IMPLEMENTING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES – A CASE OF KOSOVAR LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS

DONJETË LATIFAJ

University of Business and Technology, Prishtine, Kosovo

and

BRIKENA XHAFERI

South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia

Abstract. Project-based learning (PBL) is a contemporary educational approach in which students engage in authentic tasks and scenarios while working on various projects. Throughout the process, students are encouraged to participate actively in their learning. Since this methodology is not commonly used in Kosovo, the current study aimed to assess the extent to which information and communication technology (ICT) is utilized during the implementation of PBL in lower secondary English classes in Kosovo. Furthermore, the study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of PBL in enhancing students' ability to acquire English as a foreign language. The study focused on analyzing teachers' perspectives on the use of ICT when implementing PBL in English classes. The findings from an online survey show that teachers use ICT to a certain degree when implementing PBL and that a considerable number of teachers are interested in receiving specialized training to enhance their use of technology in future classes. Generally, teachers prefer project-based methods, but PBL is not widely utilized in the Kosovar education system. Finally, teachers and students with a positive attitude towards ICT and PBL are willing to implement them in their school settings.

Key words: project-based learning, ICT, critical thinking, creative thinking, English language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this research was to investigate innovative teaching techniques and methodologies for English classes in lower secondary schools in

Kosovo, with the goal of enhancing the quality of education and its outcomes. The study aimed to identify effective practices from education systems that are more advanced on an international level, with an emphasis on student-centered teaching and critical-thinking methods. Therefore, this research paper draws from an unpublished doctoral dissertation (Latifaj, 2022).

Project-based learning (PBL) is widely recognized as a beneficial approach for Kosovo, particularly at the lower-secondary school level. This study is particularly important for Kosovo and the ongoing discussion about the mismatch between education and the needs of the labor market. Kosovo is in the early stages of educational development and undergoing reforms and organizational changes. Despite these efforts, there has been only modest progress in recent years, according to the European Commission Report, and there is a significant need to improve the quality of education. The high rate of youth unemployment (55.4%) highlights a discrepancy between the outcomes of education and the demands of the labor market. A medium to long-term economic threat is also posed by brain drain, particularly among educated young people (European Commission Report, 2019). While elementary (96%) and secondary (88.1%) enrollment rates are high in Kosovo, the results of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) suggest that the quality and relevance of education are insufficient when compared to EU standards. Despite this, there is a growing interest among young Kosovar students in learning English from an early age. Despite the significance of teaching English as a Foreign Language in Kosovo, there have been only a limited number of empirical studies that have investigated the most effective methodologies. This study is important because it highlights the value of incorporating project-based approaches in English language classes. Proficiency in English can significantly benefit individuals in various aspects of their lives; therefore, students, teachers, and researchers should focus on exploring the latest methods, techniques, and strategies to facilitate the teaching and learning of English. Furthermore, teachers should consider techniques to enhance students' critical thinking skills, which can help expand their English vocabulary, improve their study habits, and develop practical competencies. The integration of PBL in English classes can provide an alternative structure for language acquisition in schools.

Recent research suggests that PBL is an innovative method that enables students to learn actively in the classroom and enables teachers to facilitate instruction effectively. This approach moves away from the conventional passive learning model typically observed in classrooms. Project-based learning focuses on student learning, fostering intellectual stimulation and engagement by involving students in active learning. Rather than merely imparting information on a specific topic, PBL empowers teachers to help students learn essential life skills and acquire the tools necessary to deal with real-life situations. By participating in projects, students can gain critical thinking skills and practical experience that can be applied to real-life settings outside of the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The educational approach of PBL emphasizes creating end products or projects, as described by Thomas (2000: 1). However, many teachers do not fully comprehend the significance of PBL and assume that it is an effortless method. In contrast, PBL is a sophisticated approach to teaching and learning. According to Pham (2018: 327), PBL aligns education with essential skills and immerses students in the learning process, fueling their motivation and creativity. PBL encourages students to explore beyond just one subject, and, as Gökçen (2005: 25) suggests, project work offers significant benefits as an instructional technique and alternative assessment tool in education. Project work also aids language development in multiple ways. The advantages of projects can be grouped under two broad themes: 'projects in developing students' social skills and projects in developing students' linguistic competence' (ibid.).

This contemporary approach to learning equips students with important skills necessary for success in the current century. In PBL, students drive their own learning process through inquiry and work together in groups to study and create projects that reflect their comprehension. Students benefit from this method of training in a variety of ways, from learning new, useful technological skills to becoming excellent communicators and proficient change-makers (Bell, 2010: 1). Teachers know that a lot of effort is required to make a project successful. To ensure that the project is engaging, a compelling question needs to be formulated. The project must also be relevant to real-world issues and products while considering the students' preferences and choices. Furthermore, the project needs to have a great start and meet industry standards. The list could go on and on (Miller, 2018: n.p.).

Barrows is credited with developing the idea of PBL, which was initially put into practice at McMaster University in 1968. Barrows outlined three primary goals for PBL: enabling students to acquire knowledge that can be applied and recalled; facilitating the development of cognitive skills suitable for reasoning; and improving and extending students' knowledge on dealing with possible problems ('self-directed learning skills') (Taylor and Mifflin, 2008, cited in Green, 2018: n.p.).

Hence, the gold standards—which start with finding a challenging problem or question, a sustained inquiry that has to be authentic, followed by student voice and choice, reflection critique, revision, and finally, the public product—should be followed for a successful project (Larmer, 2015: 34). In addition to that, the essential project design elements which are: design and plan, align to standards, build the culture, manage activities, scaffold student learning, assess student learning and engage and coach should also be respected in order to have both an effective and successful PBL (Larmer, 2015: 46).

Jiang and Li (2018) state that the conventional method of English language teaching (ELT) typically depends on delivering lectures, memorization, and assessments to impart language knowledge and skills. Conversely, Project-based learning (PBL) involves students in practical, real-life assignments that necessitate the use of English for communication and problem-solving. In PBL, learners

collaborate to identify issues, devise solutions, and present their discoveries to genuine audiences, which aids in developing communication and critical thinking abilities. Unlike traditional ELT, PBL merges language and content learning, resulting in more significant and contextualized language acquisition. Furthermore, PBL promotes learner autonomy by empowering students to take responsibility for their education, with their teachers serving as facilitators rather than subject-matter experts.

Hence, when students understand why they are studying something, they are more likely to delve deeper, and teachers who engage students in real-world initiatives to address difficulties have students who are more enthusiastic about learning a new subject. However, according to Sniegowski (2022: n.p.), while assignments like designing a poster, imitating a firm, or acting out a discussion may appear easier to complete, they may limit students' voices and prevent deeper learning.

Teachers are challenged to respond to the needs of the digital native generation by including technology in teaching: 'Millennial students can benefit from this approach as they work collaboratively, construct integrated knowledge, develop problem-solving skills, experience self-directed learning, and become intrinsically motivated' (Matthews and Dworatzek, 2012, cited in Green, 2018: 5). Incorporating technology into problem-based learning can enhance exploration, collaborative inquiry, and the development of skills that are crucial for success in today's world. According to Green (2018: n.p.), technology provides a wide range of tools, fosters collaboration, and assists students in problem-solving, making it an effective support system for problem-based learning.

The utilization of PBL has proven to be an effective approach for developing the skills required for success in the twenty-first century. This is achieved through the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal communication, information and media literacy, cooperation, leadership, teamwork, innovation, and creativity (Häkkinen et al., 2017, as cited in Almulla 2020). Rahmawati, Suryani, Akhyar, and Sukarmin (2020: 628) concluded 'that the most popular technology integrated with PBL [is] social media, followed by a learning management system'. The success of integrating technology into PBL depends largely on the teacher's ability to provide guidance throughout the learning process. The researchers emphasize that technology can enhance meaningful learning, particularly when it is viewed as a collaborative partner in the learning process rather than a replacement for the teacher. All in all, using PBL principles through ICT, can increase learner motivation and involvement because they are surrounded by technology tools on a daily basis.

THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to investigate how English language teachers view the use of PBL in their classes and the level of ICT implementation in lower secondary schools in Kosovo. Additionally, the research sought to determine how effective teachers perceive PBL to be in enhancing English language learning.

1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aimed to investigate the following queries and suggest a potential solution to them:
1)   How feasible is it to introduce PBL in lower secondary schools in Kosovo?
2)   What are the difficulties and advantages that teachers encounter when incorporating PBL in their English classes?
3)   How much does ICT play a role in the implementation of PBL?

2 PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The study was conducted in ten schools in the Republic of Kosovo's public and private sectors. The participants were 30 English language teachers (6th to 9th grade, or ages 10-15) working in the ten schools in the three targeted cities: Kamenica, Gjilan, and Prishtina. Hence, these schools were chosen intentionally since the researchers wanted to gain data from three counties that gather students from rural and urban areas. The findings for the study were collected through the participation of English teachers in an online questionnaire. Furthermore, they were asked to declare if they would allow the researcher to observe at least one project organized through PBL in their English classes. As such, 8 out of 30 teachers (previously trained for PBL) accepted to be observed in their classes. Additionally, classroom observations were used to determine the benefits and challenges of PBL in the EFL classroom. A specific checklist for observations was used (see Appendix 2).

FINDINGS

1 SURVEY

The survey questions in the research included a definition of PBL to help the teachers understand the methodology being studied.

The demographic profile of the teachers who participated in the survey represents 50% in both the public and private sectors.

Table 1 **Teachers' experience in the use of PBL**

Have you ever used PBL?	
Yes	67%
No	33%

Table 1 shows the feedback received from teachers who have applied PBL in their teaching practice. The data reveals that 67% of the surveyed teachers have incorporated PBL in their classes before, while 33% of them have not yet used it.

Table 2 **Teachers' viewpoints regarding the most appropriate age to work with PBL**

In your opinion, what is the most suitable age group or grade level for implementing PBL in an English Language subject?	Frequency	Percent
Grade 6	12	20%
Grade 7	12	20%
Grade 8	15	25%
Grade 9	19	32%

Based on the teachers' responses, the data in Table 2 shows that PBL works much better with the upper classes, more particularly the 8th and 9th graders. However, once projects are well planned, PBL can be effective in other grades as well.

Table 3 **Effectiveness of PBL implementation**

Project-Based Learning is effective for	Frequency	Percent
Classroom differentiation	11	15%
Engaging students' learning	17	23%
Improving the level of education	15	20%
Enhancing the ability to solve problems	1	1%
Encouraging analytical and logical thinking	16	22%
Student collaboration	12	16%

Table 3 shows the effectiveness of PBL implementation within the English classes. Therefore, the educators were provided with various choices to analyze how PBL would impact foreign language learning. The data reveals that 'Engaging students in learning,' 'Stimulating critical thinking,' and 'Increasing the quality of education' are viewed by the participants as the most beneficial advantages of implementing PBL in an English classroom.

Table 4 **The subject areas taught in a cross-curricular manner**

What are the subject areas you have taught that overlap with each other?	Frequency	Percent
Art	6	9%
Health and Well-being	11	17%
Languages and Communication	18	28%
Life and Work	8	12%
Mathematics	2	3%
Natural Sciences	7	10%
Society and Environment	12	18%
Total	64	100%

The results of the survey on which curricula are covered when creating PBL lesson plans are shown in Table 4. The respondents highlighted that 'Language and Communication' was the most covered subject, as it is an essential part of the English language learning objectives. Additionally, 'Health and Well-being' and 'Society and Environment' were frequently mentioned, indicating a connection between English and other fields.

Table 5 **The challenges of implementing PBL in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)**

How has the implementation of Project-Based Learning in TEFL been difficult or problematic?	Frequency	Percent
Classroom management	5	14%
Competition w/ Curriculum	7	20%
Difficulty w/ Assessment	4	11%
Insufficient training opportunities	2	5%
Inadequate time to create effective guiding questions	5	14%
New responsibilities for teachers as facilitators and advisors	4	11%
The need for teachers and students to acquire new skills and attitudes	7	20%

Table 5 displays the primary difficulties that teachers face when implementing PBL in TEFL. The respondents noted that allowing PBL, while also covering all aspects of the current curriculum, getting students to learn new skills, and engaging them in the PBL process were the greatest challenges. Another challenge was finding a balance between active learning and classroom management while designing the questions within the given time frame. Other concerns included motivating students to apply what they were learning, adapting the current class material to meet the students' needs, maintaining their focus throughout the entire project, properly assessing student work, and ensuring their engagement in the projects.

All the respondents in this study were English teachers at lower secondary schools, teaching students in grades 6-9. The teachers identified various effective concepts that they experienced when implementing PBL in their English classes, including classroom differentiation, improving student learning, enhancing the quality of education, problem-solving, stimulating critical thinking, promoting creativity through the use of technology, and improving student collaboration. However, the teachers also faced several challenges during the implementation of PBL, such as classroom management, competition, aligning tasks with the curriculum, insufficient professional development, lack of time for designing driving questions, adjustment to new teacher roles, and new demands for skills and attitudes from both teachers and students. They also expressed a need for PBL training in the future (see Table 6), covering topics such as how to engage students in online projects, which was a significant challenge during the pandemic, as well as how to engage and assess students' work and other aspects related to PBL.

Table 6 **Teacher training for using PBL**

What type of training would enhance your effectiveness as a PBL facilitator (teacher) in your job?	Frequency	Percent
How to modify digital materials to suit the requirements of students	7	7%
What methods can be used to evaluate the performance of students' work?	9	10%
How to differentiate lessons/projects	5	5%
How to encourage collaboration between/with colleagues	4	4%
How to encourage student collaboration	7	7%
How to involve students in virtual assignments	11	12%
How to engage students in projects	9	10%
How to give driving questions effectively	4	4%
How to give feedback effectively	7	7%
Ways to implement blended learning, which involves a mix of traditional in-person instruction and online teaching methods	8	8%
How to use give driving questions effectively	4	4%
How to use introduce PBL effectively	8	8%
How to use student-centered teaching method	6	6%

It must be mentioned that PBL is a new concept in Kosovo's education system compared to more developed countries that have been implementing this method for years. However, there seems to be a great interest from Kosovo teachers to master this teaching method and use it in their process of teaching.

2 CLASSROOM OBSERVATION ANALYSIS

The study aimed to investigate the use of PBL by closely observing teachers' and students' work. Furthermore, the researchers aimed to assess the impact of PBL on enhancing students' critical thinking skills and improving their English language proficiency. First, teachers were provided with new insights into the significance of PBL in language and communication, as well as other fundamental fields of study.

In the eight observed classes where students were creating projects based on various driving questions, it should be noted that there was occasional noise in every classroom, but mostly in a positive context. The majority of the students were confident about the topic and were advising each other, creating a competitive environment. However, there were some negative aspects, such as cases where students had low English proficiency and were demotivated to contribute because they needed help with translation. In these cases, the teacher and other group members would give students tasks where they could contribute in other ways, such as through the use of technology, drawing, or giving feedback in their native language.

For instance, it is noteworthy that most of the students utilized technology when working on the project titled 'Recycling through Art' or when tackling the driving question of 'How to create art through recycling?'. Furthermore, the researcher can confirm that the students exhibited a sense of belonging to their community, particularly at the *Zenel Hajdini* school, which emphasized the use of recycled materials. The students actively participated in discussions by asking questions and providing feedback to their peers and teachers. As a result of the project, the students acquired new vocabulary and terms related to the topic, which they used effortlessly. The researchers were initially concerned about whether the students liked the given topic, but their responses were overwhelmingly positive, with only a few students unsure about the project's objectives. However, the teachers were readily available to provide instructions to students in need of assistance. Although some students encountered challenges working with their peers and requested to switch groups, the teachers successfully managed the situation by making the necessary adjustments, allowing the students to work collaboratively and share their ideas.

Additionally, two teachers from other curricular fields served as co-facilitators to provide support to students in completing their projects.

DISCUSSION

Project-based learning shows to be an excellent teaching method that plays a role in enhancing students' critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, and communication, as well as the use of technology with a focus on speaking English as a foreign language. In each school, there were students with basic English skills who worked well with their classmates and helped them improve their vocabulary during the project. All classrooms had a competitive atmosphere among groups, as teachers promised prizes or other incentives for the best end products. This competition made students take their tasks seriously and stay engaged. However, in one school, some students wanted to give up due to their lack of English, but the teacher provided support and resources to motivate them to finish their projects.

The students' enthusiasm was apparent, and they showed a preference for this teaching approach rather than relying solely on textbooks. Project-based learning aims to connect with other subjects, giving students an opportunity to showcase their abilities and knowledge in various areas through the project. As a result, it is worth noting that the researchers observed that the project was suitable for all types of learners, with a variety of tasks, including hands-on or kinesthetic learning styles, listening to videos or classmates, and using photos and technology for better visual representation. Additionally, it should be noted that the *American School of Kosovo* and the *British School of Kosovo* have had prior experience with PBL, making the overall process more straightforward. However, the other schools faced more challenges in implementing PBL since it was their first time working with this teaching method.

Finally, upon completion of their projects, the students demonstrated a willingness to present them with pride, having gained new skills and knowledge. Throughout this process, the teachers encouraged the use of English, occasionally offering support with new vocabulary or allowing the use of dictionaries. However, there were instances where students with low English proficiency were disruptive and uninterested in contributing to the project. Despite this challenge, the teachers were cooperative and receptive to feedback, making the observation process smoother and more effective.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to shed light on the use of PBL in Kosovo and the role that ICT might have in its implementation in EFL classes. The researchers chose the cities of Kamenica, Gjilan, and Pristina as they are all located in urban areas, and targeted schools in these areas. The teachers were asked whether they had prior experience with PBL and to identify the biggest challenges they faced when implementing PBL in their classes. The results indicate that the teachers do use PBL in their classes, but they are still unsure about assigning tasks and evaluating work correctly. The teachers expressed a desire to attend a PBL training session to better understand the process. However, most of them believe that PBL is an effective way for students to learn English. The majority of PBL projects are carried out in small teams, and students enjoy working collaboratively with their peers, both during the project and on the final product. The teachers also mentioned that they assign tasks that are related to other subject areas, such as languages and communication, art, health and well-being, mathematics, and sports.

However, the survey participants reported several obstacles in applying PBL, including managing the classroom, evaluating the work, struggling with creating effective driving questions due to time constraints, adapting to the new role as project facilitator, and more. The instructors also mentioned that implementing PBL requires significant effort as it involves providing continuous feedback to the students. In order to determine appropriate driving questions that foster critical thinking skills and instill a sense of community involvement, teachers need to understand them thoroughly. Despite these challenges, PBL appears to be an innovative teaching approach that warrants further investigation and integration into the Kosovar educational system.

The study believes that PBL helps students acquire a variety of abilities, such as intellectual, social, emotional, and moral skills, all of which should be fostered throughout school so that children do not suffer from anxiety while learning. In addition, students' attitudes toward the English language improve when they use the PBL method. The students seemed to find PBL to be a satisfying method of acquiring knowledge in English, as it enabled them to advance at their own pace and also benefit from the collaborative and motivating atmosphere where they could learn from each other.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data collected through the study, recommendations are being made for English language teachers and students who are planning to use PBL as a new teaching method. The teachers were presented with the first ten recommendations, while the students were given some additional points to consider.

1) Update the finest teaching methods and tactics to improve students' critical and creative thinking abilities and keep up with new teaching trends.
2) Become familiar with this current teaching style and put it into practice in lessons.
3) When selecting the most relevant queries, consider the pupils' individual characteristics and learning styles.
4) Supplement students' learning with supplemental resources that are tailored to their needs and experiences to make the class more entertaining and engaging.
5) Transition from lecturers to educators, who are responsible for facilitating and supporting students' entire learning, especially through the use of ICT in English classes.
6) Add projects to the curriculum that will help students improve their English skills both inside and outside of the classroom.
7) When teaching English, expose pupils to real-life situations.
8) Participate in PBL workshops that improve current and efficient approaches and techniques in teaching English as a foreign language and enhance all four language skills.
9) Employ a structured evaluation process and provide regular feedback to students in order to produce a well-structured final output.
10) Commend students' efforts with diverse rewards, which could also inspire their enthusiasm for working on future assignments.

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APPENDIX 1 TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

This study analyses teachers' perceptions and their roles towards the use of Project-Based learning (PBL) in a research context of the schools operating in the Republic of Kosovo. Thank you for your time.

1. What sector do you teach?
   a) Public school
   b) Private school

2. Based on the explanation above, have you ever used Project-Based Learning (PBL) in your English course? (If your answer is 'No' you will have no further questions and will submit the survey.)
   a) Yes
   b) No

3. What group age/grade of lower- secondary school do you think PBL works best? (Tick all that apply)
   a) Grade 6
   b) Grade 7
   c) Grade 8
   d) Grade 9

4. Could you elaborate on your answer more, please? Why do you think PBL works best with the grade you have chosen above?
   _____

5. Project-Based Learning is effective for...
   a) Engaging students in learning
   b) Stimulating critical thinking
   c) Classroom differentiation
   d) Student collaboration
   e) Increasing the quality of education

6. The subject areas that you have taught cross-curricular were:
   a) Languages and Communication
   b) Art
   c) Mathematics
   d) Natural Sciences
   e) Society and Environment
   f) Health and Well-being
   g) Life and Work
   h) None

7. What are the benefits of implementing Project-Based Learning in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language)?
   a) Connects students to the real world
   b) Improves students' attitude towards

c) Keeps students engaged
d) Helps students develop teamwork and problem-solving skills
e) Students become innovative designers due to the technology
f) Students become global collaborators due to the technology

8. What have been the challenges of implementing Project-Based Learning in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language)?
   a) Lack of time in designing driving questions
   b) Competition w/ curriculum
   c) Difficulty w/ assessment
   d) Lack of professional development
   e) Classroom management
   f) New teacher role: facilitator and advisor
   g) The demand for new skills and attitudes both from the teachers and from the students

9. While implementing Project-Based Learning, I had a challenge:
   a) Designing topics based on my annual plan
   b) Communicating the lesson content effectively
   c) Maintaining students' focus on the project
   d) Managing student progress
   e) Finding sources to support their learning
   f) Adapting the material/ textbook to students' needs
   g) Having too many projects going on at the same time
   h) Using pair work
   i) Using group work
   j) Assessing students objectively
   k) Motivating students to apply it
   l) Other _____

10. What training would you need to do your job as a PBL facilitator (teacher) more effectively?
   a) How to introduce PBL effectively
   b) How to use a student-centered teaching method
   c) How to differentiate lessons/projects
   d) How to adapt online resources to students' needs
   e) How to use a student-centered teaching method
   f) How to use blended learning (a combination of face-to-face and online teaching)
   g) How to engage students in projects
   h) How to encourage student collaboration
   i) How to engage students in online projects
   j) How to assess students' work
   k) How to encourage collaboration between/with colleagues
   l) How to give feedback effectively

APPENDIX 2 OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

NAME OF SCHOOL/GRADE			
PROJECT TITLE			
Does the project meet the criteria?	YES	NO	COMMENTS
KEY KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING, AND SUCCESS SKILLS: The project is focused on teaching students key knowledge and understanding derived from standards, and success skills including critical thinking/ problem solving, collaboration, and self-management.			
CHALLENGING PROBLEM OR QUESTION: The project is based on a meaningful problem to solve or a question answer, at the appropriate level of challenge for students, which is operationalized by an open-minded, engaging, driving question.			
SUSTAINED INQUIRY: The project involves an active, in-depth process over time, in which students generate questions, fund and use resources, ask further questions, and develop their own answers.			
AUTHENTICITY: The project has real-world context, use real-world processes, tools and quality standards, makes a real impact, and/or is connected to students' own concern, interest, and identities.			
STUDENT VOICE and CHOICE: The project allows students to make choices about the products they create, how they work, and how they use their time, and guide by the teacher and depending on their age and PBL experience.			
REFLECTION: The project provides opportunities for students to give and receive feedback on their work. In order to revise their ideas and products or conduct further inquiry.			
CRITIQUE / REVISION: The project includes processes fort students to give and receive feedback on their work, in order to revise their ideas and products or conduct further inquiry.			
PUBLIC PRODUCT: The project requires students to demonstrate what they learn by creating a product that is presented or offered to people beyond the classroom.			

Donjetë Latifaj (Ph.D.) is currently working at the University of Business and Technology in Prishtine, Kosovo. Her research interests include contemporary teaching methodology, technology in teaching and individual learner differences.

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8794-4369

Email: donjete.latifaj@gmail.com

Brikena Xhaferi (Prof. Dr. in Applied Linguistics) is currently working at the South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia. Her research interests include digital teaching and learning, Innovative teaching methods, multilingualism and, second language acquisition.

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2218-3349

Email: b.xhaferi@seeu.edu.mk