

English as an International Language Project-Based Learning: A Focus on Young Chinese Learners' Beliefs

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Abstract

This study explored young Chinese learners' beliefs about English as an international language through project-based language learning in a Chinese rural school. Three English teachers and 102 Grade 6 Chinese EFL learners participated in two separate phases. Phase 1 explored how teachers implemented the project-based language learning via classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. The findings from this phase were used to construct the six aspects of the EIL project-based language learning questionnaire in Phase 2. The questionnaire was developed to explore learners' beliefs about EIL and project-based language learning in a Chinese rural school. The questionnaire revealed that the learners strongly believed in learning English as an international language through project-based language learning. Five aspects received similar positive responses, namely, collaboration, authenticity, intellectual challenge and accomplishment, and project management and reflection. However, only the aspect of public product received a more negative response.

Keywords: English as an international language, project-based language learning, beliefs, young learners

1. Introduction

In today's multilingual, multicultural world, understanding the role of English as an international language (EIL) is essential for effective cross-cultural communication (Lee et al., 2019). This is even more important for Students' English proficiency in China as it is limited because they have fewer opportunities to practice and apply it in actual, real-life contexts. This is particularly true in the Chinese rural schools, where English development has been slower than in urban areas (Hou, 2017). Despite the fact that Chinese language educators have tried various teaching approaches to support students' English learning, students' English proficiency levels have not sufficiently developed. Project-based language learning (PBL) is proposed as an effective instructional tool to simultaneously improve students' content knowledge and language skills. Students in PBL classrooms in high-poverty communities have been proven to improve their academic knowledge and skills (Duke, 2016; Duke et al., 2016). Consequently, there are increasing calls to integrate PBL into the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom.

Given the critical role of learners' beliefs (Horwitz, 1999; Kalaja and Barcelos, 2012, 2019; Truong and Wang, 2019), research on the issue of young learners' beliefs and attitudes has garnered greater academic attention (Muñoz, 2014; Nilsson, 2019). Despite this little attention has been paid to the beliefs of young Chinese learners. Fewer studies have been conducted on the effects of instructional settings like PBL in rural student learning. Research that links beliefs for PBL with effective learning in rural contexts is notably absent. To address this gap, this study looked into the implementation of the currently popular teaching approach of EIL project-based language learning in a rural Chinese primary school and students' evolving beliefs about EIL Project-based language learning. This study aims to explore the implementation of EIL project-based language learning in a Chinese rural school, and the beliefs of young Chinese learners regarding EIL project-based language learning.

This study focuses on two research questions:

- 1) What are the characteristics of EIL project-based language learning implemented in the rural Chinese school?
- 2) What are young Chinese learners' beliefs towards EIL project-based language learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *English as an International Language*

English has long been viewed as an international language. The notion of English as an international language (EIL) itself is garnering increased recognition in the field of ELT. In response to the paradigm shift and the diversifying needs of English learners and teachers in this era of globalization, Matsuda (2012, 2017) has long called for incorporating EIL pedagogy into the ELT classroom and teacher education. Moreover, McKay (2018) claimed that a shift is required away from monocultural norms to encourage learners to learn to embrace diversity and their unique identities as multilingual users of the language in ELT pedagogy. Hence, the shift in paradigm from teaching English as a second/foreign language to teaching EIL needs to be manifested at the level of curricula, classroom practice and teaching materials (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Abdullah (2011) investigated how meaning is negotiated in EIL interactions among TESOL international students from Indonesia and the People's Republic of China, claiming to raise awareness of the standard varieties of English. In the most current Chinese senior secondary ELT textbooks, Xu (2013) reports on a study with a clear focus on EIL and the local usefulness of English. Hu and McKay (2014) discovered that Anglo-American and western cultural practices were more prominent in a Chinese junior secondary school English textbook than those from China and other societies. Despite its well-established presence in several edited volumes, journals, conference topics, and workshops, (teaching) EIL is and/or will continue to be an ongoing area of research, Marlina (2018) argues.

2.2 *Project-Based Language Learning*

PBL improves the prospects of students being prepared for the 21st-century business environment (Farouk, 2016), and it is believed to be part of the language teaching pedagogy essential to 21st-century learning. The approach emphasizes students' autonomy, collaborative learning, and assessments based on authentic performances that are considered to maximize students' orientation toward understanding and mastery. Many benefits of incorporating project work in the second and foreign language setting have been suggested. For instance, Stoller (2006) stated that PBL provides opportunities for the natural integration of all four language skills, similar to Fragoulis's (2009) finding that project work promoted improvement in students' four language skills, especially listening and speaking.

In addition, according to Duke (2016), the skills entailed in PBL are aligned with so-called "21st-century competencies" such as creativity, critical thinking, and cooperation. Similarly, Yazdanpanah (2019) presented four PBL-based lessons aimed at improving students' English proficiency, research and analytical skills, ability to generate and present collaborative work, and suggestions on how to plan and implement PBL activities. Furthermore, much of the existing research on PBL shows that PBL can effectively foster students' learning and engagement. Yet, relatively little research has investigated it in the terms of the learners and their beliefs, particularly young learners.

2.3 *Young Learners' Beliefs*

Research into and informed discussion of teaching English to young learners (YLS) has developed rapidly. Nunan (2011) outlined the importance of educating young language learners for the 21st century, echoing a similar statement made by Copland and Garton (2014). They noted that teaching YLS is the focus of numerous ELT professional development networks and forums worldwide. Moreover, given the pivotal role of learner beliefs in language learning, research on young learners' beliefs has increasingly received greater attention. For example, in Germany, Kolb (2007) interviewed young learners aged 8-9 and revealed that they were considerably aware of their learning process and hold elaborated beliefs which influenced both their behavior in class and their choice of learning, which also played roles in today's language learning of young learners. Muñoz (2014) highlighted that Spanish learners aged 7-12 were able to formulate and motivate beliefs and opinions about English learning. Nilsson (2019) investigated emotional responses to everyday classroom practices in another setting, specifically addressing listening, speaking, and volunteering in ten Swedish primary classrooms.

Moreover, studies dealing with PBL and YLS are becoming more numerous. Nunan (2011) suggested project-based instruction as a method and approach for young learners, and Duke (2016) argued that PBL benefited young learners. Research also has documented compelling social studies growth via PBL with young learners (Halvorsen et al., 2012). Intriguingly, Butler (2015) also focused on young learners and found various issues have been raised when implementing communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) in the East Asian context. In another study by Lin (2015), they claimed that PBL instead can foster elementary school students' ability to learn and used vocabulary in context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Context

This took place in a public rural Chinese school located in China. The participants consisted of three in-service teachers and 102 Grade 6 learners. The three in-service English teachers have taught in this public elementary school for more than 15 years for each. There were 35 classes in the sample school. One class is around 50 students on average, and usually, one English teacher teaches two classes for one academic year. The learners have studied English as a compulsory course since Grade 3. A total of 16 hours of classroom observation were conducted using two classes of Grade 6 learners, which was documented through field-notes.

3.2 Research Instruments

The instruments included classroom observation, interviews and questionnaires. In order to construct the English as an International Language Project-Based language Learning questionnaire, two phases were undertaken.

In Phase 1, classroom observation was conducted by the researcher on one teacher who taught two classes. Three in-service English teachers who have taught in the school were invited for an interview conducted in Chinese. The findings were then explored in terms of how teachers implemented project-based language learning. Data from the observations and interviews were coded and analyzed. They yielded six key aspects: intellectual challenge and accomplishment, authenticity, collaboration, project management, reflection and public product which were categorized into the questionnaire in Phase 2. After constructing the questionnaire, it was validated, pilot tested and achieved a reliability coefficient of 0.92.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

After passing the validity and reliability process, the questionnaire was distributed to 102 Grade 6 students in Classes 1 and 2. They were administered during their regular class time. The researcher instructed the participants as to how to complete the questionnaire. The data was then analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics through the SPSS program. Finally, the analyzed data was presented in mean and standard deviation (S.D.).

4. Findings

The study aims to investigate the implementation of English via International language project-based language learning and the beliefs and attitudes of young Chinese learners towards it. In so doing, classroom observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted to construct the questionnaire.

4.1 Classroom Observation and Semi-Structured Interview

The significant findings of classroom observation and semi-structured interview comprised the aspects that found to be significant in the employment of EIL PBL. These included intellectual challenge and accomplishment, authenticity, collaboration, project management, reflection and public product.

Intellectual Challenge and Accomplishment:

The teachers began the class with a given question and allowed time for students to discuss and answer. They used Chinese to explain profound concepts and to engage students in questions and discussion. In the interviews, one teacher pointed out that "practical questions make sense" (Teacher B) and can help the student meet intellectual challenges and accomplishments, therefore, they used meaningful questions to engage students in the learning.

I chose meaningful questions for the students, provided them 5 minutes to prepare, and you know, it works... like emm, just give them questions started with "HOW", emm, for example, "How to protect our environment through our daily life?".

(Teacher A)

Authenticity:

Authenticity was also found to be a significant aspect and an essential idea in an effective classroom. For example, in the study context, authentic and traditional Chinese festivities were identified as being salient. This included "the Dragon Boat Festival" which was presented in PowerPoint slides. This is consistent with what the teachers said in the interviews as they believe authenticity plays a vital role in learners' learning.

I will connect the teaching materials to real life, but, umm... you know, not very often...

(Teacher A)

...students will become more interested in their learning, so yeah, we should make it real.

(Teacher C)

Collaboration:

The next aspect is collaboration. The teacher grouped learners to undertake role-play activities. Learners were allowed to discuss in Chinese in their groups first, and then present in English later. They collected and shared information to answer their questions. According to the interviews, they collaborated in group work in their classroom. They held positive viewpoints regarding this aspect and stressed its benefits.

I think group work helps ... No student doesn't like doing group activities. I really believe it can strengthen their solidarity.

(Teacher A)

I suppose group work has an effect on my teaching. It can help academically poor students.

(Teacher C)

Project Management:

Based on the observation data, project management was achieved by providing learners with the guideline to make expectations as clear as possible. This was one of the things the researcher observed in the class. For instance:

After this class, you will be able to present and introduce the 'Dragon Boat Festival' to others.

This was also apparent in the interview. They considered it as setting the target for learners, and encouraged them to achieve it via rewards, for example, they awarded them with a new notebook.

I set up some unit targets for them, and I hoped to encourage them to achieve the target, so I would tell them there are rewards.

(Teacher B)

Reflection:

Reflection is also crucial in the observations and interviews conducted. First, the teacher provided positive comments and feedback to learners at the end of the class, with questions like:

What did you learn from this class?

Second, students were allowed to discuss in Chinese in groups first and present in English later. Before the final answer, students received initial comments from their group members. In the interviews, they mentioned mistake-corrected notebooks with their reflections. So, most students relied on the teacher's reflections.

Some students would not be willing to do peers' reflections.

(Teacher B)

My students used mistake-corrected notebooks to do reflections, and I would evaluate them at the end of the semester.

(Teacher C)

Public Products:

Perhaps the most surprising observation was the public product. This was not identified in the observation. This finding contradicts the interviews that the teachers all claimed to have hand-made poster activities to present the learners' works. According to their answers, they seemed to all take the same approach, that is, they ranked the work and then selected some for display. But not all students' products were displayed.

I had English hand-made poster activities, and I rewarded their products by selecting some to display.

(Teacher A)

I suppose, a hand-made poster activity can be our output in terms of classroom product. Usually, I will rank their work first, and then select some for presentation in the exhibition area.

(Teacher C)

In essence, the key aspects in the study context included intellectual challenge and accomplishment, authenticity, collaboration, project management and reflection. Only the aspect of public product was not evident in the

classroom. The observation process was beneficial because the actual data helped to construct an instrument that was anchored on the study context. It also informed the instrument on the beliefs of the young Chinese learners.

4.2 The Young Chinese Learners’ Beliefs Questionnaire

The previous section set out the premise of this section. The aspects identified in the classroom informed the main instrument used in examining young Chinese learners’ beliefs. The study adopted a four-point Likert scale questionnaire with the deletion of the third “neutral” point to identify students’ attitudes. Participants were asked to rank 27 statements related to their beliefs, from 1 to 4, with 1 representing strongly disagree and 4 strongly agree. The items on the questionnaire were divided into 6 categories that comprised: intellectual challenge and accomplishment, authenticity, collaboration, project management, reflection public product. These were all included along with the items that correspond to them in the questionnaires administered to 102 young Chinese learners.

Table 1. Six Aspects of EIL-PBLL

Aspects	M	S.D	Meaning
1. Intellectual challenge and accomplishment	3.01	0.69	Agree
2. Authenticity	3.04	0.80	Agree
3. Collaboration	3.05	0.83	Agree
4. Project management	3.01	0.75	Agree
5. Reflection	3.01	0.78	Agree
6. Public Product	2.63	0.97	Agree

Table 1 presents the responses to the six key aspects. As can be seen, collaboration is the most positively viewed of all six. This is followed by authenticity, intellectual challenge and accomplishment, project management and reflection. Of the six, public product recorded the lowest mean. In the sections that follows, the responses of the young Chinese learners for each key aspect are discussed.

Table 2. Young Chinese Learners’ Beliefs regarding EIL-PBLL Intellectual Challenge and Accomplishment

Items	1. Intellectual Challenge and Accomplishment: deeply, think critically, and strive for excellence				M	SD	Meaning
	Strongly Disagree f (%)	Disagree f (%)	Agree f (%)	Strongly Agree f (%)			
1.1 I like to solve real and interesting problems. (e.g., how to grow a tree on Arbor Day).	2 (1.96)	13 (12.75)	69 (67.65)	18 (17.65)	3.05	0.62	Agree
1.2 I like discussing some real and interesting topics (e.g., How to protect our environment through our daily lives.)	4 (3.92)	16 (15.69)	52 (50.98)	30 (29.41)	3.07	0.75	Agree
1.3 I like thinking about meaningful problems (e.g., How to get people involved in keeping our new Central Park clean?).	1 (0.98)	16 (15.69)	68 (66.67)	17 (16.67)	2.99	0.59	Agree
1.4 I like to think for longer and more deeply (e.g., Think about it. What is your favorite story? List three reasons).	5 (4.9)	17 (16.67)	53 (51.96)	27 (26.47)	2.94	0.82	Agree

Table 2 presents the beliefs of young Chinese learners concerning EIL-PBLL as regards intellectual challenge and accomplishment. As can be seen, the participants overwhelmingly agree that the use of EIL-PBLL is intellectually challenging as indicated by more than half of the responses. It is further observed that young Chinese learners enjoy solving real and interesting problems (67.75%); followed by thinking about meaningful problems (66.67%); and thinking for longer and more deeply and discussing interesting topics (51.96% and 50.98% respectively). Though less than the 'agree' responses, the participants also recorded interesting responses in terms of their disagreement. Some young Chinese learners disliked thinking more deeply (16.67%). Thinking about meaningful problems and discussing real and interesting topics was the next most disliked (15.69%) with solving real problems (12.75%) last. Despite exhibiting varied responses, the participants overall demonstrated positive attitudes towards the intellectual challenge aspect of EIL-PBLL.

Interestingly, the attitudes of young Chinese learners towards authenticity yielded different results. Table 3 demonstrates their beliefs concerning the aspect of The authenticity of EIL-PBLL. Generally, most participants were positive with EIL-PBLL in terms of authenticity. 'Agree' and 'strongly agree' responses dominated over those for disagree and strongly disagree. One important thing to note though is what they enjoyed the most. As can be seen, having classes about the real world elicited the most positive response with 53.92% strongly agreeing followed by discussing topics on daily life with 52.96% agreeing. These percentages indicate that authenticity is significant in their positive outlook of EIL-PBLL.

Table 3. Young Chinese Learners' Beliefs regarding EIL-PBLL Authenticity

Items	Authenticity: Students work on projects that are meaningful and relevant to their culture, their lives, and their future.				M	SD	Meaning
	Strongly Disagree <i>f</i> (%)	Disagree <i>f</i> (%)	Agree <i>f</i> (%)	Strongly Agree <i>f</i> (%)			
2.1 I enjoy having classes about the real world (e.g., the New Shalang Park.)	2 (1.96)	10 (9.8)	35 (34.31)	55 (53.92)	3.45	0.71	Agree
2.2 I like discussing some topics about my daily life.	7 (6.86)	17 (16.67)	53 (51.96)	25 (24.51)	2.97	0.78	Agree
2.3 I like doing activities outside the classroom (e.g., do some manual activities).	6 (5.88)	22 (21.57)	42 (41.18)	32 (31.37)	2.96	0.89	Agree
2.4 I like chatting with others outside my classroom.	5 (4.9)	23 (22.55)	48 (47.06)	26 (25.49)	2.89	0.85	Agree
2.5 I like answering real problems (e.g., How to promote our March 3 Lunar Festival?).	5 (4.9)	23 (22.55)	54 (52.94)	20 (19.61)	2.92	0.78	Agree

Conversely, they less enjoyed chatting with others outside the classroom and answering real problems less (both 22.55%). This is followed by doing activities outside the classroom. Although they are not statistically significant, it is worth noting that these are the factors that the students liked the least.

Table 4. Young Chinese Learners' Beliefs regarding EIL-PBLL Collaboration

Items	3. Collaboration: Students collaborate with other students in person or online and/ or receive guidance from adult mentors and experts.						
	Strongly Disagree <i>f</i> (%)	Disagree <i>f</i> (%)	Agree <i>f</i> (%)	Strongly Agree <i>f</i> (%)	M	SD	Meaning
3.1 I enjoy sharing my ideas with people.	14 (13.73)	23 (22.55)	47 (46.08)	18 (17.65)	2.72	0.88	Agree
3.2 I want my voice to be heard and to be affirmed.	4 (3.92)	18 (17.65)	41 (40.2)	39 (38.24)	3.11	0.83	Agree
3.3 I want to play a role in groupwork.	2 (1.96)	10 (9.8)	63 (61.76)	27 (26.47)	3.06	0.76	Agree
3.4 I like learning with my classmates, teachers or others.	6 (5.88)	5 (4.9)	43 (42.16)	48 (47.06)	3.31	0.84	Agree

Table 4 presents the young Chinese learners' views concerning collaboration in EIL-PBLL. Based on the data, it can be inferred that they have positive outlook on collaboration as the combined responses on 'strongly agree' and 'agree' are greater than 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree'. Perhaps the most evident is the highest response for playing a role in group work at 61.76%. This is followed by learning with my classmates at 47.06%. Despite having recorded less responses, it is also important to mention that the participants were less interested in sharing their ideas with other people and wanting their voices be heard as indicated by the 22.55% and 17.65% response rates, respectively. The data suggests that young Chinese learners lean more towards being passive or the recipients of ideas more than actively engaging with them.

Table 5. Young Chinese Learners' Beliefs regarding EIL-PBLL Project Management

Items	4. Project Management: Students use a project-management process that enables them to proceed effectively from project initiation to completion.						
	Strongly Disagree <i>f</i> (%)	Disagree <i>f</i> (%)	Agree <i>f</i> (%)	Strongly Agree <i>f</i> (%)	M	SD	Meaning
4.1 I like studying with goals (e.g., Unit 1's objectives).	2 (1.96)	9 (8.82)	56 (54.9)	35 (34.31)	3.27	0.62	Agree
4.2 I like making my study plan (e.g., making a unit study plan).	4 (3.92)	19 (18.63)	51 (50)	28 (27.45)	2.98	0.81	Agree
4.3 I like studying with a study plan and to be rewarded following completion.	2 (1.96)	18 (17.65)	52 (50.98)	30 (29.41)	3.08	0.75	Agree
4.4 I like following the teacher's guidelines or plan to study (e.g., using teacher's graphic organizers).	3 (2.94)	21 (20.59)	58 (56.86)	20 (19.61)	2.97	0.75	Agree
4.5 I like clear guidelines. (e.g., to express "I am very angry" in pictures).	7 (6.86)	29 (28.43)	46 (45.1)	20 (19.61)	2.76	0.82	Agree

The young Chinese learners exhibited an overwhelmingly positive view of EIL-PBLL as regards project management. This is indicated by the predominance of agreement on all items with four being more than half and the other slightly less than half. Specifically, the participants expressed their compliance in following the teacher's guidelines (56.86%) or plans and studying with goals (54.9%). They also like studying with a study

plan and studying with a plan (50.98% and 50%, respectively). These results show how that young learners take part in the process of their own learning. As for 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree', the participants favor clear guidelines the least (28.43%). Though this is not statistically significant it is worth noting that this is also the least in the 'agree' section at 45.1%.

Table 6. Young Chinese Learners' Beliefs regarding EIL-PBLL Reflection

Items	5. Reflection: Students reflect on their work and their learning throughout the project.				M	SD	Meaning
	Strongly Disagree f (%)	Disagree f (%)	Agree f (%)	Strongly Agree f (%)			
5.1 I like helping my classmates to check and correct their work.	16 (15.69)	24 (23.53)	41 (40.2)	21 (20.59)	2.67	0.95	Agree
5.2 I also like listening to my classmates' ideas.	4 (3.92)	13 (12.75)	60 (58.82)	25 (24.51)	2.98	0.74	Agree
5.3 I like reviewing my teacher's key notes.	1 (0.98)	4 (3.92)	59 (57.84)	38 (37.25)	3.33	0.63	Agree
5.4 I like checking my study form the teacher's grading criteria.	2 (1.96)	15 (14.71)	50 (49.02)	35 (34.31)	3.16	0.71	Agree
5.5 I like discussing and sharing what I learned with others.	7 (6.86)	19 (18.63)	50 (49.02)	26 (25.49)	2.89	0.84	Agree

Young Chinese learners demonstrated a positive response in regards to EIL-PBLL reflection. As can be seen, Table 6 presents the participants' views concerning reflection. It reveals that they have good views of reflection concerning EIL-PBLL as indicated by the overwhelming responses for 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. Specifically, they like listening to their classmates' ideas and reviewing their teacher's notes (58.82% and 57.84%, respectively). This could mean that receiving information serves as a reflective tool for them. They also have a slightly less than 50% response rate for checking their own work and discussing their ideas with others (49.02%) and helping their classmates to check their work (40.2%). The latter also recorded the highest response in terms of disagreement at 23.53%. This could mean that students are more inclined to receive than to give feedback.

Table 7. Young Chinese Learners' Beliefs regarding EIL-PBLL Public Product

Items	6. Public Product: Students' work is publicly displayed, discussed, and critiqued.				M	SD	Meaning
	Strongly Disagree f (%)	Disagree f (%)	Agree f (%)	Strongly Agree f (%)			
6.1 I want to display my hand-made poster on campus.	22 (21.57)	28 (27.45)	32 (31.37)	20 (19.61)	2.47	1.05	Disagree
6.2 I want to introduce my hand-made poster to others on campus.	22 (21.57)	33 (32.35)	33 (32.35)	14 (13.73)	2.46	0.96	Disagree
6.3 I like presenting my work to real people in competitions.	20 (19.61)	23 (22.55)	44 (43.14)	15 (14.71)	2.67	0.9	Agree
6.4 I like making my work better and presenting publicly.	18 (17.65)	14 (13.73)	36 (35.29)	34 (33.33)	2.9	0.98	Agree

Table 7 presents the views of participants regarding EIL-PBLL and the public product. Contrary to the other aspects, the results concerning learners publicly displaying their products yields rather interesting results. This is because the responses for ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ versus ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ are not far apart. Presenting their work for competitions and making their work better yielded the highest response rates for agree with 43.14% and 35.29%, respectively. These responses are important as most students are comfortable presenting their work publicly. However, there are significant results for disagree, especially for introducing their hand-made posters and displaying their hand-made work on campus at 32.35% and 27.45%, respectively. This data could mean that while they are okay with competitions and an audience in public, they are less keen on showing their work within their school community.

5. Discussion

Drawing on the findings for the classroom and semi-structured interviews, English as an international language project-based language learning (PBLL) was implemented in the school setting through the achievement of six aspects. Intellectual challenge and accomplishment, authenticity, collaboration, project management and reflection were identified in the real classroom during the classroom observation. All interviewees reported a high level of agreement with the six aspects of PBLL, while they claimed to have carried out each aspect during the interview. For example, they highlighted the effective roles of using authentic material, which is consistent with findings in other studies (Mergendoller, 2018; Chen et al., 2021).

This study examined the beliefs of young Chinese learners towards English as an international language project-based language learning (PBLL) in a Chinese rural school. The data revealed an overwhelming positive response given the predominance of ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’. The results for “collaboration,” “authenticity,” “intellectual challenge and accomplishment”, “project management” and “reflection” were positive. For collaboration, the findings indicated that most learners wanted to cooperate with others in their learning, echoing the claim of EIL that it concerned with both content and interaction (Mckay, 2018). This also concurs with previous studies (Petersen and Nassaji, 2016; Revelle et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021), which highlighted the significance of collaboration in project-based language learning.

As for authenticity, there was a high agreement on the authenticity of PBLL among young Chinese learners. It corroborated EIL’s principle that all pedagogical decisions regarding standards and curriculum should be made in reference to local language needs and local social and educational factors (Mckay, 2018). This was confirmed by Revelle et al. (2020), who valued authentic purpose and an authentic audience as key characteristics for promoting learners’ learning. Similar findings were congruent with studies by Habok (2015), Beckett and Slater (2018), and Duke et al. (2019).

Regarding intellectual challenge and accomplishment, most learners indicated a positive response to it, this interpretation is supported by a previous study (Mckay, 2018), which noted that learners’ other language should be promoted in classroom, namely how best to use the L1 in developing language proficiency. It aligns with Mergendoller (2018)’s claim that learners were expected to solve the problems, and answer the question, so they need to use L1 to facilitate their learning.

As for project management, the young Chinese learners expressed positive views towards it. As can be seen, their answers were in line with EIL’s claim that EIL also focuses on process, also echoing the studies of Mergendoller (2018), who noted that project management is the process of “applying knowledge”.

In terms of reflection, most learners believed that they need reflection to help them learn. It parallels with the assumption of EIL that its primary function is to enable speakers to share their ideas and culture with others (Mckay, 2002). This is consistent with Mergendoller’ study (2018), which revealed that through reflection, students retained project content and skills longer, developed a greater sense of control over their education, and built confidence in themselves.

Another finding to note is that young Chinese learners are more inclined to being passive as regards both collaboration and reflection. They appear to be more comfortable with receiving input than actively contributing. This passiveness is also evident in their views towards publicly displaying their work. They are more confident to show their work to people outside their own classroom, but that does not include fellow students on campus. They are even more willing to show their work to other people and even engage with public competitions.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated young Chinese learners’ beliefs towards EIL-PBLL. The results indicate that their views are highly positive view. Methodologically, the study offered key aspects that are well grounded in the context of the study as they emerged from the context itself. This provided a somewhat clearer picture of the aspects that

are essential in a Chinese multilingual setting. Thus, given the positive results, it can be inferred that EIL PBL is a powerful tool in multicultural settings. Understanding learner beliefs about language learning is essential (Genç et al., 2016; Kalaja and Barcelos, 2019; Truong and Wang, 2019), and PBL appears to be effective in improving students' achievements (Duke, 2016), as it connects students with their communities with real purpose and audience to help learners view it positively. Although the study yielded positive results, it may not be sufficient to generalize as it concentrates on a single context. Despite its inconclusiveness, the study offers two practical suggestions for language teaching in rural schools: 1) teachers' knowledge of EIL PBL should be improved, trained and applied more fully; and 2) greater attention should be paid to learners in rural areas in terms of developing their ability to learn through project-based language learning. The present study contributes to the rich contemporary literature on EIL-PBL.

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