

## **Project-based Learning: The Promotion of Communicative Competence and Self-Confidence at a State High School in Colombia**

### **Aprendizaje Basado en Proyectos: La Promoción de la Competencia Comunicativa y la Confianza en una Escuela Secundaria en Colombia**

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## Abstract

Project-based learning is a student-centered methodological approach that involves communication, cooperation, and autonomy. Even though project-based learning has been largely explored in foreign language teaching, little is known about its implementation in second-language beginner levels. This action research study describes the use of project-based learning by a pre-service teacher in a group of EFL eighth-graders at a secondary state school in Cordoba, Colombia. Data sources include video classroom observations, students' focus interviews and students' diaries. Findings reveal the affordances that project-based learning have in the development of the students' communicative competence, highlighting the strategies that they use to communicate and the way they construct confidence when planning and reporting their projects.

*Keywords:* communicative competence, project-based learning, self-confidence

## Resumen

La enseñanza por medio de proyectos es un enfoque metodológico que conjuga la comunicación, la cooperación, y la autonomía. Aunque dicho enfoque ha sido ampliamente explorado en el campo de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, poco se conoce de su implementación en estudiantes con niveles básicos en lengua extranjera. Este estudio de investigación acción describe la implementación del aprendizaje por medio de proyectos por parte de una docente practicante en un grupo de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera de octavo grado en una escuela pública de Córdoba, Colombia. Los métodos de recolección de datos incluyen observaciones de clases, entrevistas a grupos focales y diarios de estudiantes. Los resultados muestran los beneficios de la metodología basada en proyectos en relación con el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa; los resultados señalan las estrategias que los estudiantes usan para comunicarse y la manera en que adquieren la confianza necesaria para planear y reportar sus proyectos.

*Palabras clave:* aprendizaje basado en proyectos, competencia comunicativa, confianza

## Introduction

Project-based learning (PBL) has become popular in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Colombia. Researchers have examined the affordances of PBL in EFL contexts, arguing that PBL helps learners acquire concepts and promotes problem-solving skills (Bello Vargas, 2012; Pinzon, 2014; Vaca Torres & Gómez Rodriguez, 2017). Recent guidelines from the Colombian Ministry of National Education also suggest PBL as one of the approaches for teaching English in secondary schools, as PBL promotes the development of abilities such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, technology, and problem solving (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016a, 2016b).

Even though PBL has been suggested as a method for EFL secondary education in Colombia and several research studies have reported its implementation in EFL classrooms, more research in the area is needed, especially in contexts where students have basic English language proficiency levels and rarely have significant opportunities for L2 practice.

Responding to this call, this action research study describes the implementation of a PBL instructional unit by a pre-service teacher (Juanita, pseudonym) and the affordances that this unit generates in terms of oral communication and self-confidence in a group of EFL eighth-graders in a state high-school in Cordoba, Colombia.

The motivations of this study are twofold. First, in preliminary observations to the study, Juanita noted that eighth-graders basically named objects in isolation (e.g., book, house, and picture) and chorally repeated sentences that the teacher asked them to pronounce. Also, the students felt little confident to participate individually in the class as they feared being laughed at by their classmates. Second, as part of a teaching training program, Juanita received guidance in the implementation of PBL as suggested in the EFL guidelines proposed by the Colombian Ministry of National Education. Therefore, she endeavored to implement PBL to meet the needs she had identified in the eighth-grade class. This study is anchored in two questions: (1) How do eighth-graders develop their communicative competence within a PBL instructional unit? (2) In what ways do eighth-graders build confidence during PBL lessons?

This paper adds to the relatively small amount of research that has examined the implementation of PBL with EFL learners at initial language proficiency levels (A1), particularly, in public schools in countries like Colombia where most students graduate with a A1 level (as indicated by ICFES, 2019). Second, the results of this study sheds light on how EFL learners develop communicative competence by using compensation strategies (e.g., approximation, foreignizing, and appealing for help) and teacher scaffolding.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Communicative Competence***

The teaching and learning of a foreign language involves not only the acquisition of language features (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) but also the understanding of social functions. Based on this functional view of language, Hymes (1972) proposed the notion of communicative competence, which covers the use of spoken and written language as well as the interaction among speakers, listeners, writers, and readers. Although the concept of communicative competence is four decades old, it continues being a key guiding principle in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. In Colombia, this concept constitutes one of the pedagogical principles guiding the suggested curriculum for teaching foreign languages (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016a, 2016b). Therefore, it is an area of exploration in this study.

Canale and Swain (1980) define four different sub-categories for the construction of communicative competence: linguistic competence, discourse competence (pragmatic

competence), sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Linguistic competence refers to the knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence grammar, semantics, and phonology (Canale & Swain, 1980). Discourse competence refers to the sequential and functional use of the language (e.g., sending and receiving internal messages), whereas sociolinguistic competence relates to the sociocultural rules of language and discourse (e.g., rules of politeness, social relations, and age). Finally, strategic competence refers to the verbal and nonverbal strategies used to compensate for limitations in communication. Savignon (1983) argues that the strategic competence should not be regarded as merely compensatory strategies for limitations but as communication strategies that help compensate for factors such as fatigue, distraction, inattention, and language breakdowns. Bachman (1990) defines communication strategies as “functions of evaluation, planning and execution to determine the most effective methods to achieve the communicative goal” (p. 107).

That is, communication strategies are fundamental elements for communication. Adding to this issue, Tarone (1980) and Savignon (1983) describe a number of communication strategies that learners use for solving a communicative goal (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Communication strategies

Strategy	Description
Circumlocution	Describing a word instead of using the target language word
Foreignizing	Saying a word with an L2 accent
Code-switching	Switching from L2 to L1
Appeal for help	Asking/indicating with verbal or nonverbal signals for correction, confirmation, and doubt
Word coinage	Making up a new word to communicate a desired thought
Topic avoidance	Avoiding talk about an unknown topic
Message abandonment	Beginning with a talk or concept and abandoning the message

### ***Self-Confidence***

Self-confidence (often times coined as self-esteem) is an affective principle that refers to the belief that one is capable of accomplishing a task (Brown, 2001). Although a long process, self-confidence could be co-constructed in the classroom by engaging students in sequential tasks (going from less demanding activities to more challenging tasks) and by using

verbal and nonverbal assistance to support task completion (Brown, 2001). Likewise, self-confidence could be constructed through a collaborative process in which teachers engage students in interesting tasks, monitor learners' work, and provide positive comments during assessment (Dornyei, 2001).

### ***Project-based Learning***

PBL has been defined as an active, student-centered approach to instruction that privileges students' autonomy, constructive investigations, communication, collaboration, and reflection within real-world practices or tasks (ChanLin, 2008; Fox, 2013; Grant & Branch, 2005; Haines, 1989; PBL usually encompasses a variety of individual or cooperative tasks over a long period of time (planning, research, and reporting), driven by the need to create an end-product (Beckett 2002; Fried-Booth, 2002). Hutchinson (1991) and Little (2007) regard project work as a significant approach for enhancing communicative competence and promoting language learning autonomy since PBL engages students in real-life tasks that boost motivation.

### ***Phases in PBL***

As discussed previously, PBL can be understood as a teaching approach which centers on learners and keeps track of the process that they go through during a project. In this process, teachers assist learners so that they can be responsible for their own learning and optimize their learning gains. The implementation of PBL follows different stages which are variously described by different authors. Simpson (2011), for example, suggests four different stages: *project start*, *development*, *report*, and *assessment*. The *project start* involves selecting topics based on students' interest and needs so that students can have some flexibility to work at their own level. *Project development* involves the research carried out by students either individually, in pairs, or as a group. *Reporting* to the class involves presenting and receiving feedback from other student, whereas *assessment* occurs when the final product is assessed by the class.

Miller (2011), alternatively, proposes a sequence of steps starting with the *Preparation phase*, which requires identifying the purpose of the project, determining its educational aims, selecting a final product, framing the general structure of the project, and organizing working groups. Next, the *Realization phase* consists of two main steps: Information gathering and Information processing. In this phase the teacher helps students to process data and prepares them for the language, skills, and strategic demands of the project. Next comes the *Presentation phase*, or "Information reporting cycle", in which teachers create language activities to help students to present successfully the final project outcomes (Alan & Stoller,

2005). The final phase is *evaluation*, which involves summative and formative assessment both throughout and at the end of the project.

Larmer et al. (2015) propose seven phases for project work implementation. This was the framework used in this study because it suggested a variety of pedagogical insights for the pre-service teacher who led the project work cycle reported. The first step in this framework is identifying a *challenging problem or question* whose answer requires students and the teacher to investigate, explore, and search for solutions. The second step is *sustained inquiry*, which implies not only a deeper look, but the exploration of the challenging question over an extended period of time. The third step is *authenticity*, which requires the teacher to provide students with authentic projects that involve real-world contexts involving actual processes, tools, or performance standards. The fourth step is *student voice and choice*, which refers to opportunities that students have to express their ideas, thoughts, and choices in the learning process. *Reflection*, the fifth step, is the time when the teacher and students think of what, how, and why they are learning, a dialogue which is usually informal and spontaneous. Next, *critique and revision* implies ongoing and constructive feedback to realize high levels of work in which rubrics can be used for guiding and assessing performance. The final step is a *public product* which involves the communication of the final product to an audience.

## Methods

This study follows a qualitative research tradition for understanding the meaning one pre-service teacher and her students made of the implementation of project work in the natural setting of their classroom, focusing on learners' development of communicative competence and self-confidence. Qualitative research involves questions, procedures, and data gathering from the participants' context, and researchers' interpretations of them (Heigham & Croker, 2009). Consistent with the nature of qualitative research, the study uses action research in order to describe the implementation of PBL by a pre-service teacher in a group of EFL eighth-graders at a secondary state school in Cordoba, Colombia. Action research is based on reflective practice that involves the teacher as the researcher in analyzing teaching/learning and implementing a plan to improve it, reflecting on it, and making any changes if needed (Handscomb & MacBeath, 2009).

We followed the five stages constituting the implementation cycle of action research. First, we identified the issue under analysis that was relevant to our research context. Second, we obtained information to understand the problem of the study and devised ways of overcoming the problematic situation. Third, we designed and then, fourth, implemented a number of lessons using PBL. Finally, we collected data to investigate the extent to which the plan we proposed had been successful (Ellis, 2013).

## ***Participants and Context***

This study took place in a low-income, urban state school in Montería, Colombia. Participants were one pre-service EFL teacher (Juanita, pseudonym) and a group of 32 eighth graders. Juanita was a fluent L2 English language speaker in her last term of her teaching preparation program, doing her required practicum. The eighth graders were beginning English language learners who could understand familiar L2 words, translate simple sentences from their L1 to the L2, and name familiar objects. The students responded to the teacher's questions as a group and hardly ever participated individually in the lessons, arguing their lack of confidence to do oral tasks in English.

## ***The PBL Program***

The PBL program consisted of a six-lesson project about food and nutrition during six weeks. The program was realized in six different steps: first, Juanita negotiated with the students an interesting driving question (what does Colombian traditional food come with? (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010, which tied to the topic suggested in their textbook: Colombian food. As a second step, Juanita and her students agreed on a product for their project: The oral presentation of a dish recipe in small groups using a Pictionary. Next, she assisted the students in browsing and selecting information from different sources (e.g., Wikipedia, recipe books) about the dishes each group had chosen. After this, each group presented the information they had gathered, receiving feedback and help from the teacher and classmates.

Once the teacher had identified the main lexico-grammatical and discourse problems in the students' presentations, she moved to the preparation of the students' final products. To this end, she reinforced aspects of form and discourse (e.g., the use of adverbs of frequency, use of simple present tense, pronunciation of dish ingredients, and the sequence of stages in the dish presentation). Then, she asked the students to rehearse their presentations in groups; both herself and peers provided. As a final step, the students presented their products in front of their classmates, receiving help from them and Juanita as needed (see Table 2 for further details; T stands for teacher, SS stands for students).

## ***Data Sources***

Data sources included classroom observations and field notes during the six lessons of the project. These sources served to illustrate how the project took place and the interactions that occurred in each stage. The students' diaries and two focus groups interviews (before

**Table 2.** Implementation of the PBL unit.

Steps in the PBL unit	Description
Choosing a driving question	T and SS agreed to answer the question: What does Colombian traditional food come with?
Agreeing on a product	SS chose a traditional Colombian dish, for example Lechona Tolimense, Arroz con Pollo, or Ajiaco. They agreed on presenting the dish recipe and a Pictionary that illustrated its ingredients, preparation, and nutritional facts.
Preparing the students for information gathering	T guided her students to search for different recipes online and then compare them with the recipes people in their context actually follow to prepare those dishes. SS shared the information about their dish during the subsequent lesson.
Searching and gathering information	SS browsed different websites for information about their traditional dish.
Selecting the right information	SS shared their information with the class. T helped the rest of the class to understand and asked SS to take notes, ask, and answer questions about each dish. SS in each group selected the most relevant data to describe their recipe and its ingredients, discarding irrelevant information.
Getting ready for the presentation	T focused on aspects of form specific to the presentation of a recipe (Explicit instruction of sequence adverbs, present simple). SS simulated their presentation focusing on aspects of public speaking (introducing themselves and their recipe, addressing the audience, etc.). SS presented advances on their Pictionary; T gave SS feedback on it.
Presenting the final product	SS presented to the class their traditional dish along with their pictionaries. T commented on SS' presentations and asked questions to the presenters and the class.

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and after the project) were also used to capture the students' initial perceptions about L2 use in the classroom and their insights towards the implementation of PBL.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis involved describing the students' language use and the confidence they gained through the project. For the analysis of language use, we transcribed the episodes



using the conventions described in Table 3, adapted from J. Herazo (personal communication, July 29, 2013).

**Table 3.** Transcription conventions

Mark	Description
S1	Identified student
?	Question intonation
T	Teacher
,	A normal pause
S?	Unidentified student
(.3)	Approximately 3 seconds pause
SS	Several students at the same time
:::	Lengthening of sound
(0)	Comments by researcher
XXX	Unintelligible talk
[dog]	Mispronounced word
Abcde	Soft speech, like whispering
(dog)	Best guess: Not sure whether what is in parenthesis was what was said
DOG	Said with emphasis
dog	Underlined segments indicate simultaneous talk
dog	Translation to L2

We focused on the final product that the students shared in the class, analyzing how they realized this final task. For the analysis of the presentation, first we divided the task into the specific episodes. Then, we identified the communication strategies that the students used in each stage along with the teacher's scaffolding. We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify common patterns in the focus group interviews, diaries, and classroom interaction related to self-confidence (e.g., fears, participation, and collaboration). For reliability in the analysis, we compared the information from the different data sources: observations, focus group interviews, and the students' diaries.

## Results

Prior to the implementation of PBL, the students had little opportunities for completing communicative/functional goals as most oral exercises consisted of drills

and repetition. Therefore, they basically chorally repeated sentences and mentioned some of the vocabulary they learnt in the classroom. During the project-based lessons, Juanita engaged the students in diverse tasks (e.g. defining a topic, selecting a product, searching for information, and presenting the final product) that, as we will show next, contributed to the development of communicative competence and self-confidence. To illustrate these two overarching findings, we thoroughly describe one of the final products of the PBL projects explaining the diverse communication strategies that the students used to realize the task. Then, we explain how the teachers' and students' collaborative work helped them gain self-confidence throughout the project.

### ***Communicative Competence***

The students completed three tasks for the presentation of their final projects in the PBL unit. To illustrate how they realized each task, we present a dyad's description of a typical Colombian dish (*la lechona*), highlighting the strategies that the students used to achieve the communicative goal/language function proposed in the project.

#### ***Step 1-Description of Ingredients***

In the first part of the presentation (see excerpt 1), Sara (S) and Gaby (G) (pseudonyms) described the ingredients of *la lechona* (e.g. pork, garlic, and green peas).

As seen in Excerpt 1, Gaby started the description by code switching from the L1 to the L2 to announce the dish ingredients (Turn 5, *voy a decir los ingredients*). While expressing this idea, the teacher overlapped using a rising intonation to indicate the continuation of the description (Turn 6, OUR RECIPE?). After the teacher's scaffolding, Sara started the description mostly in the L2 indicating the dish ingredients (Turn 5, *la lechona* contains ...). In the subsequent turns, Sara and Gaby continued the description by using two communication strategies, foreignizing and approximation. In turn 12, for example, Gaby used the expression *orange zum* instead of orange juice, thus foreignizing the word “*zum*”. Then, in turn 13, Sara said the word banana as an approximation of the word plantain. The communication strategies and teacher's scaffolding allowed the students to describe the ingredients of *la lechona*, thus achieving the corresponding communicative goal of the task.

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#### ***Step 2. Description of Dish Preparation***

In the second part of the presentation (see excerpt 2), Sara and Gaby described the different steps to prepare *la lechona* (e.g. cook the bacon, mix the pork).

### Excerpt 1- Describing ingredients

1	S	Good morning students.
2	T	Yes, My name is? ... ((indicating how to start the presentation/modelling))
3	S	My name is Sara. ((following the T mode, pointing at student 2))
4	G	My name is Gabriela.
5	G	Emmm, voy a decir los ingre ((code switching))
6	T	OUR RECIPE?
7	S	La lechona los ((code-switching)) ingredients.
8	T	Very good.
9	S	Ehhh la lechona, contains, pork [cooked] green peas, [cooked] rice.
10	G	Pork chops, salt, xxx
11	S	Ehhh...garlic ground cumin achiote ((foreignizing)) pow [powder]
12	G	Butter, lemon bites, orange zum ((foreignizing))
13	S	Juice, aluminium y ((code switching)) boiled pork or banana ((approximation))

### Excerpt 2- Dish preparation

1	S	Ehh preparation ((shaking hands))
4	T	Preparation okay
1	S	Dice, ehkh ...co::ok ((appeal for help))
5	T	Number 1, cook the bacon ((showing the recipe book)), number 2, add the?
1	S	[salt]
6	T	Salt ok and?
1	S	Marinate xxxx
7	T	Mix?
1	S	Mix rice, peas and vegetables.
8	T	What is mix? ((teacher asks the whole class))
1	S	Mezclar.
9	?	Very good, (The T demonstrates the word) so to mix pork and rice and vegetables.
2	T	and::?
0		[Salt]
2	S	Salt, very good.
1	?	Put first rice and meat rice and then put
2	T	Ohh yeah, you put that dough, I told you amm, how to say masa right?
2	S	Dough, so you Put the dough and then you put the pork AND?
2	T	Rice and[ spice]
3		Rice and spices so everything
2	S	Bake the preparation in 300 grados (code switching)

As seen in Excerpt 2, Sara started the description mentioning the goal in the second episode (Turn 14, *preparation*). Then, she moved to the dish preparation (Turn 16, *ehh cook*) gazing at the teacher as if appealing for help to complete her previous thought. In the subsequent turn, the teacher completed the student's incomplete utterance indicating the steps to prepare the

dish (Turn 17, *number 1 cook the bacon*). Then, she uttered an incomplete sentence (Turn 17, *number 2 add the?*) which Sara successfully completed in turn 18 *salt*. In the four subsequent turns, the teacher continued scaffolding the students by providing incomplete utterances (See turns 19, 21, 23 and 25) that they completed in order to describe the steps to prepare the dish (See turns 20, 22, 24 and 26).

After this, Sara continued the description mostly in the L2 mentioning two more steps (turn 28, *put first rice and meat and then put*). To that end, she used two communication strategies: *Appealing for help* and *code switching*. In turn 28, for example, Gaby appealed for help to continue the description; then, in turn 32, she code-switched from L2 to L1 to express the final step in preparing the dish. As in the first episode, the students completed the communication goal of the task thanks to communication strategies and to their responses to the teacher's scaffolds.

### ***Step 3-Describing Nutritional Facts***

In the third part of the presentation (see excerpt 3), Sara and Gaby mentioned the main nutritional facts of *la lechona*, associating the ingredients with their nutritional indicator (e.g., pork protein).

#### **Excerpt 3. Describing nutritional facts**

33	G	Nutri ((gazes at S))
34	S	Nutritional.
35	G	Nutritional facts (.1) pork protein
36	G	[green peas]
37	T	DRY PEAS (indicates how to pronounce the word)
38	G	Dry peas, protein, calcium, iron, vitamin, rice, calories, nutrients, Salt, <i>vitaminas</i> , and minerals (code switching)
39	T	VITAMIN AND MINERALS
40	S	Garlic minerals, calcium, <i>vitamina B doce</i>
41	T	Vitamin B12, (code switching) very good.
42	Ss	((claps))

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Gaby started the description appealing for help (See turn 33) to introduce the main topic in the episode: nutritional facts. After receiving help from Sara, Mary restated the word and started the description of the nutritional facts in the L2 (See turn 35). In the subsequent turns, Gaby code switched to continue the description in the presentation. In turn 38, for example, Gaby switched to her L2 to mention the word *vitaminas* and in turn 40 saying *vitamina B doce*. Thus, Gaby could describe the nutritional facts of *la lechona* using these communication strategies and her peer's help.

Findings indicate that the project-based unit provided opportunity for the students to develop communicative competence and its corresponding subcategories (i.e., linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence). When presenting the project, the students identified the lexical aspects of the language (i.e. linguistic competence) and pointed to its sequential and functional use (i.e. discourse competence) by describing the stages to prepare *la lechona*. To this end, the students resorted to diverse verbal and nonverbal strategies to compensate for communication breakdowns (i.e., strategic competence).

### ***The Construction of Self-confidence***

The construction of self-confidence was a significant gain in the implementation of PBL. During a focus group before the project started, the students manifested that it was challenging for them to participate because of their fear of making mistakes and of being laughed at by other students in the class. This was evident when the students responded to the pre-service teacher in the interview about the reasons for not participating in the English language class. Mary, for example, commented, “you clearly saw Di in the classroom... he laughed when we tried to participate”<sup>6</sup>. Javier also said “teacher you have noticed that they always laugh even if they do not know the answers they laugh and that is embarrassing”. These comments indicate that laughing at students who participated in the class was a common practice in the classroom that both teachers and students were aware of.

During the PBL stages, the students started to gain self-confidence as they collaboratively responded to the project tasks and helped each other in the completion of project stages. In excerpt 4 (see below), for example, it is clear how the students collaboratively interacted in response to the teacher’s questions about the ingredients of a typical dish.

As seen in excerpt 4, several students chorally responded to the teacher’s questions in turn 1 while others raised their hands for participation. In the subsequent turns, student 1 answered the question the teacher had addressed without any interruption from the other students. As the interaction went on, student 1 continued responding to the teacher’s questions getting help from other students (turn 11). Thus, instead of laughing at student 1, as usually happened in the classroom, the students helped each other in the interaction.

This collaborative environment between the teacher and students along with the student’s participation in the different tasks helped them gain confidence and overcome the fears they

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<sup>6</sup> Originally in Spanish, our translation.

**Excerpt 4. Description of chicken rice**

1	T	What is rice with chicken?
2	SS	Hey arroz con pollo! Rice with chicken
3	SS	(rising hands)
4	T	What does arroz con pollo rice with chicken come with?
5	S1	White rice
6	T	((repeats))
7	S1	Protein, olive oil, achiote
8	S1	Salt carrots habichuelas Green peas
9	S2	(...)
10	T	And the chicken! Where is the chicken?
11	SS	El pollo! The chicken
12	S1	Chicken meat!

manifested when the project started. Felipe, for example, wrote in his diary after presenting the recipe book to the class: “when it was my turn, I participated with ease because the teacher had explained to us what we had to do in the other classes...we had practiced”<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, Gabriel reflected: “when it was my turn, I felt at ease because the teacher corrected our mistakes in case we made any, I felt happy.” Lina said: “today I presented my book menu, at first I felt ashamed, but then, I felt better because the teacher helped me”. These comments indicate that involvement in the previous stages and the student’s scaffolding and corrections contributed to their self-confidence during their performance. In fact, all the students in the classroom successfully shared their final product as an oral presentation. This was true even for students like Mary, who had initially voiced their fears and reluctance to classroom participation due to their classmates’ constant laughter. Excerpt 5 illustrates Mary’s final performance in the classroom.

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Maria was hesitant to initiate the presentation expressing that she could not do it (See turn 3). Interestingly, after the students and teacher’s encouraging discourse (See turn 1, turn 2, and turn 4) and the teacher’s scaffolding (See turn 5), Maria completed the first stage in the presentation. This is an interesting achievement given that she had previously expressed her uneasiness and fears towards classroom participation.

<sup>7</sup> The students’ comments have been translated from Spanish.

### Excerpt 5. Dish ingredients

1	T	Ok! <i>Son tus mismos compañeros!</i> <i>They're your own classmates</i>
2	S1	<i>Dale! Tu puedes!</i> <i>Come on! You can do it!</i>
3	M	No, no, no ((ashamed))
4	T	Come on Mary!
5	T	Say good morning!
6	M	Good morning, my name is Mary, my recipe contains avocado, banana, garlic, meat, lemon, onion, orange...
7	T	Thank you Mary! Sit down!
8	SS	(clapping)

### Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study revealed that project work contributed to the students' development of communicative competence and to their construction of self-confidence. As described above, the different stages in the PBL project gave the students the opportunity to practice language for communication since the overall project had a communicative goal: The description of a typical dish. The students engaged in reaching a communicative goal, thus going beyond the recognition of lexico grammatical features.

Realizing the project communicative goal involved a constant collaboration between the teacher and the students as well as the use of diverse communication strategies. Juanita assisted the students through the different phases in the PBL project, simplifying the task so that they could successfully reach the final goal. This is a key element when scaffolding students' learning through interactions (Donato, 1994) and one likely reason for student improvement. In the final presentation, Juanita scaffolded the students in preparing the dish. She provided verbal hints (e.g. giving the students incomplete sentences for them to fill in) until they could respond to the task independently. Also, the students used diverse communication strategies (e.g., approximation, foreignizing, and appealing for help) to compensate for the breakdowns they had when communicating their ideas (Savignon, 1983).

PBL also promoted the students' self-confidence. Results showed that the PBL lessons created an enjoyable and low-pressure learning environment that helped the students to engage and participate in the different tasks. As the students had to collaboratively work on the completion of the tasks, they relied on classmates' and teacher's support to pronounce words, find information, look for vocabulary, and constantly assess their work. As researchers

have explained (e.g., Johnson et al., 1998; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Lightner et al., 2007; Slavin, 1990), cooperative learning equips students with social skills that help learners feel more confident when interacting with other peers. In fact, this cooperative work from peers and the teacher helped the students to reduce the social pressure they had when the project started and thus respond to the tasks. This ties to Brown's (2001, 2007) conceptualization of self-confidence in that it is through the realization and support of diverse tasks that self-confidence is constructed.

## Implications and Limitations

This study has shown that PBL helps students to improve their communicative competence as well as gain self-confidence. This is so because PBL involves the constant collaboration between the teacher and students as well as the immersion in real-world tasks. In the implementation of PBL, the teacher's role is fundamental since teachers provide students with opportunities to grow in the process and reach their final goals. This is even more relevant in students with basic language levels who are not daily exposed to the second language.

This study sheds light on the importance of teachers' scaffolding during PBL lessons. As this study showed, the teacher's support in the project was essential to help the students to complete the tasks and thus use the language to communicate. Our work also provides concrete examples of how PBL is enacted in L2 classrooms, pointing to the different stages the students and the teacher go through when presenting their final products.

Research in EFL classrooms in Córdoba (see Espitia & Perez, 2017; Henao & Montes, 2013; Nisperuza & Pacheco, 2017; Perez & Petro, 2013; Salamanca, 2016) have shown that teachers in state schools very often resort to traditional methodologies (e.g., grammar translation method and drills,) for the teaching of English. These teachers argue that students' language proficiency is too weak for doing communicative tasks, as was the case of Juanita prior to this study. As a way to reshape this conception, we suggest using PBL in the EFL classroom. This will allow for more opportunities to explore the affordances PBL may offer, especially to beginner learners.

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Although sufficient for the aims of this study, data did not allow for tracking the students' communicative competence and self-confidence over time. Future research should see the affordances that PBL creates in longitudinal studies that can monitor students' development in a longer period of time. Also, results of this study cannot be generalized given its case-study design. Rather, results clearly show the advantages of PBL in the particular context of the study.



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