Effectiveness of project-based learning model with English language in higher education: A practical case in the Degree of Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the implementation and impact of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in teaching English for Tourism in the Degree of Tourism at the University of A Coruña (Spain). Recognizing the growing importance of English proficiency in the flourishing Spanish tourism industry, this study aimed to enhance students' language skills and engage them in meaningful learning experiences. The results indicate that students exhibited high motivation and interest in PBL, showcasing the practical relevance of theoretical knowledge to their future careers. By adopting this innovative teaching approach, students not only improved their English fluency but also acquired crucial skills for the tourism sector. The research underscores the effectiveness of PBL with first-year students, demonstrating their ability to successfully complete 12-week projects that integrated practical application of course content and language acquisition. This study advocates for the continued use of PBL in foreign language education to bridge the gap between theoretical learning and real-world applications.

Keywords: *English for Tourism; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); project-based learning; language proficiency; intercultural communication.*
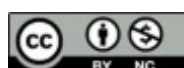
I. INTRODUCTION

English language and the tourism sector are closely related in international communication as this language enables tourists from diverse linguistic backgrounds to communicate effectively. Students enrolled in the degree of Tourism in general, and in Spain in particular, are conscious of this and know that mastering this language is essential and even more so in the Spanish tourism sector for different compelling reasons.

After the impact caused by the pandemic on tourism, which led to a 74% drop in demand according to the United Nations World Trade Organisation (UNWTO, 2021), this sector continues to experience substantial growth all over the world including Spain, reaching figures which are close to the records set in the year 2019, before the global health crisis lived. This recovery shows that tourism, one of the most affected sectors, has proven to be resilient and able to rebound despite being highly sensitive to risk scenarios as seen during the worldwide lockdown. Crises within this sector are not new and it could be stated that they are frequent, and this reality has led to the development of strategies that have forced a severe reconfiguration of many of its segments (Gössling et al., 2020; Collins-Kreiner & Ram, 2021).

In line with this continuous evolution of the tourism industry, effective communication in English has become crucial for various stakeholders, including tourists, hospitality professionals, and tourism businesses. English has emerged as the language of tourism, facilitating interactions and operations across the global tourism sector (McIntyre, 2009). Speaking English to enhance customer experiences, facilitating intercultural communication, and improving overall service quality within the Spanish tourism context has become increasingly vital for success within this sector. Numerous reasons explain why English language proficiency is of utmost importance in the Spanish tourism industry, causing a direct impact on customer satisfaction, professional development, and industry growth.

Considering this context, English language in the degree of Tourism in Spain is compulsory and the courses are designed to help future professionals as it is a basic

tool within the tourism and hospitality industry. In contrast to this reality, there is an underlying problem that reveals that throughout history the teaching and learning of languages in this country has not been particularly characterized by good results nor received the importance they deserved as was the case of the English language until the 1970s (Criado & Sánchez, 2009).

Fortunately, the teaching of languages in Spain has been highly improved and adjusted to European requirements after the different regulations and new laws on education. The application of the Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLT), with the support of the Council of Europe, was introduced officially in the last part of the 20th century. However, the reality shows that the level students reach in the English language at the end of secondary school is not uniform. In addition, the teaching methodology keeps being focused on principles that do not conform to CLT, and in some cases, the communicative skills are not developed (Cerezo, 2007).

Project-based learning (PBL) seems to be an instructional approach that allows Spanish students the opportunity to learn and use English focusing on communicative purposes applying the theory learned (content learning) during the course through the integration of tasks that can be applied to real-life situations of the tourism sector as it is product-as well as process-oriented (Stoller, 2002). PBL activities motivate students while making them use language skills collaboratively and empower them to build their confidence in the English language. It could be stated that PBL makes the students see that the learning and the use of the English language become both the means and the end (Simpson, 2011).

The next sections develop the aspects just mentioned, examine the existing literature, and describe the different stages of the project applying PBL. This research contributes to the validity of PBL in teaching English as a second foreign language, particularly for students studying a degree in Tourism.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-based learning is an instructional approach that emphasizes active and authentic learning experiences through the completion of projects. Its description cannot be assigned to a unique definition but, after reviewing the literature, there is an agreement to be described as centred on the learner (Bas, 2012). This flexible pedagogical method encourages students to explore complex problems, collaborate with their peers and apply critical thinking skills to solve real-world challenges. This approach, highly implemented in recent years by many researchers (Barron et al., 1998; Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Grant, 2011), engages learners in a deeper understanding of the subject matter while developing important skills such as problem-solving, communication and teamwork.

PBL involves transversality, integrating different disciplines, and often requires students to work in groups. The duration of the projects can range from long-term assignments with interim reports and tasks to short-term as well as in-depth investigations that allow students to delve into a topic and develop a comprehensive understanding.

Previous studies on this type of learning have shown numerous benefits of implementing PBL in educational settings. It enhances student engagement and motivation by presenting them with meaningful and relevant tasks (Tirado-Morueta et al., 2022). The selection of contents and exercises that can be encountered in a real professional environment helps the students to see the direct application of their knowledge, which increases their interest and investment in the learning process (Brown et al., 1989). Additionally, PBL promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills as students analyse information, make connections, and propose creative solutions (Johnson & Johnson, 2013; Maros et al. 2023). Furthermore, the collaborative nature of PBL fosters communication and teamwork abilities, which are vital in today's interconnected world (Jaya & Mortini, 2023). Different studies have demonstrated the positive impact of PBL on student achievement. For example, a meta-analysis conducted by Bell (2010) examined 43 studies and found that PBL resulted in

significantly higher achievement test scores than traditional instructional methods. Another study, conducted by Helle et al. (2007), compared students' performance between a PBL environment and a lecture-based setting, revealing that the PBL group exhibited superior understanding and application of concepts compared to the lecture group. In 2004, a previous study published by Kloppenborg and Baucus stated the validity of projects as thanks to them students are more interested in learning as they combine social skills, teamwork, communications skills, and awareness of the requirements for their future jobs.

All these positive aspects have led to the application of PBL to improve foreign language learning of English in university studies in tourism.

II.1. Project-based learning (PBL) to teach English as a foreign language in higher education: the case of English for Tourism at the University of A Coruña

The traditional learning process of the English language in Spanish classrooms has historically been characterised by a teacher-centred system rather than a student-centred method. In line with this traditional approach, teachers used to be mainly senders of theoretical content and students became passive recipients who learned a wide variety of grammatical rules instead of using language for communicative purposes. Nevertheless, this teaching approach is progressively less frequent these days albeit many secondary schools continue practicing this methodology and most first-year university students present an uneven language proficiency, conditioned by the type of instruction received.

Fortunately, this teacher-oriented approach has evolved into a more learner-centred perspective to enhance students' motivation, linguistic confidence, and autonomy. The communicative language teaching approach (CLT), whose aim is language use to improve second language acquisition and engage the learner in different social contexts and active classroom activities (Johnson, 1995; Boyd & Maloof, 2000), is one of the approaches applied in some Spanish secondary schools and the students who were taught following this type of learning show a higher confidence at university.

To cope with this generalised situation, two approaches were chosen to teach English to first-year students in the degree of Tourism at the UDC: PBL combined with CLT, which is also connected to PBL. After the adaptation of this learning model to teach foreign languages (Krashen, 1982) and prove that this systematic methodology helps students to develop their skills when learning a language (Ribé & Vidal, 1993) as well as their soft skills, such as collaborative work, critical thinking and communicative skills (Karyawati & Ashadi, 2018), different projects have been developed using PBL in English as Foreign Language classes (EFL) (Hutchinson, 1996; Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009; Liu, 2016; Poonpon, 2017; Syakur et al., 2020) since then.

This study exemplifies the primary motivation to apply this method: to provide students with a more practical, effective, and meaningful approach to learning English, specifically in the field of tourism. One of the course objectives was to change the focus: a less dominant teacher who becomes a co-communicator, a transmitter, and a more passive element in the learning process whilst the student becomes an expert who controls the content and their learning. The students made their own decisions choosing one of the activities offered and had to apply the course contents given in class.

The idea behind this change of roles is mainly that these students experienced firsthand how-to-learn skills and language skills (Nunan, 1989). In addition to this, in PBL teachers play a great role, which differs completely from the traditional one, as they are assistants who help students find their learning journey (Newell, 2003) and, at the same time, become advisors who monitor the process and help their students solve problems during the different stages of the project.

The subject chosen to apply this project-based learning was Modern Language: English, a core course in the first year of the degree. This course is an introduction to English for tourism, designed to help students acquire specialized vocabulary in the tourism industry. The main content focuses on cultural heritage, tourism history, gastronomy and itineraries. The course also aims to build confidence in professional skills, including making presentations, creating tourist routes and brochures, describing monuments and sites of interest and learning public speaking to work as a tour guide.

The course is always taught during the first semester of the academic year, from September to December. Regarding the number of weeks, it usually lasts between 12-14 weeks, depending on holidays, and the content is divided into four units, designed to be taught for three weeks each.

The criteria determined to assess the course include a variety of methods that allow the teacher to test the individual and group learning of each student, given the collaborative ethos of the subject. The grading of the course relies on the following scores: all students must pass a written examination which represents 50% of the overall assessment, the group project which accounts for 20% and two speaking examinations, which are part of the project presentations and the discussions during the interim report presentations, which are 30% of the total.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

English language is included in Spanish education from pre-school (3 years-old children) until the end of high school (17-18 years-old students). After fifteen years of studying English, students should have a high proficiency in this language when starting at the university. In contrast, the reality could hardly be more different as university teachers must begin going back to the basics, reviewing grammar and pronunciation, teaching them how to speak in public and make presentations instead of proceeding directly to more academic content. One of the main problems lies in the focus, which has traditionally been on grammar and vocabulary rather than practical communication skills. Insufficient emphasis on speaking and listening skills, limited exposure to authentic English materials, absence of frequent direct contact with native speakers and large class sizes have hindered language acquisition (Neff et al., 2009). Furthermore, the limited number of weekly English classes and the lack of continuous practice opportunities outside the classroom impede the development of fluency and confidence in using the English language.

With this context in mind, the present study aims to apply PBL and answer how effective this method is in implementing the English language learning process for

students in the degree of Tourism. To encourage these students of English to apply the knowledge of their specific field acquired during the course and their language skills, this research wanted to prove if PBL could help to achieve the following primary objectives:

- Improving both oral and written levels of English of students.

- Improving students' communicative skills

Along with these primary objectives, a secondary objective that is directly interconnected to them was established: avoiding the usage of their mother tongue when working together to prepare the final project.

III.1. Participants: The Teacher and the Student's Role in PBL

In this PBL experience the teacher's role suffered a substantial change with this methodology from the traditional one and the students were informed about this difference from the first moment. This is one of the requirements of PBL to be effective (Levy, 1997) so the teacher became a new figure in charge of coordinating, guiding, and advising the students once the groups were organised and began to develop the first activity. In this case, once the students were informed about the change in the learning process, which was quite surprising for them, the content and the distinct stages of the activity were explained.

At the student level, they saw their involvement was completely active as they had to make decisions and be part of a group, working collaboratively, from the beginning. This required a high level of commitment from the first week of the project.

The activity included the official number of students enrolled during the first semester of the academic year 2022-2023 which was 60 although 52 were the ones who finally took part in the projects, as some of them had the subject validated or were repeaters who were not able to attend the classes. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 20 years old and all of them had studied English subjects stated in the curriculum in their primary and secondary schools. Their level was not homogeneous as proficiency in

English is not required and, although those coming from secondary school should have achieved a B2 level, the differences were remarkable.[1]

Regarding their distribution, the students were divided into two classes to attend the sessions during the week. In this case, the students were required to work in groups of five, so the total number was 8 with 5 members and 2 with 6 students. There was not a fixed leader to represent each group as they were asked to assume this role on a rotational basis so they could live this experience equally.

III. 2. Project procedure: PBL content and stages of the project work

The procedure followed was to present the students the opportunity to develop a project as part of their final assessment to pass the subject at the end of the semester and apply the content learned during the weeks that the course lasted.

The first week was devoted to the explanation of the course content and the revision of basic aspects of the English language. During the second week, the students received the necessary information about the project development, its description, and the rubric to assess the student's work.

Following Bell (2010), the students have to receive a topic to be developed through either project work or research and the learning process can be either individual or in groups. In both cases, students are overseen and monitored by a teacher during the stages of the project to guide the students. In this case, the students were informed they had to work in groups, and they had to choose among four different projects focused on the promotion of the autonomous region of Galicia[2] as a tourist destination:

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1 Students in Spain who want to enter a Spanish public university are required a secondary school diploma as well as have passed a group of entry exams, known as *Selectividad*, among which there is a foreign language test. The language most students choose is English, and although the level achieved is usually B2, the differences between rural and urban areas are highly notorious (Neff et al., 2009).

2 Galicia, in the north-west of Spain, has achieved a leadership position in the tourism sector in the last two decades as an important tourist destination partly due to pilgrimage routes to Santiago (Saint James Way), its gastronomy and its incredible nature (Santos & Trillo-Santamaría, 2017), promoted by rural tourism highly in demand, mainly after Covid 19 pandemic (Araújo-Vi-

- Design of a travel brochure.

- Creation of a promotional video.

- Creation of a gastronomy blog to promote Galician cuisine.

- Creation of a three-day tour in A Coruña city or a week tour around the region of Galicia

During weeks three and four, there was a general introduction to basic vocabulary, the history of tourism, the travel industry, and the importance of tourism in Spain and Galicia. In addition to this, the students received information about PBL, the distribution of the weeks for the development of the project and they were informed about the compulsory requirement of handing in an interim report to control and assess the project progress once a month.

All the groups were also informed they had to communicate their choice of one of the four projects, together with a draft, containing the main ideas and the title for their project for the fourth week. The different groups had to schedule their meetings and they could choose an internet tool (MS Teams, WhatsApp, Zoom, or Skype) for communication and video conferences if all group members approved it. Before meeting this deadline, the students had to schedule a date with the teacher to present their initial ideas, doubts, sources of information, first readings, and research on the topic to justify their choice and the validity of their project for the end of the second week. At the end of this feedback session and after reaching an agreement about the project's name and main objectives, the groups were ready to start their research in depth, gather information, distribute the tasks for the group members, and schedule their meeting sessions.

In the fourth week, each group made their first in-class presentation to report on their research progress. During this face-to-face meeting, they presented an outline of the project, covering the activity chosen, the first problems met, the internet tool used for their online meetings, and their meeting evidence (screenshots).

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la et al., 2021; González et al, 2020;). Its higher level of professionalization and its promotional campaigns both by local institutions and private investors have also contributed to increasing its competitiveness within the national tourist market.

From week five to eight, the students collected the primary data and during that period the teacher provided the necessary support when required. They were required to select their primary and secondary sources and find sources from the Internet and specialised journals, with at least two sources accessed from the university library. Depending on the topic chosen and when possible, they had to take photos, conduct interviews, go on field trips and visit tourist information points and tourism-related businesses[3].

At the end of week eight, each student handed in their first written interim report and in week nine they made a short presentation using a digital tool (Microsoft PowerPoint, Genially, Canva…). The evaluation criteria were based on three areas: language (paying special attention to the use of specific vocabulary), communicative abilities, and content of the presentation. After the presentation, each group was asked a few questions both by the teacher and the rest of the students.

It is necessary to mention that one of the requirements demanded of all the students was that all groups had to ask a minimum of two questions at the end of each presentation to encourage participation, catch their attention, and get their engagement in the other projects. During these short presentations, the teacher made notes on the students' work and gave the written reports back with comments, corrections, and suggestions to improve the project.

In the last three weeks, they had to solve the problems met until that moment (team members' conflicts, meeting deadlines, cooperation with team members, search for appropriate information, good range of vocabulary, improving presentations…) and incorporate the suggestions offered by the teacher regarding the contents covered during the course and their communicative skills before the final presentation in week twelve.

During the last week of the course, the teacher interviewed all the groups to offer the students the possibility to answer a few questions to evaluate the experience and to

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3   Some academic aspects were also required for the presentation of the interim reports of the project as it is the use of a particular citation style. At this stage, the help of the teacher was needed and gave a masterclass to explain the specific conventions in terms of contents, structure and style that an academic text should present.

have the opportunity to talk in detail about what they learned with this methodology, highlight the most important obstacles met during those weeks as well as the most important positive aspects and the skills acquired during those weeks.

IV. PROJECT RESULTS FROM THE STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

One of the main reasons for choosing the PBL model was to improve student's learning of the English language for Tourism and to encourage them to use it in a practical context. In addition to this, another objective was to avoid individuality and get the highest level of interaction. With these premises in mind, the students were asked to participate in an in-class meeting to evaluate the experience at the end of the course. They adopted a very positive attitude and the major questions they had to answer regarding the evaluation and implementation of the project were five: perception of the schedule for the activities and the in-class presentations (Q.1), application of the course content for the project (Q.2), evaluation of the communicative skills requirements (Q.3), evaluation of the group work experience (Q.4), degree of satisfaction and suggestions for future editions of the project (Q.5).

The analysis of the responses shows that the level of the student's satisfaction is mostly positive. Regarding the timing of the whole project, most of the groups consider it correct (see Table 1), except for one group (group 8) which thinks that the other teachers should not have set assessment tasks during the week of the project presentations.

Table 1. *Perception of the schedule for the activities and the in-class presentations*

Q.1	
GROUP 1	"The time spam scheduled for the preparation of the different tasks was well calculated, but the group members had some problems meeting because we had a lot of assignments"
GROUP 2	"Some members took the term "responsibility" and "deadline" very loosely and they seemed they did not want to participate but the group could meet the deadlines to hand in the different tasks. "

GROUP 3	"We could meet all the deadlines and we could present all the tasks"
GROUP 4	"The schedule was perfect"
GROUP 5	"Our group didn't have any problems. Of course, setting up the meetings was difficult because of the busy schedules but apart from that we would say that working with my team was a pleasure and we had enough time to complete all the stages of the project"
GROUP 6	"The group had to work hard to prepare the project and respect the deadlines"
GROUP 7	"The group had a problem on one occasion to meet one of the deadlines but, in general, everything was fine."
GROUP 8	We think this project should have a better time plan and teachers could meet and avoid setting exams in the week we have the project presentations".

Concerning the second question, the groups expressed great satisfaction with the possibility of applying the theoretical content taught during the course (Table 2) and learning the specific language and skills required for their future professional needs.

Table 2. *Application of the course content for the project*

Q.2	
GROUP 1	"Some members of the group had a low level of English, so it was an excellent opportunity to learn and practice English"
GROUP 2	"Thanks to the project we could use the vocabulary of the units and prepare a project which is directly connected to the tourism sector"
GROUP 3	"The preparation of the project was a very good opportunity to practice speaking, be more fluent in English, and use the specific vocabulary of our degree"
GROUP 4	"The activities were about tourism and not general English as in secondary school"
GROUP 5	"We think the project was beneficial for us because we learned to speak in public and use English in the field of tourism"
GROUP 6	"We learned to describe monuments and historical sites in English, and all the vocabulary was really useful to prepare the project"
GROUP 7	"The level of the course was a bit difficult for us but we could learn the different activities"
GROUP 8	"We learned to speak and write in English focusing on tourism and search for information"

Analysing the students' responses to the third question (Table 3), verbal communication skills are one of their major concerns. A few students mentioned they could use electronic devices such as tablets or laptops in their school and had prepared oral presentations in different subjects (team 3 and team 5). In contrast, it was surprising to hear that a great majority had never made a group presentation in English (groups 1 and 4) or did not feel confident enough to speak in English (group 7). The case of Group 7 is an example of how the lack of soft skills, confidence, and fluency in English outshone their final project presentation despite being very creative and presenting innovative ideas.

Table 3. *Evaluation of the communicative skills requirements*

Q.3	
GROUP 1	"We were very nervous because it was the first time that some people in the group had to make an oral presentation in front of a whole class"
GROUP 2	"Our skill presentations were very low, and we didn't feel confident during the first presentation but thanks to the teacher's help we learned how to speak in public and make a presentation in English"
GROUP 3	"Some members of the group come from the same school, and it was not the first time we had to prepare an oral presentation so we could help the other members and guide them"
GROUP 4	"Two of the members did not want to speak in public because they said they were very bad at English, but we helped them and, in the end, they prepared an acceptable presentation"
GROUP 5	"All the group members had made oral presentations at secondary school. Good experience"
GROUP 6	"It was difficult at first and we had to make a great effort to correct body language. We spoke very slowly, and it was difficult for us to look at our classmates"
GROUP 7	"Our group knew how to make a PowerPoint, but it was very difficult to speak in English"
GROUP 8	"Good opportunity to practice English and speak in public"

The responses obtained when the groups were asked about how they evaluated the group work experience can be classified into two main groups: internal disagreements between the members of the group due to a lack of commitment or lack of motivation

because of their low English language skills (Group 1, Group 2 and Group 6) and those who overcame internal problems related to the distribution of the workload and tasks (Group 3, Group 4 and Group 5).

Table 4. *Evaluation of the Group Work Experience*

Q.4	
GROUP 1	"We had trouble organizing our time at first, but we managed to meet in the late evening hours, and everything was fine. In addition to this, the project allowed us the opportunity to help each other and now we are good friends"
GROUP 2	"It was difficult to distribute work equally among team members because some members had serious difficulties to speak English and were not motivated"
GROUP 3	"We learned to solve different problems regarding teamwork thanks to this project. The experience was incredible and fulfilling"
GROUP 4	"We needed to be organized and everyone got involved in the project"
GROUP 5	"We learned that one person doesn't have to do everything in the group and there are people who are willing to cooperate."
GROUP 6	"Working in a group can be challenging as not everyone has the same level of motivation or the same level in English."
GROUP 7	"We learned to listen to everyone's opinion and to reach an agreement."
GROUP 8	"We learned the importance of speaking English and being well-organised"

Finally, the last question (Table 5), expected by all the groups, was to know their degree of satisfaction as well as to provide some ideas and suggestions for future editions of the project. Their main message was that the teachers who were not involved in this subject were informed about the project to avoid other assessment tasks during the weeks when the presentations were scheduled. The students also provided some interesting ideas such as the creation of a blog (Group 3) to upload the projects or giving a special recognition to the best project (Group 5). The final message transmitted by all the students is that the project had been a good opportunity to improve their English and their communication skills, learn group commitment, and learn how to solve problems.

Table 5. *Degree of satisfaction and suggestions for future editions of the project*

	Q.5
GROUP 1	"I think the project itself is something interesting and teamwork with other students is a rewarding experience, but it would be easier if everyone took an active part in it. It is a very good experience, and it helps to make friends"
GROUP 2	"Maybe the university could offer a course about learning communicative skills and about making presentations during the first month of the course because other students were much better than our group,"
GROUP 3	"We enjoyed the project, and we learned a lot about tourism. A suggestion to implement the project could be to create a blog with the projects."
GROUP 4	"If we could change something we would like only a little better control over the people participating, so some of the other students wouldn't be so laid back about it leaving others to do almost all of the work"
GROUP 5	"Students could be more motivated if the groups could choose the best project and win a prize"
GROUP 6	"In next year's edition, the project could include more activities and more destinations".
GROUP 7	"The project was well planned, in our opinion, and all the projects were very interesting and focused on Tourism and not general English"
GROUP 8	Our group was very happy with the project but in a future edition all teachers should coordinate and avoid exams when the presentations are scheduled"

V. ENSURING THE USE OF ENGLISH AS A VEHICULAR LANGUAGE

One of the main objectives when choosing the PBL model was challenging: avoiding the use of the student's mother tongue when working together and ensuring the use of English as a vehicular language by selecting an activity connected to the Tourism sector. Several strategies were employed to achieve this that helped to guide and monitor the students throughout the project: weekly in-class monitoring; diverse group composition; interim reports and interim presentations, regular in-class feedback and assessment.

During the in-class sessions when groups worked together, strict monitoring done by the teacher ensured that English was used exclusively. The teacher regularly observed interactions among students to ensure compliance and reinforced the consistent use of English.

Another element that took an important role in the project was Erasmus students. Every year the UDC receives them in its classes and most of them are not fluent in Spanish, necessitating the use of English for all group interactions. Their presence and inclusion in the different groups compelled Spanish-speaking students to communicate in English. This strategy enhanced their language skills and ensured the project's linguistic objectives were met.

Students were also required to prepare and present interim reports in English throughout the project duration. These reports and periodic short presentations provided regular practice and served as checkpoints to assess and ensure consistent use of English. In addition to this, regular feedback was provided after each interim report and presentation, focusing on content and use of English. This iterative process allowed students to improve their language skills progressively, ensuring that English was consistently used in their collaborative activities.

By implementing these strategies, it was possible to create an immersive English-speaking environment within the field of tourism, facilitating the use of English as a vehicular language. These measures ensured that students adhered to the language requirement, thereby effectively achieving the project's objective. During the final week of the course, the teacher interviewed all groups, providing students with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, discuss the challenges and positive aspects they encountered, and highlight the skills acquired throughout the project. This last meeting also helped the teacher assess the evolution of the students.

VI. DISCUSSION

In this study, PBL was the methodology chosen to implement a key subject within the Degree of Tourism in the UDC and it was presented as a project to learn and apply the English language after the selection of an activity connected to the Tourism sector.

Additionally, as has just been described above, interviews with all the groups were conducted to capture the experiences of students in implementing project-based

activities within their English for Tourism classes at the end of the course. This facilitated an exploration of the benefits and limitations of these activities, as well as potential strategies to overcome challenges encountered.

At the end of this round of interviews with the different groups, it was possible to identify two main findings, one of them directly connected to students and another one to the teacher responsible for the subject. The finding connected to students was their satisfaction at having been able not only to make a presentation, which was a first-time experience for some groups; but also conducting it in English and seeing the practical implementation of the theoretical concepts. In addition to this, thanks to this project-based activity they admitted having increased their level of commitment and involvement. This fact ratifies those studies in this field which state that PBL is a tool that helps students to improve their communication and social skills.

 In contrast to this finding, they had to tackle two main educational weaknesses: making a presentation and improving their English level. Their first weakness was preparing a presentation as most of them admitted a lack of practice and no formal training in giving any type of presentation. Concerning the level of English, those students with a lower level of English language proficiency for the course received support and reinforcement in tutoring hours and a few of them also started to attend private lessons.

The finding garnered from the implementation of this project from the perspective of the teacher was to witness the significant practical potential of this pedagogical methodology and the high level of receptiveness by the students. They were introduced to an instructor with a markedly distinct role from the traditional secondary school teacher. This new image of the teacher as a coach and problem solver has played a pivotal role in the relationship with students who were previously accustomed to instructors who merely transmitted theoretical knowledge. However, this teaching approach centred on learners instead of centred on contents made the teacher reconduct the initial planning and incorporate some changes as the project evolved which implied increased monitoring. Additionally, the students have exhibited several shortcomings, needing additional support to complete the project.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The limited English proficiency among Spanish speakers has been a subject of discussion and concern for years in Spain as it has been exposed in this paper. The factors involved range from cultural factors to the effectiveness of English language education in schools and, in some cases, a combination of both.

Cultural factors, for instance, have played a significant role in shaping language learning attitudes and behaviours in the case of Spain, a country where there is still a lack of exposure to English in everyday life. In addition to this, limited opportunities for immersion in an English-speaking environment and a predominant use of Spanish in social interactions do not contribute to the development of English language skills. A second element considered is the Spanish educational system, and how the low effectiveness of English language education in schools has impacted directly in poor proficiency levels among students at the end of secondary education. While English is taught as a compulsory subject in Spanish schools from the age of three, the focus has traditionally been on grammar and vocabulary rather than practical communication skills. Insufficient emphasis on speaking and listening skills limited exposure to authentic English materials, and large class sizes coupled with the limited number of English classes per week hinder language acquisition and limit the development of fluency and confidence in using the English language.

With this background and with the use of the PBL model, this project with first-year university students has proved to be an effective pedagogical approach that has promoted transversality as well as active and authentic learning experiences far from the traditional teaching at secondary schools. Through engaging in this project, students have improved not only their soft skills but also their English language fluency and deepened their understanding of the subject matter, which was the main objective of this project-based experience. The results also prove students were more aware of their needs and shortcomings during the project. They also developed essential skills in the English language, self-confidence when making presentations,

enhanced their motivation, and showed a high degree of commitment to challenging problems resolved thanks to their collaborative hard work and their teacher's supervision.

The project also successfully ensured the consistent use of English as a vehicular language through a structured approach. Key strategies included (vigilant in-class monitoring, the integration of non-Spanish-speaking Erasmus students, mandatory English-language interim reports and presentations, and systematic feedback on language proficiency) contributed to achieve this objective. These measures collectively encouraged an English-speaking environment and helped to meet the project's linguistic objectives effectively. It is important to note that the success of this initiative required significant teacher involvement and considerable effort, underscoring the intensive nature of the project's implementation.

This study also submits evidence that implementing PBL effectively requires careful planning and support from educators. Their role in designing meaningful projects is crucial, providing guidance throughout the process, and facilitating reflection and evaluation. It cannot be ignored that it is also essential to align the projects with curriculum goals and learning objectives while allowing for flexibility and student autonomy.

In addition to this, the combination of the project-based methodology and the grading criteria applied, which is not exclusively based on a traditional written examination and individual speaking tasks, let the students see themselves committed to attending and see that without their presence the collaborative process disappears. The need for attendance is another important aspect of studying at a university, even more so after the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and, in this respect, project-based learning contributes to the recovery of face-to-face interaction and the incorporation of active class discussions.

To conclude, the integration of PBL in this educational setting has shown positive effects on student achievement and based on the results, should be identified as an effective instructional strategy for teaching English for specific purposes. This research aims to be a valuable resource for educators seeking effective methodologies for English

language instruction in the tourism and hospitality industry. Mastery of this subject is increasingly important for future non-native professionals and is essential for effective communication in today's globalized hospitality and tourism sector.

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