

EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Project-Based Learning in Primary Education: A Survey-Based Study

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Abstract: In recent years, primary English education in post-Soviet Central Asia has changed considerably. Likewise, Uzbekistan has been placing strong emphasis on developing communicative skills from the early grades. Project-Based Learning (PBL) has gained attention as it enables learners to use language for real-life purposes rather than only practising grammar. However, there is limited research on how Uzbek primary EFL teachers understand, apply, and evaluate PBL.

This study reports on a survey of 17 teachers from three primary schools in Tashkent, Urgench, and Kosonsoy. As schools typically employ only a few English teachers, the participants represent the full teaching staff. Data from a 20-item questionnaire show that most teachers view PBL positively and use it to some extent, especially to practice speaking and listening skills. At the same time, challenges have arisen such as very limited time, young learners' pedagogical and psychological needs, and lack of resources. At the end of the paper, practical recommendations for educators and curriculum developers are presented.

Keywords: project-based learning, communicative competence, EFL, primary education, teacher perceptions, Uzbekistan, Khorezm region.

Introduction: Teaching English in Uzbek primary schools has been a complex task for years. Over the past decade, due to the reforms, English started to be taught from Year 1 and this increased expected learning outcomes, and promoted communicative curriculum. However, new changes have not been applied to classroom practices at the same pace. Many teachers still rely on grammar drills, repetition, and textbook-based lessons, even though official documents encourage more interactive and integrated approaches. (Mahkamova, 2015; Sodiqova, 2021) This inconsistency between policy and practice is common in many areas, especially in primary education, where teachers often struggle to balance covering required material with giving children real opportunities to use English meaningfully.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) offers one possible way to address this issue. In simple terms, PBL is built around extended tasks—such as creating a poster, giving a

presentation, or producing a class magazine—that encourage students to use language with a clear purpose (Thomas, 2000). The approach is based on constructivist principles, where learning develops through active participation and collaboration. It also aligns with the concept of communicative competence described by Canale (1983), which includes not only knowledge of grammar but also the ability to use language effectively in real situations, handle communication difficulties, and adjust speech to different audiences. These kinds of skills are difficult to develop through short-term, form-focused exercises alone.

Researches from different countries, such as China, Indonesia, and Iran, generally show that Project-Based Learning (PBL) can improve students' speaking and writing skills and increase their motivation. However, the positive results depend on how well PBL is applied practically, and not all of the findings are equally strong

(Yang et al., 2025; Astawa et al., 2017; Cabanillas, 2023). At the same time, there is still limited research on how primary school teachers in developing or underdeveloped countries actually experience using PBL. It is uncertain if they fully understand the approach, have enough support or what challenges exist in using them effectively. The current study was carried out to explore the issues above. It is based on a survey of 17 EFL teachers from three primary schools in the Khorezm region of western Uzbekistan. The research looks at teachers' understanding of PBL, how they use it in their lessons, the difficulties they face, and their views on its role in developing young learners' communicative skills. Four major issues the study focuses on are how teachers define PBL, how often and in what ways they use it, what challenges they are facing and how they evaluate its impact to develop students' communicative competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1 What Project-Based Learning Is — and What It Is Not

Project work has been used in schools for many years. However, many of us don't realise what Project-Based Learning (PBL) actually means. According to Thomas (2000), true PBL is different from simple project activities and can be identified through five key features:

1. The project should be a core part of the curriculum, not just an additional activity after the main lesson.
2. It should be built around a clear driving question or problem that students explore.
3. Students participate in active inquiry in which they build new knowledge instead of repeating what they know already.
4. Students have some level extend of independence in how they implement the project.

The assignment should be realistic and related to real life, rather than being created only for classroom purposes.

These criteria are important as they distinguish meaningful PBL from activities that only seem to be project-based. Not all product-based tasks actually develop language or thinking skills. For example, if all students are assigned to create a poster by copying information from a textbook, it seems to be PBL, yet it excludes key elements such as inquiry, learner

independence or a real communicative purpose. Some teachers view any group activity with a final product as PBL, even if it lacks core principles. Consequently, they report using PBL, while they actually apply much simpler and less effective form. Theoretically, Project-based learning (PBL) is based on several closely related ideas. One of the most important is the concept of social constructivism developed by Vygotsky (1978). According to this theory, learning develops through interaction and collaboration where language plays a key role. Later, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested the idea of situated learning in which knowledge is formed within real-life contexts and social environments. This aligns well with PBL's focus on authentic tasks. These ideas are also connected to Dewey's earlier principle of "learning by doing," which provides a strong and lasting philosophical basis for PBL (Yang et al., 2025).

2 PBL and Communicative Competence

According to Canale (1983), communicative competence is more complex than grammatical accuracy. His model includes four parts: grammatical competence (knowing language forms), sociolinguistic competence (using language appropriately in context), discourse competence (producing connected and coherent speech or writing), and strategic competence (managing communication problems such as missing vocabulary or misunderstandings). These skills cannot be achieved through grammar-focused exercises alone. Learners need real situations where they have a purpose, an audience, and a need to communicate effectively. Project-based activities such as presenting information about their community, convincing classmates about an idea, or creating a class magazine, naturally require students negotiate, maintain coherent communication, adjust language to different audiences overcome lexical gaps. Unlike drills or simple comprehension tasks, well-designed PBL reflect real communication situations. (Stoller, 2006; Canale, 1983).

3 Research on PBL in EFL Settings

Research on Project-Based Learning (PBL) in EFL has grown in recent years, but it still covers limited contexts and age groups. Yang et al. (2025) found that PBL increased students' motivation and improved contextualised writing in a rural Chinese middle school, although it did not significantly affect grammar test results. The authors argue that this may be because PBL

develops skills that are not easily measured by traditional exams.

Other studies report similar outcomes. Astawa et al. (2017) observed gains in speaking and writing in Indonesia, Cabanillas (2023) found improved speaking skills in Spain, and Shafaei and Rahim (2015) reported better vocabulary memorization in Iran.

However, the majority of researches focus on secondary and higher education. Although primary learners have specific needs connected to short attention spans and rely on visual and hands-on learning (Sodiqova, 2021; Mahkamova, 2015), this age-group remain under-researched. This brings us to realize that PBL cannot be directly transferred to primary classrooms without careful adaptation of tasks and teaching methods.

4 Barriers to PBL in Under-Resourced Contexts

Thomas (2000) notes that time is one of the main barriers in implementing PBL. Teachers need to cover the required curriculum within fixed lesson period and projects often require more time than anticipated. Especially in systems with strict timetables and summative exams, it is difficult to fit extended project works into lessons. Yang et al. (2025) and Santhi et al. (2019) also highlight additional challenges such as limited resources, especially the lack of digital tools in rural schools, as well as insufficient teacher training. As teachers do not access clear guidance on how to design and manage projects, they often return to more traditional, teacher-centered methods.

In Uzbekistan, other local factors are added to these challenges. Class sizes are often large, professional development is not always consistent, and teaching is still mainly teacher-centred (Musoyeva, 2015). At the same time, Dörnyei (2001) notes that the classroom environment strongly influences students’ willingness to take communicative risks, which is essential for PBL. Since project work requires learners to participate actively and deal with uncertainty, teacher support becomes especially important. Against this background,

the present study focuses on how Uzbek primary teachers understand and manage these challenges in practice.

METHODOLOGY

1 Design

A descriptive survey design was applied in carrying out this study. Surveys are appropriate when the goal is to describe characteristics of a specific group such as attitudes, beliefs, and self-reported classroom practices (Creswell, 2014). Since this research is exploratory and there is very limited prior experience on Uzbek primary EFL teachers’ views of PBL, a descriptive approach was preferred over a hypothesis-testing framework. The analysis combines quantitative data from closed-ended questions and qualitative insights taken from open-ended responses.

2 Participants and Setting

Data were collected in December 2025 from three public primary schools in Uzbekistan: School 283 in the city of Tashkent, School 38 in a Urgench district, Khorezm, and School 6 in rural Kosonsoy, Namangan. These schools were chosen to reflect different geographic settings and because they were willing to participate in the study. In total, 17 teachers took part. This relatively small number is explained by the structure of primary education in Uzbekistan, where schools usually employ only a few English teachers. As a result, the 17 participants represent all primary EFL teachers working in the three schools, rather than a subset of a larger population. All eligible teachers were invited and agreed to take part, meaning the study followed total enumeration method. This ensures complete coverage of the target group within these schools, although the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all primary EFL teachers in Uzbekistan.

Participants’ teaching experience ranged from 1 to 19 years. Six teachers worked at the urban school, seven at the district-centre school, and four at the rural branch. A detailed breakdown is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Participating Teachers (N = 17)

Variable	Category	n (%)
School	School 283 — city centre	6 (35.3%)

	School 38 — district centre	7 (41.2%)
Location	School 6 — district / rural	4 (23.5%)
	Urban (city centre)	6 (35.3%)
	Peri-urban (district centre)	7 (41.2%)
Teaching experience	Rural	4 (23.5%)
	1–3 years	5 (29.4%)
	4–10 years	7 (41.2%)
Grades taught	11–19 years	5 (29.4%)
	Grades 1–2 only	5 (29.4%)
	Grades 3–4 only	4 (23.5%)
	Grades 1–4 (all)	5 (29.4%)
	Various combinations	3 (17.6%)

3 Instrument

The questionnaire included 20 items and was prepared in Uzbek to make it fully understandable for all participants. It was distributed through Google Forms. The first five questions focused on demographic and background information. The remaining 15 items were organised into seven main areas: teachers' understanding and recognition of PBL (Items 6–8); frequency and forms of PBL use (Items 9–10); views on its suitability for young learners (Item 11); perceived challenges (Item 12); language skills linked to PBL (Items 13 and 16); beliefs about its contribution to communicative competence and comparison with traditional methods (Items 14–15); and institutional factors affecting PBL implementation, along with suggestions for improvement (Items 17–20).

Most questions were multiple-choice or multi-select, and some included optional open-ended responses for further explanation. The questionnaire was reviewed by two experienced EFL teacher educators, and based on their feedback, minor wording changes were made before final administration.

4 Analysis

Responses to closed-ended questions were analysed using simple frequency counts and percentages.

Because the sample size was small, results are also reported in raw numbers (e.g., “12 out of 17”) to make interpretation clearer, as even a single response can significantly affect percentage values. Open-ended responses were analyzed inductively by identifying and grouping recurring themes. The study does not aim for statistical generalization; instead, it seeks to provide a detailed and accurate account of the beliefs and practices of EFL teachers in these three schools, and to draw broader implications for educational policy and classroom practice.

RESULTS

1 How Teachers Understand PBL

When asked to define PBL (Item 6), 12 out of 17 teachers provided an accurate description, explaining it as an approach where students learn by working on real problems and developing knowledge and skills through projects. This understanding is in line with definitions proposed by scholars such as Thomas (2000) and Stoller (2006). Three teachers, however, associated PBL with a series of structured textbook exercises, showing a misunderstanding between routine classroom tasks and true project-based inquiry. The remaining two teachers reported that they were unsure about the meaning of PBL. These results are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2
Teachers' Definitions of PBL (N = 17)

Definition given	n	%
Accurate: students tackle real problems to build knowledge	12	70.6%
Inaccurate: completing textbook exercises in sequence	3	17.6%
Uncertain: "I don't know"	2	11.8%

When asked to identify features of PBL (Item 7, multi-select), most teachers selected group work (13 out of 17) and the teacher's role as a facilitator rather than a direct instructor (13 out of 17). Creating a final product such as a poster, video, or presentation was chosen by 12 teachers, while 11 associated PBL with solving real-life problems. However, only 5 teachers recognised its interdisciplinary nature, suggesting that this aspect is less well understood in this context.

For Item 8, which asked teachers to choose suitable project examples, the most frequently selected options were an "Animals Around Us" presentation (16 out of 17), a "My Family Album" project (13 out of 17), and a

"Healthy Food Menu" task (12 out of 17).

2 Current Practice: How Often and in What Form

Item 9 explored how often teachers use PBL. As shown in Table 3, responses were mixed. Eight teachers said they use PBL occasionally, three reported using it regularly, four said they use it rarely, and two stated that they do not use it at all. Overall, 15 out of 17 teachers (88%) indicated that they use PBL in some form, at least from time to time. This suggests a relatively high level of reported use, especially in a context where traditional, teacher-centred instruction is still commonly practiced.

Table 3
How Frequently Teachers Use PBL in EFL Lessons (N = 17)

Frequency	n	%	Cum.
Always	3	17.6%	17.6%
Sometimes	8	47.1%	64.7%
Rarely	4	23.5%	88.2%
Never	2	11.8%	100%

Responses to Item 10 provide insight into how PBL is actually implemented in these classrooms. Teachers reported activities such as designing topic posters (e.g., "My School," "Professions"), creating a class magazine, preparing travel guides, and making family album presentations. One teacher also described a group project on healthy eating that concluded with a classroom "market," where students presented their menus.

These examples differ in how closely they match

Thomas's (2000) full definition of PBL. Some tasks involve elements of inquiry and student choice, while others are more structured and resemble craft-based classroom activities. Overall, however, the responses show that teachers have practical experience with project-type work in their English lessons.

3 Suitability for Young Learners

No teacher considered PBL unsuitable for primary-aged learners, which is a noteworthy result, especially given that young learners' developmental needs are often

used to justify more structured, teacher-led instruction. Two teachers (2 out of 17) stated that PBL is fully suitable, seven viewed it as mostly suitable, and eight selected “partially suitable.” The fact that “partially suitable” was the most common response suggests that teachers see PBL as useful but requiring careful adaptation for children who are still developing basic literacy, attention span, and classroom learning habits. Rather than rejecting PBL, their responses indicate a cautious but generally positive attitude toward its use in primary education.

4 What Makes PBL Difficult

Item 12 explored the main challenges teachers face when implementing PBL (multi-select), as shown in Table 4. The most frequently reported difficulty was lack of time, selected by 13 out of 17 teachers. Eleven teachers also highlighted the developmental features of young learners, such as short attention spans, limited language proficiency, and difficulties with independent work. In addition, six teachers mentioned problems in organising effective group work, while five pointed to insufficient materials and classroom resources as a barrier.

Table 4

Main Challenges in Using PBL with Young Learners (N = 17, multiple responses permitted)

Challenge	n	%
Time constraints	13	76.5%
Age and developmental characteristics of young learners	11	64.7%
Difficulty organising group work	6	35.3%
Insufficient materials and resources	5	29.4%

5 What Teachers Believe PBL Does for Communicative Competence

Eight out of 17 teachers stated that PBL offers “very great help” in developing students’ communicative competence in English, while another seven described it as helpful. Only two teachers expressed a more

cautious view, and none of the participants believed that PBL does not contribute to communicative development (see Table 5). This relatively strong agreement is significant, as it suggests that despite practical challenges in implementation, teachers generally recognise the value of PBL for improving students’ language skills.

Table 5

Perceived Contribution of PBL to Communicative Competence (N = 17)

Rating	n	%
Very great help	8	47.1%
Helpful	7	41.2%
Partially helpful	2	11.8%
Not helpful	0	0.0%

Teachers identified three main advantages of PBL compared to traditional methods (Item 15). Most teachers (15 out of 17) said that PBL allows students to

use English in more realistic and meaningful situations. Twelve teachers mentioned higher motivation and engagement, while eleven highlighted the development

of independent learning skills. In terms of language skills, speaking was most frequently reported as benefiting from PBL (15 out of 17), followed by listening (11 out of 17). Seven teachers believed that all four language skills improve equally through project work.

Regarding overall language development (Item 17), seven teachers reported significant improvement in students' proficiency, another seven observed steady but moderate progress, two described improvement as gradual, and one noted little noticeable change. Although these are based on teacher perceptions rather than test data, the results align with broader research findings on the positive impact of PBL in EFL contexts (Astawa et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2025).

6 Resources, Conditions, and What Teachers Think Would Help

Five out of 17 teachers reported that their schools have all the necessary conditions to implement PBL effectively. Nine said that conditions are only partially available, while three teachers—all from School 283 in the urban area—stated that full provision is in place. The most frequently mentioned missing resource was technological equipment (computers, projectors, internet access), noted by 12 teachers. Ten teachers pointed to limited curriculum time, and eight highlighted a lack of training in PBL methodology.

When asked what would most support wider use of PBL (Item 20), the majority of teachers emphasized the need for regular, practice-oriented training in PBL design and implementation (15 out of 17). This was followed by improved classroom technology (14 out of 17), clearer inclusion of PBL in national curriculum standards (13 out of 17), and better basic teaching conditions such as time, space, and materials (12 out of 17). In addition, 10 teachers mentioned the importance of opportunities for sharing experience and good practice across schools.

DISCUSSION

1 Knowing About PBL Is Not the Same as Knowing How to Do It

The result that 70.6% of teachers were able to define PBL accurately is relatively positive, especially in a context where access to international pedagogical literature may be limited. At the same time, the remaining 30%—five teachers who either misunderstood the concept or were unsure about it—indicate an important gap in knowledge.

As Thomas (2000) points out, the wide range of activities labelled as PBL can make the concept unclear, and this ambiguity is reflected in the findings. Teachers who equate PBL with a series of structured or sequential tasks are less likely to design projects that include key elements such as a driving question and student autonomy. As a result, they may not fully achieve the communicative benefits that PBL is intended to provide. This supports Stoller's (2006) argument that teachers need more than practical activities; they also require a clear theoretical understanding and structured guidance for designing effective project work.

2 Occasional Use and What Lies Behind It

The relatively high proportion of teachers reporting some use of PBL—88% using it at least occasionally—contrasts with the limited number who use it regularly. This pattern reflects what Thomas (2000) describes as an implementation gap, where teachers support an approach in principle but struggle to apply it consistently due to practical constraints.

In the Uzbek primary school context, factors such as 45-minute lessons, a dense curriculum, and the lack of dedicated time for project work make sustained implementation difficult. As a result, what is described as PBL may often take the form of shorter, more structured activities, such as a single lesson-based poster task, rather than extended inquiry-based projects. These adaptations do not necessarily reflect poor teaching practice; rather, they represent realistic adjustments to existing classroom conditions.

3 Time, Age, and Resources: Three Overlapping Problems

The three main barriers identified—time pressure, young learners' developmental characteristics, and lack of resources—do not operate independently; rather, they reinforce each other. While limited lesson time might be partially managed by dividing projects into shorter stages, this requires careful planning, scaffolding, and classroom routines, which themselves demand additional preparation time that teachers often do not have. Similarly, shortages of materials restrict the types of student products that can be created, which in turn reduces the communicative purpose and richness of project work.

In the Uzbek context, Sodiqova (2021) notes that young learners learn best through vivid, hands-on, and

multimodal activities that maintain their engagement. However, in classrooms with limited access to projectors, stationery, or internet resources, providing such experiences becomes more difficult. Although none of these challenges is impossible to overcome, treating them separately without addressing the broader system of constraints is unlikely to lead to meaningful improvement in PBL implementation.

4 Why Teachers Believe in PBL for Communication Development

Teachers strongly believe that the communicative value of PBL aligns with Canale's (1983) view that the actual use of language instead of studying rules in isolation can contribute to the development of communicative competence. When 15 out of 17 teachers highlight authentic language use as the main advantage of PBL, they are essentially confirming this principle. Their responses also show why speaking is seen as the most improved skill (15 out of 17): project work requires students to present, discuss, and negotiate, which naturally creates more speaking practice than traditional drills.

Dornyei (2001) helps explain another key finding. Twelve teachers reported higher student motivation in PBL lessons. If learners are more engaged, they are more willing to participate, take risks, and use English more actively. In this way, increased motivation may indirectly support communicative development, as more engaged students tend to produce more language and learn more effectively.

5 What the Recommendations Tell Us

As for teachers' recommendations, the most frequently mentioned needs were training (15 out of 17 teachers) and better access to technology (14 out of 17), followed by curriculum-level support (13 out of 17). Teacher training is the most immediately achievable area for improvement, as it does not require major systemic reform. The strong demand for practical, methodology-based training suggests that teachers are willing to develop their understanding and use of PBL if they are given clear, hands-on guidance. In contrast, curriculum integration represents a more structural change. If PBL is formally included in national standards and allocated time within the syllabus, teachers would not need to fit it into an already crowded timetable, making implementation more realistic and sustainable.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore what primary EFL teachers in Uzbekistan know about PBL, how they use it, what challenges they face, and how they perceive its impact on students' communicative development. The 17 participants, representing all primary English teachers across three schools, showed generally positive attitudes toward PBL and reported using it in practice, but their implementation is limited by time constraints, lack of resources, and insufficient training.

Key findings highlight that while most teachers have a reasonably accurate understanding of PBL, a notable minority do not, which can lead to simplified or incomplete implementation. Almost all teachers believe that PBL supports communicative competence, particularly speaking skills, which is consistent with findings in the wider literature. However, the barriers they reported—limited time, curriculum pressure, and lack of resources—are structural issues that cannot be solved at the individual teacher level.

The study also has limitations. The sample reflects only these three schools rather than all primary EFL teachers in Uzbekistan. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data means that actual classroom practice may differ from what teachers described. Future research should include classroom observations and student perspectives to provide a more complete picture of PBL implementation.

Despite these limitations, the study clearly identifies priority areas for improvement: practical and theory-based PBL training, better access to classroom technology, and stronger integration of PBL into official curriculum and timetables. These steps are realistic and align with Uzbekistan's broader shift toward communicative, learner-centred language education.

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