-feeding towards active learning and being knowledge seeker?</p>

The dependable variable research in the research was the level of reading skills, and the study examined the impact of Project-Based Learning on EFL undergraduate learners' reading skills. Thus, the second chapter gives insight of Project-Based Learning integration in EFL reading context.

The **Third Chapter** is concerned with the research of the effects Project-Based Learning in EFL classes on the learners' enhancement of reading skills.

The study involves several researches:

- A pre-experimental students' questionnaire
- A pre-experimental teachers' interview
- An experimental study – Project-Based Learning implementation to enhance Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners' reading skills (experiment itself, with control- traditional, and experimental-Project-Based-Learning implemented groups)
- Lecturers' post-experimental interview
- Students' post-experimental survey

In the **pre-experimental students' questionnaire** the items were designed to evaluate students' general attitudes towards reading, their reading habits, smart phone usage habits, and reading habits. It was conducted at the Faculty of Education – in the future experimental group. The main purpose of it was to be closely acquainted with the students to teach them optimally. The information gathered from the questionnaire let the researcher give projects to the experimental group, considering their interests, as well as the digital tools, social networks, computers', smart phones', and tablets' applications (apps) that they used.

The obtained results show that the majority of students, regardless of their gender, like reading (female –32% + male – 40% = 72%). On the other hand, 28% (16+12) of students do not like reading, and it is quite a considerable amount for University students, especially for the faculty of Education students, who are the future teachers of this society. It means that almost one third of the students do not have an interest in reading. The male students have a little bit more positive attitude towards reading in this survey, but, of course, to make far-going conclusions, wider studies are necessary. It was also revealed that 25% of female students seldom read and 32.4% of female students do not always read or read less than one hour a day (25%-seldom read + 32.4%-do not always read and read less than one hour a day=57.4%), it means that approximately 60% of female students do not have reading habits. The effect of this factor was observed on the presented projects, male students' projects were more educational and had a richer context.

Before commencing the implementation of Project-Based Learning, an **interview** was held **with Ishik University lecturers** concerning students' reading habits and their suggestions for enhancing students' reading skills. Respondents were lecturers from English language department, the Faculty of Education. As a matter of fact, the interviewed lecturers already had ideas about students' attitudes towards reading, because they had an experience of teaching students of this geographic area and Ishik University. The interview was held in order to set out projects' appropriateness to fit students' abilities, capacities and interests.

The goal of the **experimental study** was to find out whether Project-Based Learning organized according to the worked out model would really increase Iraqi EFL undergraduate learners' reading skills. Correspondingly, three research questions were asked:

- Does the application of projects in Project-Based Learning significantly increase EFL undergraduate learners' reading skills?

- Does the application of traditional teaching increase EFL undergraduate learners' reading skills?
- Do the reading test results in the experimental group increase significantly compared to the test results in the control group?

In order to provide the general view of the quantitative data, the results of control and experimental groups are displayed in the Tables 3 and 4 in summary form, including the mean, the standard deviation, maximum and minimum scores, and standard error of the mean.

**Table 3. Representative performance data of the control group in all tests**

Parameter / Time	Pre - Test	While - 1	While - 2 (Post-Test)	Post - Test (Delayed Test)
Mean	50.320	52.680	50.880	58.640
Std. Deviation	12.7106	11.8526	11.5806	12.0031
Maximum	77	72	73	78
Minimum	21	24	25	30
Standard Error	2.5421	2.3705	2.3161	2.4006

**Table 4. Representative performance data of the experimental group in all tests**

Time	Pre - Test	While - 1	While - 2 (Post-Test)	Post - Test (Delayed Test)
Mean	51.435	60.391	71.043	86.087
Std. Deviation	13.7967	12.6518	11.3637	9.2781
Maximum	74	85	89	98
Minimum	31	37	50	70
Standard Error	2.8768	2.6381	2.3695	1.9346

**Table 5. Control and Experimental Groups' Tests Results Means Comparison**

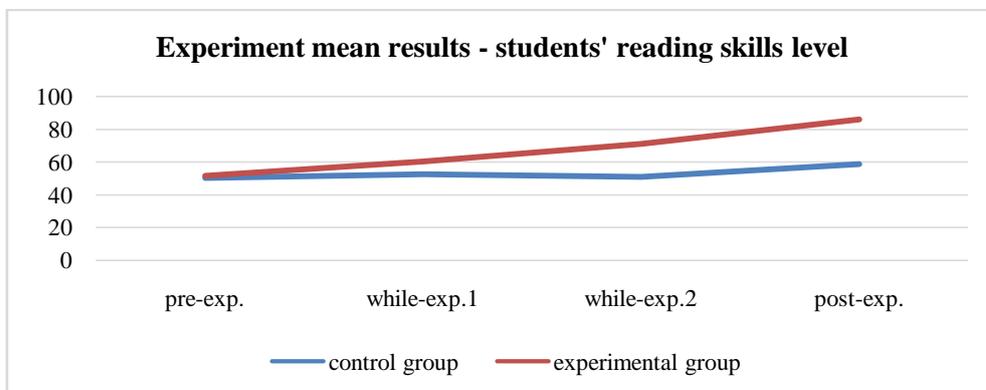
	Control group	Experimental group
Pre-testing mean	50.320	51.435
While-testing mean	50.880	71.043
Post-testing mean	58.640	86.087
Increase	8.320 (16.53%)	34.652 (67.37%)

Experimental group in reading score outweighed and outperformed the control group. The results indicate that Project-Based Learning much more enhanced and promoted English reading performance of the experimental group's learners than that of the students in the traditional instruction class.

To assess the situation visually, graph 1 was built. In the graph, it can be seen that the pre-experimental tests in both groups yielded more or less the same results, but during the

experiment the experimental group was improving faster, while the control group's results fluctuated and eventually grew just a little.

**Graph 1. Experiment mean results**



These results support our hypothesis – the role of Project-Based Learning for the improvement of reading skills is really positive.

At the end of Project-Based Learning implementation, a post-experimental interview with lecturers was applied which surveyed the effects of assigned projects on their courses. Teachers' observations and feedbacks realized projects' positive effects on students' reading skills.

**Students' post-experimental questionnaire.** Quantitative data proved that Project-Based Learning implemented (experimental) group students had a significant improvement in their English language reading skills. The questionnaire obtained students' feedbacks about one year Project-Based Learning implementation and its impact on their reading skills asking their opinions, feedbacks and reflections. The students' questionnaire results show that the majority of students believe that Project-Based Learning improves their reading skills and promotes their general English language knowledge improvement.

**Limitations of the Research.** The study was conducted in Northern part of Iraq –Kurdistan Region with First year Faculty of Education students. It is hard to determine whether the findings obtained from the research can be generalized to EFL context in other countries, even to overall Project-Based Learning implementation in Iraqi tertiary EFL courses. The study's main analysis was based on statistical analyzes of quantitative data. However, more qualitative studies are needed in this field.

Other limiting factors are the number of students and the fact that the study was implemented in one faculty (Faculty of Education) in one private University. If the study had been conducted in a

state university with more students, it might have revealed different results. Nonetheless, caution is required in drawing conclusions and implications for other settings and students for this study.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study was designed to investigate the Project-Based Learning implementation effect on Iraqi undergraduate students' reading skills. The review of the relevant literature established the theoretical framework for the research. The research purpose was to fill the gap of innovative, student-centered, critical-thinking and analyses-based language learning approach implementation in Iraqi educational and English language learning community.

- Technology and especially mobile technology development, social media popularity increment, easy internet and information access have had some adverse impacts on students' reading habits. Unfortunately, reading is fading away nowadays from students' life and it is overshadowed by the afore-mentioned technological developments. This reading reduction arises most particularly in unstable countries, such as Iraq. In the absence of reading practice, the reading skills and reading habits cannot be addressed, because the region instability manifests itself from personal to educational life.
- The most important thing I was seeking after was an approach which could allow my students to combine technology, be on the internet and follow social media ambitions with improving their English language reading skills sociably and in an enjoyable way. Project-based learning gave me a great opportunity to generate and consequently see learners who were actively engaged in exploration and inquiry work, were reading, questioning, applying acquired reading skills to analyze written information and generate the quality end-product.
- There are numerous studies in different countries (China, Turkey, Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, Spain, Mexico, Iran, Germany) with a wide range of EFL learners), which investigated the effect of Project-Based Learning on EFL students' English language skills, as well as on motivation, learners' autonomy, and acquiring the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and shown the efficiency of the approach. On the other hand, there are almost no applied studies related to Project-Based Learning integrated into EFL context or Project-Based Learning effects on Iraqi students' English language skills (in particular, reading skills). With this respect, this is the only investigative study on the issue in Iraqi EFL context. Many points and issues need to be explored in Project-Based Learning, regarding to Iraqi EFL context and educational system. Many investigative and exploratory studies still can

be done and contribute to Iraqi EFL context and other disciplines. To accomplish reading-based PBL projects, EFL learners should carefully seek through many of the digital or print reading materials. Hence, learners actively engage in deep and thoughtful informational and literary texts, which construct knowledge, expand world-view, and amplify experiences. Subsequently, learners are able to demonstrate cogent evidence and reasoning.

- Learners may encounter challenging reading parts and texts during the research stage of Project-Based Learning, which are beyond their reading skills' levels; especially, in Iraqi EFL context for students with poor reading habits and lack of critical reading, proper scaffolding should be provided in order to guide learners to break down difficult reading parts to manageable chunks. It is necessary to teach them deliberately reading skills to make them be able to analyze texts for bias, reliability or faulty logic. Using reciprocal teaching or paired reading techniques assist learners to promote each other's understanding. Considering the importance of critical reading, it is recommended to hold Socratic seminars and workshops to enlighten students about critical reading skills and help them to think critically about their reading material.
- Based on the literature analysis, a 7-stage approach to developing student reading comprehension strategies, while applying the PBL approach, was developed in the dissertation, which was applied during the experiment:
  - Stage 1 (during a very short project 1):
    - Presenting reading strategies by the teacher – what they are, when they should be used and how to use them.
      - Strategy 1: preview, get the gist, make predictions.
  - Stage 2 (during a very short project 2):
    - Strategy 2: Summarize, generate questions, clarify details
  - Stage 3 (during a longer project 3):
    - Strategy 3: Guessing unfamiliar vocabulary based on linguistic knowledge
  - Stage 4 (during a longer project 4):
    - Strategy 4: Guessing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary based on context
  - Stage 5 (during a long project 5):

Strategy 5: Guessing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary based on background knowledge

- Stage 6 (during a long project 6):

Strategy 6: Guessing unfamiliar vocabulary based on context

- Stage 7 (during a long project 7):

Choosing the appropriate strategy

- Stage 1 and 2 are completely teacher-guided, stage 3 and 4 are partially teacher-guided, while stage 5-7 are practically independently fulfilled by students.

- Based on the classroom experience during the experiment, I suggest five major steps in the project development:
  1. Setting up the stage;
  2. Forming teams;
  3. Assigning team members' position;
  4. Working stage on the reading project;
  5. Providing scaffolding (when / if needed).
- The study held involved a student questionnaire and a teacher interview dealing with students' reading habits. Both revealed grave problems in reading skills. It also involved an experiment and post-experimental students' questionnaires and teachers' interviews concerning their satisfaction with the teaching approach applied.
- The experiment participants were elementary level students; consequently, projects were designed in line with preliminary level of reading skills (skimming, scanning, and reading for main idea). It is expected that at each further level learners should be in charge of more difficult reading tasks.
- Each project that was organized during the experiment, took into consideration the elementary level of students' reading skills that had to be increased. The PBL projects were developed in a way that would immerse the students in a textually rich environment. Each project required more and attentive reading compared to the previous one. The projects were highly contextual, because a series of decisions were taken into consideration: learners' suggestions, their needs for academic reading skills and real-life skills, their interests, and curricular goals. EFL instructors should attach importance to these main principles, while implementing Project-Based Learning for improving learners' reading skills.

- By fulfilling various projects learners develop continually as readers and come close to more literary projects. Furthermore, Project-Based Learning gives EFL teachers a chance to teach their students more than just the textbook that the publishers suggest them.
- Project-Based Learning should be implemented in teaching reading in EFL context. Almost all colleagues at Faculty and my former colleagues from secondary and high school share the opinion that students mostly do not like reading and consequently they have poor reading habits. The study proved that teaching reading through Project-Based Learning is an innovative, path-breaking, seminal learning, teaching and technological and learner-centered approach that generates a friendly, productive, enjoyable in-class and out-class environment where students have mutual understanding, regardless their culture and religion, where they seek knowledge, explore books and the world.
- Through Project-Based Learning EFL learners receive new information, reading for projects assists learners to gain comprehension, reading between lines, synthesizing, interpreting and going ahead in their study field (Grabe, 1991; Noor, 2011; Richards, 1976). Learners during projects' construction need to do further readings which engenders natural employment of reading strategies for the deep comprehension of the written material. They entail analyzing and synthesizing of the read material with reading strategies of question generation and clarification. In addition, Project-Based Learning has a great contribution to other English language main skills (writing and speaking). Project-Based Learning projects motivate students to read and the essential aim of reading, comprehension arises from the application of reading strategies.
- The current research has investigated the results of Project-Based Learning implementation in relation to English reading skills. The hypothesis was that Project-Based Learning implementation will significantly increase undergraduate EFL learners' reading skills. The experiment held showed a much higher reading success of the students in the experimental group (mean results changed from 51.435 to 86.087), compared to the control group (mean results changed from 50.320 to 58.640). Thus, the experiment proved the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning implementation on the learners' reading skills improvement. Thus, the suggested 7-stage approach to application of PBL approach to the development of reading skills can be recommended for application by EFL teachers at universities. Future research may investigate other English language skills and sub-skills individually or in combination of interrelated skills.

- The study also involved students' and teachers' reflections after the implementation of Project-Based Learning for the development of reading motivation and skills. Future research may investigate students' and teachers' attitudes towards Project-Based Learning implementation in EFL context, involving all language skills.
- The study reveals students' attitudes towards reading in general, reading habits and reading activities they are most engaged in. Students generally like reading (female-32% + male-40%=72%). On the other hand, 28% (16%+12%) of students do not like reading and it is a considerable amount for University students, especially for the Faculty of Education. Only 33.3% percent of students prefer reading in their free time, but at the same time some other aspects emerged from the questionnaire results. The first one is that 58.3% of students like to go out and enjoy spending time with friends. As Project-Based Learning is based on students' cooperation and collaboration, it necessitates teamwork. Moreover, 42% of the students surf the internet in their free time. Project-Based Learning positively configures students' tendencies to be on the Internet as it contributes to their learning. Students do not read because they believe they are too busy with their phones, 50% of female and 46% of male students are too occupied with their phones. Future research may examine the integration to PBL projects of students' most favored activities and their contributions to EFL learners' language skills. Furthermore, computer-assisted Project-Based Learning and mobile learning integration with Project-Based Learning would be a positive and powerful stimulant in enhancing language skills as well as digital and real-life skills.
- This study, which was held at Ishik University with freshmen students from the Faculty of Education aged 17-25, can provide a good basis for further studies in primary, secondary and high schools. The study was implemented for one academic year and various and several short-term, longer-term and long-term projects were designed and generated in order to enhance English language reading skills. In light of this study's projects, more different-duration project studies could be run in different learning communities.
- According to the United Nations (2008, as cited in Khreisat, 2014) recent report, American and British people read from eleven to eight books in a year. However, people living in the Gulf region (Arab World people) read only 4 pages a year. Therefore, educators, who not only assist learners to acquire language skills, but also cultivate learners' humanistic ethics, should have as one of their aims to make their learners avid

readers, because reading is the passkey in each step of educational and personal life. Especially language teachers should seek for new educational approaches, which will help our learners to develop good reading habits. Project-Based Learning is one of the possible effective solutions of the problem of reading skills' enhancement.

- Project-Based Learning with various types of projects helped Iraqi EFL learners to improve their reading skills. Debate competition is a project where learners must research a particular topic and employ skimming, scanning and critical reading skills to select evidence that supports their arguments. Quiz-games make reading lessons more interesting and enjoyable. Reading biographies improves EFL students' scanning and skimming skills for specific information. In the period of data collection in Quiz-show EFL students improve their reading for information, recognizing text types and transforming information from one mode to another. The word 'presentation' is generally associated with oral and presenting skills, and comes to mind when someone speaks and others listen. However, presentation has a direct connection with reading skills, especially in the process of data collection, when readers research the written material on the topic which is going to be presented. Presentation requires language learners to employ all four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. To be able to prepare a properly organized academic presentation, language learners need to use their English reading skills. EFL teachers can be recommended to vary the reading project types they use, to avoid the boredom which may take place if only one project format is applied.
- Project-Based Learning projects should be planned and arranged with a high cultural and content awareness of study settings and participants' background. Peculiarities of gender attitudes towards team working (such as avoiding working in mixed-gender teams) has to be considered and delicately treated.

**List of publications in which the basic findings of the dissertation are presented:**

1. Kavlu, A. (2015a). Implementation of project-based learning (PBL) in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms in Fezalar educational institutions (Iraq). *5th International Research Conference on Education, English Language Teaching, English Language*. Tbilisi: International Black Sea University. p.206-221.
2. Kavlu, A. (2015b). Project-Based Learning Assessment Methods Comparison in Undergraduate EFL Classes. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies Ishik University*, 2 (1), p. 47-59.
3. Kavlu, A. (2015). The Place of Reading in EFL Context. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies Ishik University*, 2 (1), p. 81-88.
4. Kavlu, A. (2015). The Effect of Project-Based Learning on Undergraduate EFL Students' Reading Comprehension Ability. *Journal of Education in Black Sea Region*. 1(1), p.39-44.