

EFL Learners' Views about Project Work Implementation

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Abstract: This study was carried out to get an in-depth understanding of EFL learners' perceptions towards project work in their language studies. The participants were 30 volunteer EFL students in the English Preparatory Program of a state university. To collect the data, a 5 Point Likert type questionnaire involving 31 questions and an interview form were used. The data, gathered through Likert scale type questionnaire, was analyzed using SPSS and the frequencies and the mean scores for each item were calculated. The data gathered by interview forms was analyzed through qualitative research method. The results indicated that students mostly experienced pleasure and excitement while conducting projects as a group and believed that they became more productive, independent, and motivated. However, it was seen that they still found it time-consuming and stressful as well as a demanding work. It was concluded that the students liked and approved of learning English through project based learning but had differing opinions about its benefits. Some recommendations were yielded based on the analysis and students' responses.

Keywords: Project-based learning, English as a foreign language, qualitative study

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Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce Öğrenen Öğrencilerin Proje Çalışması Uygulamasına İlişkin Görüşleri

Özet: Bu çalışma, EFL öğrencilerinin dil çalışmalarında proje çalışmalarına yönelik algılarını derinlemesine analiz etmek için gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma, bir devlet üniversitesinin İngilizce Hazırlık Programında öğrenim gören 30 öğrenci ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Verilerin toplanması için 31 sorudan oluşan Likert tipi ölçek ve görüşme formu kullanılmıştır. Likert ölçeği ile toplanan veriler SPSS kullanılarak analiz edilmiş ve her bir maddenin frekansları ve ortalama puanları hesaplanmıştır. Görüşme formları ile toplanan veriler nitel araştırma yöntemi ile analiz edilmiştir. Elde edilen sonuçlar, öğrencilerin proje yürütürken grup halinde çalışmanın keyif ve heyecan verici olduğunu ve sonuç olarak daha üretken, bağımsız ve motive olduklarını göstermiştir. Ancak öğrenciler, yine de grup halinde proje çalışması yapmayı zaman alıcı ve stresli bulduklarını ifade etmişlerdir. Öğrencilerin proje tabanlı öğrenme yoluyla İngilizce öğrenmekten hoşlandıkları ve onayladıkları ancak faydaları hakkında farklı görüşlere sahip oldukları sonucuna varılmıştır. İstatistiksel analizlerin ve öğrencilerin cevaplarına dayanarak bazı önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Proje Tabanlı Öğrenme, Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce, Nitel Çalışma

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INTRODUCTION

Project-based learning is based on constructivism which holds that learners are not taught but they must construct the knowledge of the world through experiencing (Benson, 2005). Constructivism is a problem-oriented learning approach that is expected to create its own reality based on the learner's understanding of personalized learning materials. It focuses on students' active participation in authentic, reflective and social dialogue based learning. So, the Project Method suggests that students create and use knowledge in order to handle problems arising while they are dealing with purposeful and real-world based activities (Dionne & Horth, 1994).

One of the reasons, Project-based learning was introduced into foreign language education was the perceived inadequacies in Krashen's (1981) input hypothesis. According to Krashen, comprehensible input is the most important variable in second language acquisition and added that foreign language learners can only be successful at the result of extensive exposure to the target language similar to the first language acquisition. Later in 1980s, Swain's (1985) evaluation of Canadian French immersion students' learning brought a new perspective into the field of foreign language teaching and showed that comprehensible input alone is not sufficient. Later, she claimed that while interacting with native speakers foreign language learners were expected to produce comprehensible and understandable output. Swain added that students should be offered various communication opportunities, in which they could interact with native speakers in the French cultural environment, to produce comprehensible output. This change in perspective was observed in the popularity of the project-based communicative language teaching methodology of Brumfit (1984). For this reason, project-based learning in EFL setting was implemented in authentic contexts with opportunities of interaction and communication of individuals. (Candlin, Carter, Legutke, Semuda, & Hanson, 1988; Fried-Booth, 1986; Gardner, 1995; Hilton-Jones, 1988; Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Stoller, 1997). The interest in project-based learning and its use in foreign language instruction have been growing worldwide since 1980s (Alan & Stroller, 2005; Fried-Booth, 1982, 1986; Haines, 1989; Legutke, 1984, 1985; Papandreou, 1994; Sheppard & Stoller, 1995; Stroller, 1997; Tessema, 2005; Tomei at al., 1999) and Fried-Booth (1986) was the first who used it in EFL context suggested that language tasks arise naturally from the projects and added that “developing cumulatively in response to a basic objective, namely, the project” (1986, p: 8).

Solomon (2003) defined project based learning as a process of learning autonomously in which learners are responsible for the progress they made in the process of learning. According to Solomon (2003,p:10), in project-based learning individuals were expected to solve “authentic, curriculum-based, and often interdisciplinary” problems through working collaboratively. Project based learning was seen as a comprehensive learning and teaching approach and its main concern was to attract students' attention to the study of complex problems and carefully designed products and tasks.

(Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Moursund, 1999; Thomas et al., 2002). Stroller (1997) suggested the main features of the project work. According to him, project work firstly focuses on learning content through language learning. Secondly, the teacher is concerned with providing support and guidance throughout the process. Thirdly, it encourages the learners to work on their own, in small groups or as a class to complete a project cooperatively. Then, reflecting real-life tasks, it leads to the real integration of skills and knowledge from a variety of sources. Next, it results in an end product that can be shared with others. Finally, it is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering and compelling; Students can develop their language skills, content learning and cognitive abilities, as well as develop confidence, self-esteem and autonomy.

In a number of studies (Özdemir, 2006; Korkmaz, 2002; Özdenir and Özçoban, 2004; Gültekin, 2005), the effects of project based learning on language teaching have been investigated and evidence showed that project based learning affected learners' academic success positively. Ribe and Vidal (1993) suggested that project based learning may be used as a systematic instruction method to improve students' language skills, cognitive features and global personality skills while learning a foreign language. Hilton-Jones (1988) emphasized another aspect of project based learning as a way of self-study allowing learners to study at their own pace and their own level. Project based learning also helps learners to develop problem-solving and higher order critical thinking skills (Allen, 2004) which are the qualifications of 21st century people.

In effective project based learning, teachers are expected to have different roles (Levy, 1997). Teachers are not dominant, but they are just guides, advisors, coordinators (Papandreou, 1994), and facilitators. In implementing the project method, the focal point of the learning process moves from the teacher to the learners, from working alone to working in groups. Learners are active participants of the learning-teaching process and teachers are just facilitator of the process.

Although there is evidence suggesting that project-based learning appears to be effective model for producing gains in academic achievement (Meyer, 1997; Ozdemir, 2006) and attitudes (Korkmaz, 2002; Meyer, 1997) it is hard to claim that project-based learning is a proven alternative to other forms of learning since it still needs to be examined. So, this study aimed to contribute to the literature with a detailed analysis of Turkish EFL learners' views about their experience of project work implementation. For this reason, the study focused on the following research question:

Research Question

What are EFL learners views about the project work implementation?

METHOD

Setting

The project work implementation was conducted in the School of Foreign Languages in a state university in Turkey in the second term of 2015-2016 academic year. At the beginning of the school year, the students were all at the level of A1 according to the Common European Framework where as they were at level B1 when they studied on the projects. When the students finish the first year of their first year in the preparatory school, they are expected to complete level B1 successfully. They study English as a foreign language 24 hours in a week all through the year.

They were required to do their project work in six weeks by choosing a topic from a list involving 50 topics defined by the teacher (and also the researcher in this study). It was compulsory to do the project in a group and outside the class period. Two afternoons were determined together by the students and the teacher to come to school and work on the projects. The students were not allowed to study on their own and strongly advised to collaborate especially while producing the final products. At first, they themselves were asked to decide about the members of the groups but later it was seen that some of the students could not manage to be objective about choosing their friends and asked help from the teacher. After grouping the students and making the lists of the topics chosen by the groups, a two-page criteria list of evaluation were provided for each of the students. The students were also informed that their pre-presentation studies would also be evaluated with their final product.

Participants

The participants in this research comprised of 10 females and 16 males, totally 26 students of preparatory classes studying English for one year in the School of Foreign Languages. They are all freshmen aged from 18 to 22. Of the 26 students, 10 were from the department of Philosophy, 8 of them were from department of International Relations, 6 of them were from Electronic Engineering and 2 of them were from the department of Economic and Administrative Sciences. All of them were compulsory students at the school.

Instruments

The participants were asked to anonymously fill out a questionnaire involving two parts which respectively investigated their background information and a scale concerning 30 5 Likert Type questions and an interview form interrogating what they think about their project work experience. The questionnaire which aimed to investigate the participants' views about the project work implementation was originally developed by Keles, S. A. (2007) and adapted to the purpose of the present study by the writers. In the original form, the questionnaire evaluated students' views on project work implementation in eleven factors whereas in the present study the evaluation was performed in nine factors as "students' views on using research sources (4 items), students' views on

using time (2 items), students' views on collaborative working (5 items), students' views on project work's benefits to their grammar knowledge (2 items), students' views on improving their language skills (6items), students' views about project work's influence on autonomy (2 items), students' views about project work's influence on cognitive skills (2 items), students' views on the motivational benefits of project work (7 items), Students' views on affective influence (1 item).

Data Analysis

The data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed through descriptive statistics (percentage, mean, median, and standard deviation), using SPSS to find out the students' perceptions and attitudes towards the project work implementation. In addition, the data gathered through the semi structured interview forms were analyzed by means of content analysis technique to get an in depth understanding of students' views of project work implementation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of quantitative data

To assess the students' views about the project work implementation in learning English as a foreign language, at first, descriptive statistics were conducted and group means and standard deviations were presented in Table 1 in descending order. Considering the mean values shown in the table, it can be concluded that the participants have different opinions about the benefits of using projects in foreign language learning. As can be seen in the table, their opinion related to the "benefits to grammar knowledge" was the highest and followed by "improving language skills", "influence on cognitive skills", "using time", "the motivational benefits of project work", "using research sources", "its influence in developing autonomy", "the benefits of collaborative working" and, "affective influence".

Table 1: Means for the eight aspects of students' views about project work implementation

GROUPS	N	MEAN	SD
Students' views on project work's benefits to grammar knowledge	26	4.17	0.84
Students' views on improving their language skills	26	3.72	1.28
Students' views about project work's influence on cognitive skills	26	3.71	1.13
Students' views on using time	26	3.67	0.64
Students' views on the motivational benefits of project work	26	3.60	1.19
Students' views on using research sources	26	3.53	0.60
Students' views about project work's influence on autonomy	26	3.50	1.61
Students' views on collaborative working	26	3.46	1.08
Students' views on affective influence	26	3.30	1.28

This result shows that the participants, in general, think that conducting project work mainly helps them improve their grammar and language skills while they do not mainly concern about its affective dimension. This finding is not consistent with the results of some previous studies which

claimed that project-based learning increases the motivation of the students and improvement in attendance, higher class participation, and greater willingness to do homework were among the observations reported by teachers (Bottoms & Webb, 1998; Moursund, et al., 1997).

Table 2: Students' views on project work's benefits to grammar knowledge

	D/SD(%)	NS(%)	A/SA (%)	MEAN
Using acquired grammar rules	0	11.5	88.5	3.26
Consolidating acquired grammar rules	7.70	19.2	73.1	3.65

In the "benefits of grammar" category, 88,5% of the students believed that preparing project work help them practicing the grammar rules they have learned whereas 73 % of them perceived that project work as a way of reinforcing those rules.

Table 3: Students' views on improving their language skills

	D/SD(%)	NS(%)	A/SA (%)	MEAN
Helping to improve oral presentation skill	23.1	7.7	69.2	3.46
Helping to improve reading skill	15.4	3.8	80.8	3.65
Helping to improve vocabulary skill	19.2	19.2	61.5	3.42
Helping to improve writing skill	23.1	19.2	57.7	3.34
Helping to improve speaking skill	19.2	11.5	69.2	3.50
Helping to improve listening skill	11.5	15.4	73.1	3.61

When asked about their views on the effects of project work on improving language skills, 80.8% of the participants most strongly agreed that project work improves their reading skills. In addition a huge amount of the participants seem to have the opinion that project work helps them improve their listening (73.1%) and speaking (69.2%) and oral presentation (69.2%) skills.

Table 4: Students' views about project work's influence on cognitive skills

	D/SD(%)	NS(%)	A/SA (%)	MEAN
Help to use learners' creativity	19.2	19.2	61.6	3.42
Transferring what is learnt in the class outside the class	11.6	26.9	61.5	3.50

The findings in the category of views about the project work's influence on cognitive skills revealed that more than half of the students believe that project work is a way to use English outside the classroom and it stimulates the creativity of the learners in the process of learning English.

Table 5: Students' views on using time

	D/SD(%)	NS(%)	A/SA (%)	MEAN
Enough time is given	11.5	23.1	65.4	3.53
Project work takes a long time	11.5	30.8	57.7	3.46

Students mostly think that they were given enough time to prepare their project and they also mostly agree that project work requires a long time.

Table 6: Students' views on the motivational benefits of project work

	D/SD()	NS(%)	A/SA(%)	MEAN
Feeling more interested in learning English	19.2	11.5	69.2	3.50
Feeling sense of satisfaction about language learning	15.4	19.2	65.4	3.51
Feeling sense of achievement about language learning	23.1	34.6	42.3	3.19
Enhancing self-confidence about language learning	26.9	19.2	53.8	3.26
Helping to be more active in the classroom	19.2	23.1	57.7	3.30
Enjoyable class atmosphere	26.9	11.5	61.5	3.34

Regarding the opinions of the “motivational benefits of project work” category almost 70% of the learners reported that this implementation increased their interest in the course while a considerable amount of them felt satisfaction (65.4%) and enjoyed the atmosphere in the class (61.5%) more. Moreover, around half of the students reported the feeling of high self-confidence and achievement during carrying out the projects.

Table 7: Students' views on using research sources

	D/SD(%)	NS(%)	A/SA(%)	MEAN
Using library, books, magazines, encyclopedias, TV programs or films.	11.5	26.9	61.5	3.53
Using the internet	3.80	7.70	88.5	3.84
Getting help from native speakers	53.8	11.5	34.6	2.80
Difficulties of finding appropriate materials	19.2	42.3	38.5	3.19

Among the resources, students overwhelmingly (88%) stated that their first choice for the resource of the research was internet which was not surprising for the researcher. However, the number of the students claiming that they used books, magazines, TV programs or films cannot be underestimated. Despite the huge sources offered by the internet and rich university environment and help provided by the instructors, 38.5% of the participants complained about the scarcity of resources and almost half of them (42.5%) stated that indicated that they were not sure about the sufficiency of resources.

Table 8: Students' views about project work's influence on autonomy

	D/SD(%)	NS(%)	A/SA (%)	MEAN
Enhancing sense of responsibility	15.4	38.5	46.1	3.30
Helping to improve decision making ability	23.1	15.4	61.5	3.38

In terms of developing learners' autonomy in language classes, project work implementation does not seem to contribute a lot in the present study. Almost one third of the participants (38.5%) reported that they were not sure if working on a project enhanced their sense of responsibility whereas less than half of the participants agreed that it enhanced the sense of responsibility. However, more than half of the students (61.5%) believe that they could develop their decision making ability through project work.

Table 9: Students' views on collaborative working

	D/SD(%)	NS(%)	A/SA (%)	MEAN
Easy to work collaboratively	34.6	11.5	53.9	3.19
Freedom to ask their peers what they do not understand	11.5	23.1	65.4	3.53
Exchanging ideas with peers during the project work process	23.1	26.9	50.0	3.26
Making close friends	38.5	3.8	57.7	3.19
Usefulness of collaborative working	34.6	15.4	50.0	3.35

In this category, the participants mostly (65.4%) agreed on the freedom to ask their peers what they do not understand. Half of the students agreed about the benefits and opportunities of the collaborative working such as paying attention to each other's opinions, exchanging information and negotiating meaning and getting closer with their classmates. However, the other half of the participants seemed not to be aware of the contribution of collaborative working for the completion of a successful project output.

Table 10: Students' views on affective influence

	D/SD(%)	NS(%)	A/SA (%)	MEAN
Feeling nervous while presenting project work	30.8	23.1	46.2	3.15

Almost half of the students (46.2%) agreed that they felt nervous during project work while one third of them did not agree with them. According to the information presented by the students in the interview forms students were usually experienced problems with the other members of the groups. Some extracts about those problems were chosen from students' expressions and presented in the following part.

Analysis of qualitative data

When students asked to write their feelings about working in a group and conducting a project, it was seen that students explained their feelings free heartedly. The students' responses about the project work implementation were gathered under two themes as positive and negative ones. Their views were presented in the following paragraphs with their own words after correcting just mechanical errors.

Positive Views:

Some students stated they enjoyed working on a project as a group and they also found it very useful to improve their vocabulary practice grammar rules they learned.

"I think it was quite useful for everybody. We, sometimes, talked about this activity with friends and almost everybody in our group agreed because we had a good chance of consolidating the grammar we learned and memorizing new words".

One student highlighted the compatibility of the group members working together. It seems that they observed the other groups and concluded that the groups involving the members working in a harmony could benefit and enjoy the process most.

"I certainly enjoyed studying in a group. To be honest, our group was the best group. All of us studied meticulously. Everybody was on time for our meetings and listened to each other and I believe we did a great job and enjoyed it a lot. But some of our friends had some difficulties in studying together because of irresponsible group members".

In the statements of some students it was implied that students find it boring and monotonous to sit in the classroom and follow the classroom routine and project work was a big change for them.

"To tell the truth, I wish we used projects more often during the year. It brought a big change to our boring classes. This is not only my idea".

"I must confess that producing something and presenting it to other people's taste made me feel that I was doing something serious not just studying a lesson".

Another conclusion that can be drawn from students' statements is although students hold great enthusiasm toward speaking and participating in the activities in the classroom, their fear of failure and error constrain them from doing so. However, learners working on a project collaboratively are expected to gain in self-reliance and personal accountability (Moursund, 1999). It is exemplified by responses given below:

"In the class I was usually nervous and afraid of making errors while speaking or answering the questions. I used to think that the other students were better than me. However, during our group work, I found out that all the other students were like me, I mean, they were not any better. Even the best student who had the highest grades during the first semester did not know so many things. We found out the answers to some of our questions together. It made me feel more relaxed in the classroom and I am more confident now".

While carrying out the tasks, students expanded their language exposure through a variety of sources, such as magazines, books, the Web, the teacher, group and classroom discussion which helped them facilitate their language acquisition. It has been observed that the students enjoyed picking up new components of language and practicing skills while communicating with their group members. In addition, it has been reported that these projects provide students with the opportunity to learn and practice language skills and other skills. As member of a group put it:

"I think it helped me to improve all our language skills such as reading, writing and speaking. From the first day of the study we started reading some materials related to our topic and then

discussed it in our groups and finally we wrote our final reports and presented them to the other groups. I believe that we gained new things at every stage”.

"The idea of producing something together with our friends was fantastic. We started enthusiastically but after a while this enthusiasm faded because of some group members. I think if the teacher had allowed us to choose all the group members, it would have been perfect. Some of us had to study harder to compensate the laziness of some students. But, after all, we enjoyed a lot".

Consistent with the previous literature, students report that they find projects fun and challenging because they play an active role in applying the project and in the entire planning process (Katz, 1994). One student stated that:

"This kind of study was very enjoyable. Our group members were very helpful and we helped each other a lot willingly. We could ask everything and got answers. Some of us did not know what to do and needed extra guidance. All in all, it was a useful activity and we were all glad".

Negative Views:

In addition to aforementioned positive perceptions revealed by the students, some students declared their dissatisfaction towards project work in their statements. One student clearly stated that:

“We had many quarrels and conflicts. At first, everybody thought and claimed that their idea was the best and nobody wanted to accept the ideas of others. So we wasted lots of time”.

It was also found that although some students were quite comfortable with working in the groups, few students reported discomfort with the idea of working as a team. Another student expressed that:

“I did not like working in a team at all. Some of our friends, for example, were always late and sometimes they did not show up at all. Some of them were usually unprepared and we had to help them and lost too much time.”

However, when the teacher asked the groups whether they had problems within the groups, they never reported any problems or complaints but they wrote the problems in the interview forms.

An extract showed that some students perceived it as a stressful activity and gained nothing in this process in terms of learning:

“I must confess that it was very stressful from the beginning to the end. We had to work together with our friends in limited time and I felt stressed in the whole process. Actually, it was really difficult and not useful at all”. This may stem from the problems they experienced during the process. Since students seriously complained about the group work which is a part of project based learning

may have been the result of researcher's failure as the teacher who was expected to play the role of the collaborator, the facilitator and the learner as suggested by Moursund (1999).

One of the most frequently stated problems was about group work since they were not familiar with working in a group. Problems stemming from the difficulties of group work were also mentioned in some other studies (Fragoulis, 2009). When asked if they enjoyed working in a team for the project, one student said:

"I certainly prefer studying alone. In this project if I could study alone, it would certainly be easier for me and I would do a better job".

Two striking statements from different students were clearly reflecting the learners' passion for traditional teacher centered classroom:

"I don't think that we can learn something new on our own by conducting projects. I admit that we are consolidating what we learned in the classroom. As far as I am concerned, I like being taught by teachers using textbooks and grammar books. At this stage we just need the teacher to be with us all the time".

These complaints indicated students' dissatisfaction with the teacher's role in the project work as a facilitator or guide. They seem to expect the teacher to manage all the process and just to be told what to do next. It can be seen in another student's statement clearly:

"I can say that this was a waste of time. We had two spend weeks to learn something new or practice the things we have already learned. Instead, we could have learnt them from the teacher only in a few lessons. When the teacher explained the grammar rules or tell the meaning of new words, we learn faster and better. After the lesson, we do the exercises at home to reinforce the new knowledge".

CONCLUSION

The study investigates students' opinions and attitudes toward project work implementation in learning English to get an in depth understanding of the advantages and deficiencies of the project work implementation as well as the difficulties and benefits of practicing it. With all the rich data collected some noteworthy conclusions were drawn. In the survey phase, the data from the surveys reveal that the Turkish EFL learners' reported views about project work implementation shared the same tendency in most of the questionnaire's items as summarized in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, it has been concluded that majority of EFL learners believe that project work implementation mostly helps them improve their grammar and language skills. They also believed that project work implementation gave them opportunities to use their creativity and increase motivation. However, fewer learners believe that project work implementation helps them improve their autonomy

and benefiting the power of collaboration in foreign language studies. The most obvious effect was reported to be on grammar and language skills.

Secondly, survey supported the view that students had positive perceptions towards the project work experience in general but they also reported some problems. It was concluded that most of the students liked and approved of learning English through project based learning but had differing opinions and mixed feelings about its benefits. It could be inferred that some students believed that they had become more productive, independent, and motivated by conducting projects in their EFL studies. Furthermore, it was stated by many students that they were pleased to take part in a study like this because they thought that conducting project work gave them some opportunities to improve searching, communicating and presentation skills as well as language skills.

However, fewer students revealed to possess negative perceptions and attitudes towards project work as they mostly mentioned about the problems. Some of them did not see it as a real work of learning since the teacher was not involved in the whole process and they had to search for information on their own and had to teach themselves. It was also reported to be a time-consuming, stressful and demanding work. Another common problem which was uttered by the students was the difficulty of working as a team. Some students were not interested in cooperative studying or did not have much enthusiasm or motivation towards working in a team and they were observed to cause problems in the groups. Unfortunately, some of them were so heavily concentrated on the problems they encountered in the groups that they missed the opportunities they could have caught to construct new knowledge and practice language skills as some of the participants did.

Finally, the conclusions drawn from the study would certainly offer some suggestions. Using project work might facilitate learning process and positively influence teachers' teaching approaches and classroom practices since it was suggested by some learners to break the monotony of traditional classroom setting. Students seeing their responsibility in working collaboratively were likely to do well and enjoy project work. Hence, students should be guided to work collaboratively and in group work before starting the process of project work.

It should also be noted that this qualitative study phase, like other qualitative studies, do not try to find generalization about views of the whole population of the EFL learners in Turkey about project work implementation in language learning. The data collected through the questionnaire along with the emerging themes in the survey were analyzed in order to explain how EFL learners, participating in this study only, feel about project work implementation. The insights gained from this study may not be applicable to other EFL learners' situations, yet they are able to increase EFL teachers' understanding about project work implementation so that they can get ideas to apply in their specific situation. Thus, it might be advisable to design some other projects for students at various age and proficiency groups using similar ways.

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