

DEVELOPING INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (PBLT) IN EFL CLASSES

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Abstract: *This article examines the role of Project-Based Language Teaching (PBLT) in developing interpersonal competence among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It argues that interpersonal skills—such as collaboration, negotiation, empathy, and communication management—are essential outcomes of communicative language teaching and can be effectively fostered through structured project work. Drawing on sociocultural theory and task-based pedagogy, the article explores how PBLT creates authentic interactional contexts where learners co-construct knowledge, resolve conflicts, and engage in meaningful communication. The discussion highlights the role of teacher scaffolding, peer interaction, and reflective practice in developing interpersonal competence. The article concludes that PBLT offers a powerful pedagogical framework for integrating language development with social and interpersonal skill formation in EFL classrooms.*

Keywords: *Project-Based Language Teaching, interpersonal competence, EFL, collaboration, communication skills, scaffolding, sociocultural theory, learner interaction.*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the focus of instruction has shifted from isolated linguistic knowledge to broader communicative and interpersonal competence. Modern learners are expected not only to master grammar and vocabulary but also to interact effectively, collaborate with others, and participate in meaningful social communication. Interpersonal competence—defined as the ability to communicate, cooperate, negotiate meaning, and maintain social relationships—is therefore an essential component of language learning.

However, many EFL classrooms still emphasize individual performance, teacher-centered instruction, and form-focused learning. As a result, learners often lack opportunities to develop real-world interactional skills such as teamwork, conflict resolution, and collaborative decision-making. This gap highlights the need for instructional approaches that integrate language learning with social interaction.

Project-Based Language Teaching (PBLT) offers a strong pedagogical solution to this challenge. By engaging learners in collaborative, goal-oriented tasks, PBLT naturally creates environments where interpersonal skills are developed alongside linguistic competence. Students must communicate, plan, negotiate, and cooperate to complete shared projects, making interpersonal interaction an integral part of learning.

2. Main Body

2.1. Interpersonal Competence as a Core Outcome of EFL Learning

Interpersonal competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) refers to the ability of learners to engage in meaningful social interaction through the target language. It extends beyond grammatical accuracy or vocabulary knowledge and includes a wide range of communicative and relational abilities such as collaboration, negotiation, empathy, turn-taking, conflict resolution, and active listening.

In contemporary communicative language teaching, interpersonal competence is increasingly recognized as a core learning outcome rather than a secondary by-product of language instruction. This shift reflects a broader understanding of language as a social practice rather than a purely cognitive system. Learners are expected to use English not only to construct sentences but also to build relationships, coordinate actions, and co-construct meaning in interaction with others.

However, in many EFL contexts, including higher education environments, instruction remains heavily focused on individual performance and form-focused assessment. Students often work independently on grammar exercises, translation tasks, or controlled speaking activities that do not require genuine interaction. As a result, learners may develop acceptable linguistic accuracy but lack the interpersonal flexibility required for real-life communication.

This gap becomes particularly evident in situations requiring spontaneous dialogue, group collaboration, or problem-solving discussions. Learners may struggle to express disagreement politely, negotiate meaning effectively, or maintain group cohesion during collaborative tasks. These difficulties indicate that interpersonal competence must be explicitly developed through pedagogical design rather than assumed as a natural outcome of language exposure.

2.2. Sociocultural Foundations of Interpersonal Learning

The development of interpersonal competence is strongly grounded in sociocultural theory, particularly the work of Lev Vygotsky. According to this perspective, cognitive and linguistic development occur through social interaction, where learners internalize knowledge mediated by more capable peers or instructors.

A key concept in this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the distance between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with assistance. Within collaborative tasks, learners operate within this zone through scaffolding, dialogue, and shared problem-solving.

From this perspective, interpersonal competence is not only a communicative skill but also a developmental mechanism. Interaction itself becomes the medium through which learners acquire both language and social behavior patterns. When learners engage in meaningful dialogue, they are not merely practicing language structures but also developing social strategies such as persuasion, negotiation, clarification, and cooperation.

This theoretical foundation provides strong justification for collaborative pedagogies such as Project-Based Language Teaching (PBLT), where interaction is not optional but essential for task completion.

2.3. Project-Based Language Teaching as an Interaction-Driven Pedagogy

Project-Based Language Teaching (PBLT) is a learner-centered instructional approach in which language acquisition occurs through the completion of structured, meaningful projects. These projects are typically designed around real-world problems or authentic communicative goals, requiring learners to collaborate, investigate, and present outcomes.

Unlike traditional teacher-centered instruction, PBLT positions learners as active participants responsible for managing both linguistic and organizational aspects of learning. This shift transforms the classroom into a dynamic social environment where communication is constant and necessary.

In PBLT settings, learners must:

- plan tasks collaboratively
- assign roles and responsibilities
- negotiate ideas and perspectives
- solve problems as a group
- produce shared written and oral outcomes
- present findings to an audience

Each of these stages requires sustained interpersonal interaction. As learners progress through the project cycle, they repeatedly engage in negotiation of meaning, clarification of misunderstandings, and collective decision-making. These processes naturally foster interpersonal competence through authentic communicative pressure.

Importantly, PBLT differs from traditional group work because it is structured around a final product or outcome. This goal-oriented nature increases accountability and ensures that interaction is purposeful rather than superficial.

2.4. Interaction as the Mechanism of Interpersonal Development

Interaction is the central mechanism through which interpersonal competence develops in PBLT environments. When learners engage in group tasks, they must continuously interpret, respond, and adapt to others' contributions. This creates a communicative space where language is used dynamically rather than statically.

During interaction, learners develop several key competencies:

Negotiation of meaning: Learners clarify misunderstandings, rephrase ideas, and ensure mutual comprehension. This process strengthens both linguistic accuracy and communicative flexibility.

Turn-taking management: Students learn how to enter, maintain, and exit conversations appropriately, which is essential for smooth group communication.

Collaborative decision-making: Learners evaluate different ideas, justify opinions, and reach consensus, developing critical thinking and persuasive communication skills.

Social sensitivity: Interaction exposes learners to different perspectives, helping them develop empathy and cultural awareness.

Repeated engagement in such interactional processes gradually transforms learners' communicative behavior. Over time, students become more confident, responsive, and socially competent users of English.

2.5. Scaffolding Interpersonal Skills in PBLT Environments

While interaction is essential, it does not automatically guarantee the development of interpersonal competence. Without structured support, group work may result in unequal participation, dominance of stronger students, or communication breakdowns. Therefore, scaffolding plays a critical role in guiding interaction and ensuring inclusive participation.

Scaffolding in PBLT can be implemented at multiple levels:

Linguistic scaffolding: Providing functional language for interaction, such as expressions for agreeing, disagreeing, suggesting, and asking for clarification. This enables learners to participate in discussions even with limited proficiency.

Procedural scaffolding: Clearly defining group roles (e.g., leader, note-taker, presenter) and outlining task steps. This reduces confusion and promotes balanced participation.

Interactional scaffolding: Modeling effective group communication, including respectful disagreement, turn-taking strategies, and collaborative dialogue patterns.

Teacher mediation: Monitoring group work, intervening when necessary, and providing corrective feedback on both language and interaction behavior.

Over time, scaffolding is gradually reduced as learners become more autonomous in managing group interaction. This process aligns with sociocultural principles of mediated learning and the gradual transfer of responsibility to learners.

2.6. Reflection as a Tool for Developing Interpersonal Awareness

Reflection is a crucial but often overlooked component of interpersonal competence development. After completing project tasks, learners benefit from analyzing not only their linguistic performance but also their interactional behavior.

Reflective practices may include self-assessment questionnaires, peer feedback sessions, and guided reflection journals. These activities encourage learners to evaluate questions such as:

- Did I contribute equally to the group?
- How effectively did I listen to others?
- Did I express disagreement respectfully?
- How did the group resolve conflicts?

Such reflection promotes metacognitive awareness of interpersonal behavior. Over time, learners become more conscious of their communication styles and develop strategies for improvement.

2.7. Challenges in Developing Interpersonal Competence through PBLT

Despite its effectiveness, the development of interpersonal competence through PBLT is not without challenges.

One common issue is unequal participation, where more proficient or confident learners dominate group discussions while quieter students remain passive.

Another challenge is the lack of collaborative skills among learners who are accustomed to teacher-centered instruction. In such cases, students may struggle to negotiate roles, manage conflicts, or sustain productive interaction.

Additionally, linguistic limitations may hinder interaction, especially at lower proficiency levels.

Learners may revert to their first language or avoid participation altogether.

These challenges highlight the importance of careful task design, structured scaffolding, and continuous teacher support. Effective implementation of PBLT requires not only assigning group tasks but also actively teaching learners how to collaborate.

2.8. Summary of Pedagogical Value

When properly implemented, PBLT transforms the EFL classroom into a social learning environment where interpersonal competence develops naturally through meaningful interaction.

The integration of scaffolding, reflection, and structured collaboration ensures that all learners can participate effectively, regardless of proficiency level.

Ultimately, interpersonal competence emerges not as an isolated skill but as a by-product of sustained, purposeful communication in collaborative learning environments.

3. Conclusion

Project-Based Language Teaching provides an effective framework for developing interpersonal competence in EFL learners.

By engaging students in collaborative, goal-oriented tasks, PBLT transforms the classroom into a social learning environment where communication, cooperation, and negotiation are essential.

Supported by sociocultural theory, especially the concept of interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development, PBLT enables learners to develop not only linguistic proficiency but also essential interpersonal skills required for real-world communication.

Ultimately, integrating structured scaffolding, reflection, and collaborative task design ensures that interpersonal competence becomes a natural outcome of language learning rather than an additional objective.

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