

Learners' Views on PBL-based Instruction of Literary Texts in the EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT: *The current descriptive study aimed to explore learners' attitudes towards Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and the extent to which they considered it to be successful in developing various skills. A survey measuring various aspects of PBL was administered to 31 third year student of EFL at the University of Abbes Laghrour in Khenchela after a 10-week experiment of PBL-based instruction. Students' responses have revealed that PBL-based instruction was effective in developing various skills within the literary texts classroom. Students felt that they improved in terms of overall ability to learn collaboratively, their willingness to share knowledge, their ability to apply new knowledge, and more. Implications include an incorporation of PBL in literary texts classes can promote an engaging learning environment, reinforcing a sense of ownership of one's learning.*

KEYWORDS: EFL, literary texts, PBL, problem-based learning, students' attitudes

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Introduction

Teaching literature in the EFL classroom has witnessed many issues, each of which plays a role in the hindrance of the learning processes. A complete disengagement from the learning process is perceived during literary texts classes, and only proficient learners partake in the learning processes due to lack of interest in reading literary texts. Added to that, monotonous ways of approaching literary texts such as discussing surface meanings, providing plot analyses, or teachers delivering their interpretations of literary texts increase learners' passiveness. Hence, through this study, the researchers implemented a ten-week PBL program in a literary text course with third year EFL students in an attempt to know their attitudes after the intervention takes place. To achieve this, the researchers aim to answer the following questions: 1) What are students' general attitudes and preferences towards diverse aspects of the learning environment? 2) According to the learners, how effective is PBL-based instruction in the literary texts classroom?

I. Background

1.1. Definitions of Problem-Based Learning

Both in the field of education in general and in English language teaching in specific, the existing literature addresses diverse concepts and teaching approaches, methods, strategies. One such approach is Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which is considered to be a specific language teaching approach. Numerous educators have attempted to define the construct. For instance, Barrows and Tamblyn (1980) define PBL as the learning that takes place when students are trying to resolve a problem. Attempting to define PBL, Savery (2015) says that it is an instruction-based, 'curricular' and 'learner-centered' approach that uses real-world problems as a starting point of lessons, whose resolution requires learners' research for needed information, amalgamation of factual and practical knowledge, and the application of this knowledge. In line with the aforementioned viewpoints, Schmidt (1993) asserts that PBL uses problem scenarios as their initial prompt; nevertheless, he emphasizes the tutor's supervision of small group work during the problem resolution process. Evidently, PBL has neither a fixed definition nor implementation upon which educators agree (Azer, 2008).

1.2. The Underpinnings of Problem-Based Learning

Being a learner-centered teaching and learning approach (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1986), PBL is based on constructivist and instructional principles (Savery & Duffy, 1996). These constructivist assumptions emphasize the role that interaction plays in enhancing students' understanding, besides the role of problem scenarios that trigger inquiry and cognitive work. Additionally, collaboration among students is accentuated as a means through which learners generate negotiations of meanings to examine each other's understandings and to construct knowledge since other students are expected to provide alternative views (Savery & Duffy, 1996; Tan, 2003).

Several instructional principles, rooted in constructivist assumptions, are proposed by scholars. To begin with, learning aims should be clear to students; thus, every set of learning activities should have an objective known by the students (Tan, 2003). Accordingly, when tutors impose learning objectives on their learners, Savery and Duffy (1996) argue that there might be the risk of learners disengaging from the learning process; therefore, it is recommended that tutors identify their learners' areas of interests in order to set relevant aims and activities. As another instructional principle, learners should direct their own learning process from the problem presentation to its resolution. Tutors, in turn, should keep the learning environment challenging by providing complex problem scenarios to keep learners motivated and to prompt much of their mental activity. A further principle implies that knowledge is constructed when learners share their views and negotiate meanings. As a final principle, tutors should instruct their learners to reflect on their learning process to identify weaknesses and strengths (Savery & Duffy, 1996).

These instructional principles can be found where PBL is a prevailing teaching and learning approach. In regards to self-direction in learning, learners in PBL classes are expected to identify knowledge gaps and set learning aims accordingly (Ansarian & Teoh, 2018); in addition, learners, as Azer (2008) mentions, are expected to actively gather, analyze, and apply knowledge in order to construct new one. Moreover, and in line with the constructivist instructional principles, Tan (2003) argues that PBL approach involves learners' cognitive engagement with problems, which is accompanied by classroom interaction as a means of achieving understanding of the presented concepts; it also entails construction of knowledge through learners' evaluation of each other's viewpoints and negotiation. Concerning reflection, PBL boosts reflective practices for both teachers (Baldwin & McCombs, 2004).

and learners (Ansarian & Teoh, 2018) where the former assess the latter's performances and behavior while the latter evaluate their own performance and progress during learning.

1.3. Characteristics and Elements of PBL

Various scholars have attempted to identify diverse characteristics and components of PBL. The main characteristics are the following:

A. Facilitation: This characteristic is based on the view of the pioneers of PBL Barrows and Tamblin (1980), which gives no place for the direct transmission of facts in PBL environments. Savin-Baden (2003) and Ansarian and Teoh (2018) refer to facilitation in PBL classes as the tutor's generation of learning opportunities for learners.

B. Collaborative Learning: This is a critical component in PBL classes that implies learners' collaborative inquiry where they search for information required for problem resolution, besides the initiation of dialogues amongst group members and other groups (Lee & Tan, 2003).

C. Self-Directed Learning: Learners, as long as a PBL environment is concerned, are believed to demonstrate self-reliance during the learning process. In other words, learners should assume responsibility of the evaluation of presented problems, the recognition of information required for the problems resolution, choose their learning materials, analyze and decide on the relevance of the gathered information, and provide solutions to the given problems (Savin-Baden & Major, 2004).

D. Reflection: Opportunities should be allotted to learners for them to assess their learning experience, identifying effective and ineffective learning strategies and materials in order to avoid mistakes with the aim of enhancing future learning (Ansarian & Teoh, 2018). Not only this, but reflection, according to Tan (2003) and Baldwin and McCombs (2004), also entails tutors and their assessment of the learning environment and the various aspects related to it such as learners' performances and participation.

II. Method

2.1. Sample

The sample consists of 31 students enrolled as third year students of EFL at the University of Abbes Laghrour in Khenchela, Algeria. Of the entire sample, 23 (76.7%) are female and 7 (23.3%) are male. The age of respondents ranged from 20 to 36 ($M=23.23$), and all respondents are from the same geographical and ethnic background.

2.2. Data gathering tools

The researchers investigated learners' views on PBL-based instruction of literary texts in the EFL classroom after implementing this approach for a semester in their literature class. Following the completion of the semester and the intervention, the researchers conducted the present study to explore the participants' opinions on this instructional approach. To achieve this aim, the researchers devised a semi-structured questionnaire divided into four sections, each devoted to one of the following: demographic information (4 items), learning preferences (5 items), attitudes towards PBL activities (27 items), and attitudes towards the literary texts course in general (3 items). The section on demographics simply asked for background information such as age and gender. Learner preferences and attitudes towards the literary texts class in general were based on a categorical scale where respondents can answer by selecting more than one option. The section on learners' attitudes towards PBL activities is based on a Likert scale, the first part of which is based on five points ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree), and the second is based on a three-point Likert scale, '1' being 'not satisfied' and '3' being 'very satisfied'.

2.3. Procedures

The researchers first piloted the questionnaire prior to its administration. Eight participants from the same background, level, and specialty as the sample were used to pilot the questionnaire. Piloting led the researchers to changing a few words and expressions and some formatting to make the statements more comprehensible and clearer for students. Administration took place in class, although some students did not finish in time, so they were asked to take the questionnaires home and return them during the following session or through email. Once all questionnaires were collected, responses to the main section were analyzed for internal consistency, yielding $\alpha = .745$ for attitudes towards PBL activities, indicating an average and acceptable level of reliability (Corina, 1993).

III. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The researchers started by analyzing section 2, students' general attitudes and preferences towards diverse aspects related to the learning environment such as students' preferred type of work, learners' and teachers' nature, and the preferred learning environment (refer to Figure 1 and Figure 2). The analysis of data reveals a variety of attitudes towards these aspects. In the first question, the students were asked about how they prefer to work to achieve their goals. Answers did not diverge towards any one particular response; 10 students prefer to work individually; eight students prefer working in pairs, and nine students prefer group work. It can be said that 10 EFL students do not prefer the group work that PBL implies while about an equal number do prefer what is fundamental to PBL.

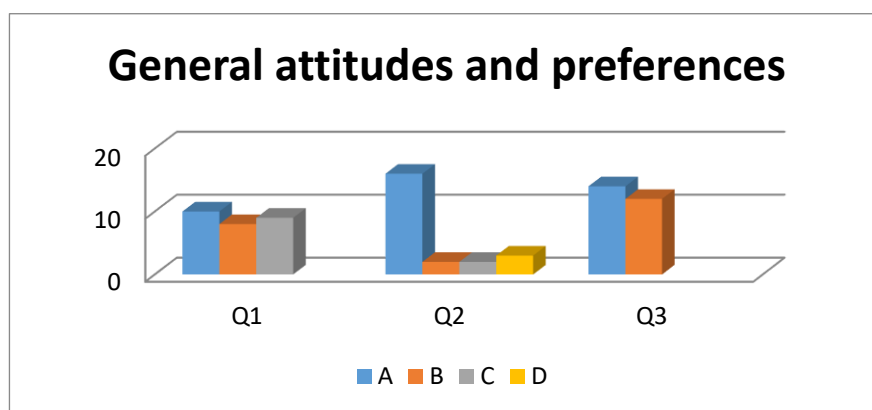


Figure 1. General Attitudes and Preferences

The second question concerns learners' preference for the number of students in each group; 16 students prefer to work in groups consisting of three to four members. Only two students prefer groups of five to eight; another two prefer groups of nine to 12 members, and three students selected "other". These findings show congruence between students' preferences and PBL since PBL emphasizes small groups when solving problems.

When they were asked whether a learner should be independent or teacher dependent inside the EFL classroom (question 3), responses were neutral; 14 students believe that learner should be independent while 12 believe that s/he should be dependent on the teacher. This is in parallel with the principle of PBL that focuses on students' self-reliance. These results reveal that an acceptable proportion of students prefer to have an independent role inside the classroom.

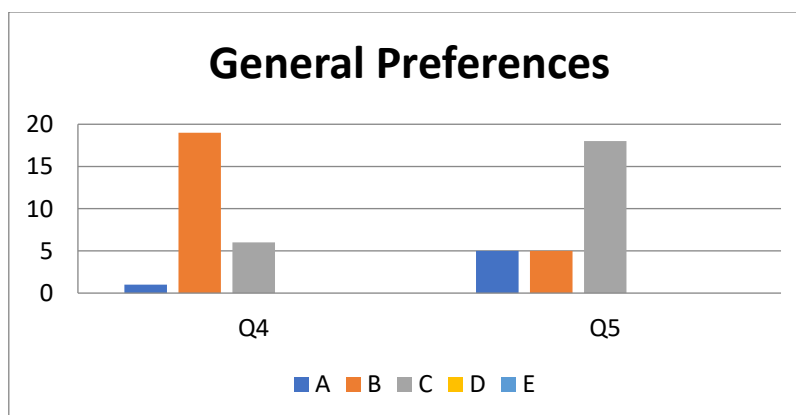


Figure 2. General Learning Preferences

The fifth question sheds light on students' preferred learning environment that allows them to develop their overall English language level. The majority of students (18) prefer both learner-centered and teacher-centered classrooms whereas only five students prefer learner-centered, and the same number of students prefer teacher-centered classrooms. Since PBL supports and provides a learner-centered environment, the PBL-based instruction that was provided was expected preferable learning environment.

Section three was an attempt to measure the extent to which students agree or disagree on the effectiveness of PBL in EFL learning; the researchers have devoted a section of 17 items to achieve this end (Table 1 contains sample questions from this section). These 17 items are about the different learning aspects that PBL has effected during literary texts classes. The role of problem scenarios, collaborative work, students' self-direction, and self-reflection has been targeted in this section. Additionally, the role of PBL in the understanding, acquisition, retention and application of knowledge has been of major focus in this section. In this section, 'strongly disagree' was given a value of 1, and 'disagree' was given a value of 2. Respondents who were neutral were assigned a value of 3; those who agreed were assigned a value of 4, and those who strongly agreed were assigned a value of 5.

The analysis of this section reveals various degrees of agreement on the usefulness of a number of aspects of PBL. Considering the first item, which tackles the role of students' collaborative work in increasing their motivation, the analysis has yielded a mean score of 3.6, which indicates that students have an overall positive attitude towards the use of collaborative learning in motivating them to finish assignments. In addition, the students find that collaborative work has helped them share knowledge among each other. This is seen in the mean score of item number six (M= 3.85), which also indicates a positive overall attitude.

In regards to the opportunities that PBL offers for the students to meet real-life situations, expressed in the second item, the students deviate towards neutrality (M= 3.23). When answering questions about the effect of problem scenarios on acquiring, retaining, and applying knowledge, the analysis revealed that students had mainly positive attitudes. In items three and four, for example, students reported mostly positive attitudes (M= 3.81 and M= 4.00, respectively), indicating that they felt that PBL allowed them to apply their learned knowledge and that PBL stimulated the acquisition of new knowledge. However, in item 12, students were more neutral (M= 2.60), indicating that, overall, learners felt that PBL stimulated the acquisition of knowledge and allowed them to apply their learned knowledge, but has not been too effective in helping them gain knowledge without the teacher's intervention. Again, according to item 13, students were rather neutral about the level of effectiveness of PBL in helping them retain acquired knowledge (M= 3.21).

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Interpretation |
|--|----|--------|----------------|----------------|
| 2. The problems allowed me to deal with real-life examples | 30 | 3.2333 | 1.16511 | Neutral |
| 5. PBL provides me with opportunities to direct my own learning. | 27 | 3.4444 | 1.12090 | Positive |
| 10. Interaction with the teacher established effective learning of literary texts. | 28 | 4.2143 | 1.3126 | Very Positive |
| 14. PBL has promoted my participation in the learning process. | 30 | 3.4000 | .81368 | Positive |
| 15. PBL has helped me to know my strengths and weaknesses. | 30 | 3.7000 | 1.26355 | Positive |
| 17. The problems presented by the teacher motivated me to learn. | 31 | 4.0968 | 1.10619 | Positive |
| OVERALL | 17 | 3.5519 | .41798 | Positive |

Table 1. Sample questions from section 3

In regards to the effectiveness of PBL in enhancing self-directed learning (item 5), students felt rather positive (M= 3.44). As an extension of the previously stated idea, the students were asked about the extent to which PBL promoted their participation in the learning process (item 14); results yielded another overall positive viewpoint (M= 3.40), indicating that students believe that PBL has been effective in promoting their participation in the learning process. In a similar regard, the students agree that self-directed learning is a helpful factor in understanding knowledge related to literary texts, which is reflected in students' responses to item number nine (M=3.59). The most positive viewpoint expressed by students is towards the role of the teacher's interaction in establishing effective learning of literary texts (item 10, M= 4.21). This means that, in spite of their appreciation of the role of self-directed learning, the students need the teacher to intervene during the learning process.

Another element targeted by this section, self-reflection, has been answered diversely by the students. For instance, when answering item number 15, which is about the role of PBL in helping students recognize their weaknesses and strengths, students generally agreed that PBL offers opportunities for learners to evaluate their learning, allowing them to know the areas and the strategies that boost their performance, besides the factors which cause poor performance during the learning process (M=3.70). In item number six, which is related to students' openness, results indicate that in a PBL environments the students are open to listen to and accept each other's ideas and opinions (M= 3.85). Moreover, there is aptitude from students' side to correct their misconceptions and misunderstandings of any idea.

Overall, the mean score of all the questions, ranging from M= 2.6 to M= 4.21, is M= 3.55, indicates that students have a positive view of PBL. Specifically, they view most positively the role of PBL in promoting collaborative learning, application of learned knowledge, self-directed learning, and self-reflective learning. Other aspects of PBL, like students' motivation to learn literary texts (items 1 and 17), however, seem to yield more positive results (M= 3.6 and M = 4.09, respectively). Moreover, item seven allows the researchers to claim that PBL provides learners with opportunities to practice their English (M= 3.86). Whether the presented problem scenarios are similar to the ones students face in real life, the students show a neutral attitude.

The section continues with another, 10-item sub-section dedicated to measuring students' satisfaction with various aspect related to the learning environment (Table 2). The researchers tackle aspects such as the learning environment and opportunities, students' relationship with each other and with the teacher, the teacher's role and feedback, and the presented topics during literary classes. In this section, 'not satisfied' was given a value of 1, 'satisfied' was given a value of 2, and 'very satisfied' was given a value of 3. In interpreting results for each statement, an average of 1 – 1.67 was considered to be negative; an average of 1.68 – 2.339 was considered to be neutral, and an average of 2.34 – 3 was considered to be positive.

Students' satisfaction towards the learning environment is measured through the first item. According to the responses to the first statement, the learners are relatively neutral, or only somewhat satisfied (M= 1.7). Likewise, the students are only somewhat satisfied with the opportunities to learn (item 2, M= 2.1), the relationship with their classmates (item 4, M=2.10), their level of participation inside the classroom (item 7, M=1.71), the time available to share ideas (item 8, M= 2.00), the topics presented (item 9, M=2.07), and the overall program (item 10, M= 2.03).

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Interpretation |
|--|-----------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1. The learning environment | 31 | 1.7097 | .58842 | Neutral |
| 2. The opportunities to learn | 31 | 2.1290 | .67042 | Neutral |
| 3. The relationship with your teacher | 31 | 2.5161 | .62562 | Positive |
| 7. Your participation inside the classroom | 31 | 1.7097 | .82436 | Neutral |
| 9. The overall program | 29 | 2.0345 | .49877 | Neutral |
| OVERALL | 10 | 2.1071 | .27527 | Neutral |

Table 2. Sample questions from section 3, subsection 2

Students' satisfaction towards the learning environment is measured through the first item. According to the responses to the first statement, the learners are relatively neutral, or only somewhat satisfied (M= 1.7). Likewise, the students are only somewhat satisfied with the opportunities to learn (item 2, M= 2.1), the relationship with their classmates (item 4, M=2.10), their level of participation inside the classroom (item 7, M=1.71), the time available to share ideas (item 8, M= 2.00), the topics presented (item 9, M=2.07), and the overall program (item 10, M= 2.03).

Learners were nevertheless more satisfied with a few other aspects of the PBL-based instruction provided. They provided positive feedback about their relationship with the teacher (item 3, M=2.52), the teacher's role (item 5, M= 2.45), and the teacher's feedback (item 6, M=2.35). This indicates that, overall, students hold positive attitudes towards the learning environment where PBL is a prevailing teaching and learning method and towards PBL in literary texts classes in particular.

In the final section of the questionnaire, section four, the researchers attempted to tackle another important element as far as PBL is concerned: motivation. Additionally, the researchers sought to know the students' perception towards the role of the teacher, along with the role of the internet in literary texts classes.

When they were asked about their feeling during literary texts classes, the students responded differently (Figure 3) 18 students reported that they were motivated during literary texts classes whereas 10 students reported that they felt free. This means that the findings are in parallel with PBL since PBL exposes students to challenging problem scenarios, which motivate them, besides the freedom that PBL gives to students by allowing them to direct their learning. This freedom is confirmed by the second question, where only three students considered the teacher as authoritative during the learning process. Furthermore, 22 students saw the teacher as a guide while 13 students perceived the teacher as a facilitator. With this being said, two students felt boredom and only one student felt anxious during literary texts classes.

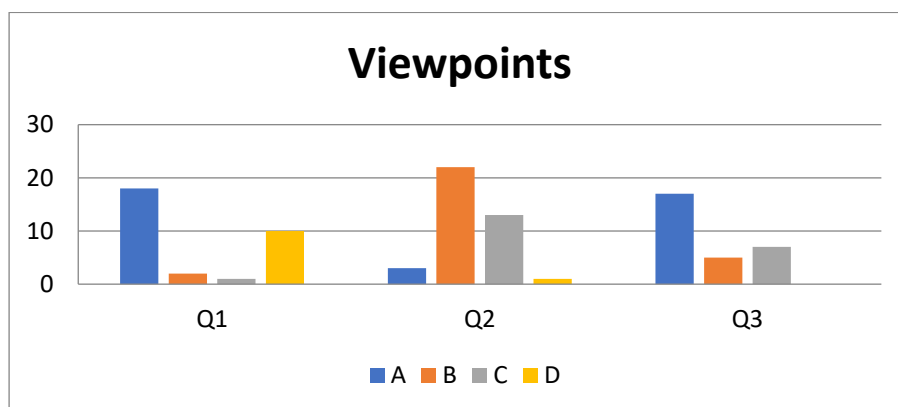


Figure 3. Learners' viewpoints on various aspects of the classroom

In the last categorical scale question, the students were asked to evaluate the role of Internet in the learning process of literary texts; 17 students viewed the internet as being helpful in completing activities during learning literary texts; meanwhile, five students found the Internet distractive, and the internet was considered by seven students as a tool for offering ready-made solutions (see figure 3). These outcomes highlight the beneficial role of using the Internet, as PBL recommends; however, the teacher has to consistently keep monitoring his/her students in order to prevent them from using distractive activities on the phone or getting ready-made solutions.

3.2. Discussion

The researchers attempted to explore students' attitudes towards PBL elements in literary texts classes. Similar to what Azman and Shin (2012) claim, the findings of this study reveal that the implementation of PBL enhances collaborative learning. Collaborative work launched during PBL classes have prompted the sharing of knowledge amongst learners. This means that PBL provides opportunities for learners to learn from each other as it offers an environment that encourages learners to consider opinions and perspectives different from their own. This finding is

supported by Lee and Tan's (2003) claim, which highlights the role of collaborative learning in enhancing students' critical openness. Gokhale (1995) asserts that collaborative learning is one factor that helps in creating interest in topics among learners and in promoting their critical thinking skills.

Moreover, self-reflective teaching is prompted in learning environments where PBL is a dominant learning method, allowing the learners to identify their weaknesses and mistakes during the learning processes. Optimizing critical openness through debates and share of knowledge is an opportunity for learners to replace and correct their misconceptions. According to Lee and Tan (2003), collaborative learning provides opportunity for learners to monitor their learning performances.

Concerning self-directed learning, this study reveals that active learning is prompted owing to the implementation of PBL. Active learner, therefore, is believed to increase students' participation in the learning process. These findings are in line with the findings of Markušić and Sabljčić (2019), who found that students in PBL environments are active when learning literature. Azman and Shin (2012) found that students' activeness also entails tasks completed by students within groups. Instead of preferring self-directed learning only, the students in this study assert that they also prefer the teacher's intervention during the learning process; particularly noting the importance of learners-teacher interaction.

The application of PBL has been regarded by several students as beneficial in various ways. For instance, students found that PBL has allotted time for them to practice their English. Azman and Shin (2012), Ansarian, Adlipour, Saber, and Shafiei (2016), and Markušić and Sabljčić (2019) report that implementing PBL develops students' speaking skills. Concerning students' motivation, this study has revealed that PBL increases students' motivation during literary texts classes. This outcome is similar to Azman and Shin's (2012), which suggests that PBL boosts students' motivation during the learning process in the English language classroom.

This study has not revealed students' attitudes towards problem scenarios; however, it has yielded some memory and knowledge-related findings. The students held a neutral position when asked whether PBL allows students to encounter real life situations, unlike Azman and Shin (2012) and Ansarian and Teoh (2018), who report that PBL provides opportunities for learners to encounter real-life situations. In regards to the acquisition of new knowledge, PBL is perceived to be useful, contrary to Dochy et al., (2003), who found that implementing PBL results in the acquisition of little knowledge by students. Unlike results reported by Dochy et al., (2003), who found a positive effect of PBL on knowledge retention, in this study students were neutral when asked if PBL-based activities helped in the retention of learned knowledge. PBL provides contextual learning, which, according to Godden and Baddeley (1975), is believed to be a helpful factor in knowledge retention.

Moreover, self-directed learning implied by PBL reinforces knowledge retention since self-directed learning is believed to be a boosting factor in regards to knowledge retention (Gureckis & Markant, 2012; Siriwongs, 2015). As far as opportunities for applying knowledge are concerned, this study has revealed that PBL is effective in providing opportunities for learners to apply acquired knowledge. This outcome is similar to the findings reported by Azman and Shin (2012) and Markušić and Sabljčić (2019), who found that PBL optimizes learners' critical thinking skills, which include knowledge application.

Students expressed different degrees of satisfaction in regards to various PBL aspects. For instance, PBL helps establish a good teacher-learner relationship. Most students expressed their satisfaction with the role of the teacher, whom they considered as a facilitator as well as a guide. Students also reported that during the literary texts classes where PBL is implemented, they were motivated to learn. This is in line with Azman and Shin (2012), Rahman et al., (2016) and Markušić and Sabljčić (2019), who claim that PBL implementation in language and literature classes increases students' motivation. Furthermore, this study has revealed that PBL offers opportunities for learners to learn. Learners reported the internet as being a major helping factor in finishing classroom activities, although some highlighted its potential misuse for such reasons as being distracting and providing ready-made solutions. Hence, teachers ought to monitor learners consistently for learning progress and activity completion.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study was conducted with the aim of exploring EFL students' perceptions towards the implementation of PBL in literary text course. Namely, the researchers aimed at answering the following research questions: 1) What are students' general attitudes and preferences towards diverse aspects of the learning environment? 2) According to the learners, how effective is PBL-based instruction in the literary texts classroom? Implementation and effectiveness of various aspects of PBL-based instruction in the EFL literary texts classes have been viewed positively overall by learners PBL. Survey responses have revealed that several aspects of the learning process have improved: collaborative learning, self-reliance, self-reflective learning, students' motivation, opportunities to practice English, the teacher-learner relationship, and the acquisition and application of new knowledge. As a limitation, this study could have provided more evidence in regards to the implementation of PBL in literary texts classes if it had lasted for a longer period. Accordingly, the researchers hope that future research will investigate the use of PBL in numerous fields and sub-fields of English language teaching to provide more insights for researchers and practitioners alike.

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