

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AS A STRATEGY TO LEARN ABOUT CULTURES

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Abstract

This study explored EFL students' perceptions of merging the project-based learning strategy (PjBL) and the three-part cultural framework (products, practices, and perspectives = the 3Ps) to learn about cultures. Shortly after having been exposed to twenty-four-week lessons on their home and English-speaking cultures using the PjBL strategy and the 3Ps framework, thirty-four research participants completed questionnaires and were interviewed. Data analysis indicated that the participants held highly favorable opinions in regard to combining PjBL and the 3Ps as an effective strategy for culture learning in EFL classrooms. Students acknowledged that they gained a deeper understanding of American, British, and their home cultures, specifically in relation to the five thematic units they explored systematically. Despite challenges militating against its implementation, the amalgamation of PjBL and the 3Ps framework was reported to have offered multiple learning opportunities to autonomously bolster the research participants' knowledge of cultural practices, products, and perspectives.

Keywords Project-based learning, cultures, cultural products, cultural practices, cultural perspectives, perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Incorporating the project-based learning strategy to learn about cultures in the context of foreign language education has been reported to induce positive attitudes towards the cultures being explored (e.g., Bouchouk, 2017; Bulach, 2003; Gu, 2002; Kim, 2019; Kwe & Kean, 2014; Hsu, 2014). While the existing research studies concluded that learners' attitudes were favorable for PjBL, none of the studies known to this researcher has explored students' perceptions of PjBL when combined with the cultural framework of the 3Ps (products, practices, and perspectives) to learn about cultures. Prompted by the deficiency in the research on PjBL in the area of culture teaching, the researcher's primary purpose in this study is to tap into students' perceptions of PjBL in combination with the 3Ps framework to incorporate cultures in the Moroccan secondary EFL classes. By exploring students' perceptions of PjBL in conjunction with the 3Ps framework in culture learning in the Moroccan EFL context and other similar contexts, the findings of this study can inform the teaching practitioners about the utility of merging PjBL and the 3Ps combination as a pathway to insert cultures while teaching English. Furthermore, in the context where both time and content are very limited, curriculum and course designers and material developers can be encouraged to promote culture learning by taking advantage of merging both PjBL and

the 3Ps.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. PjBL Framework

The participants in this study were tasked with completing five macro-project work assignments on five thematic units: education, women and power, humor, marriage traditions and celebrations, and internet penetration and online shopping. To structure these culture-driven projects, the researcher used Stoller's (2010) seven-step model. This model outlines three primary stages within the project work (PW) process aimed at fostering students' language skills and content knowledge. These stages encompass the preliminary phase, information gathering, compilation, analysis, reporting, and project evaluation. Each primary stage consists of several delineated steps. Table 1 details the stages and the steps, along with the teacher's and students' roles throughout the process.

Table 1
Stoller's Seven-Step Process Model

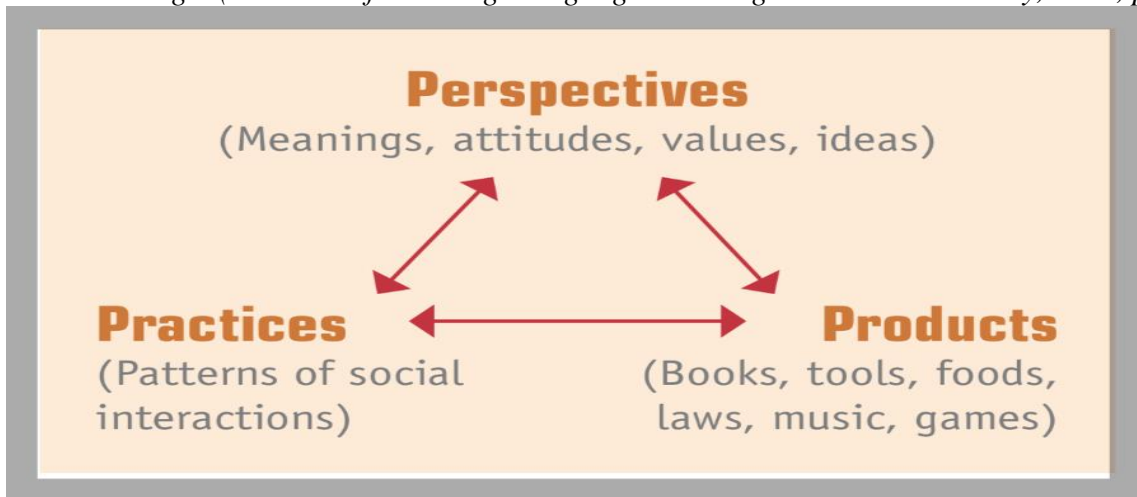
Stages	Steps	Teacher's Role	Students' Role
Preliminary stage	<i>Step1:</i> students and the instructor decide on a project theme.	Suggest a list of cultural themes.	Form small groups. Agree on a topic.
	<i>Step2:</i> students determine the final tangible outcome of the culture project.	Suggest different forms that a tangible outcome can take.	Single out a tangible final outcome form based on their language needs and interest.
	<i>Step3:</i> students structure their projects	Help students assign roles and outline their projects.	Students assign roles, outline their project, and set a project deadline.
Information gathering, compiling, analyzing, and reporting	<i>Step4:</i> students gather information from different sources.	Provide students with online resources, topic-related vocabulary items, etc.	Gather information from various sources.
	<i>Step5:</i> students compile and analyze the information.	Provide students with synthesizing and notetaking skills through language interventions.	With the project goals in mind, students compile and analyze the data.
	<i>Step6:</i> students report the information.	Discuss the manners of presentation. Review linking words, paraphrasing, etc. Provides feedback	Discard the irrelevant data. Write their final projects. Present their final tangible outcomes.
Project evaluation	<i>Step7:</i> students evaluate their end-products.	Provide a list of questions to help learners evaluate their final projects.	Reflect on their projects.

2.2. Cultural Framework of the 3Ps

The American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Language outlines language learning in the 21st century through the lens of five Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Within the National Standards, culture is defined as encompassing philosophical perspectives, behavioral practices, and societal products. This relationship between the three elements of culture is represented through a triangular diagram, with perspectives positioned at the top and products and practices forming the base. This representation highlights how products and practices stem from the cultural perspectives that frame a cultural group's worldview. Furthermore, this diagram features the intersected nature of these cultural components (Cutshall, 2012).

Figure 0

The Culture Triangle (Standards for Foreign language Learning in the 21st Century, 2006, p. 74).



Moran's (2011) conceptualizations of the three-construct framework of culture were adopted. Firstly, according to Moran, cultural products encompass all the artifacts generated and/or embraced by a culture, ranging from tangible items like tools, clothing, and written records to more intricate yet observable constructs such as language, music, family structures, education systems, economies, politics, and religious institutions. These tangible and intangible products are located and organized in physical spaces. Secondly, cultural practices encompass the full range of actions and interactions undertaken by individuals within a given culture, both independently and collectively. This encompasses language usage, various forms of communication and self-expression, social group activities, and the utilization of cultural products. These practices involve both verbal and non-verbal communication and include the interpretation of time, space, and situational context in social settings. Additionally, practices involve concepts of what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate, incorporating cultural taboos. Finally, as for cultural perspectives, they encapsulate the perceptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that form the foundation of cultural products and guide individuals and communities in their practices. These perspectives can be overtly expressed but often exist implicitly, operating beyond conscious awareness. Typically, perspectives generally provide meaning and establish a distinct outlook or orientation toward

life—a worldview.

2.3. Previous Research on students' perceptions of PjBL inside language education

Research studies have consistently demonstrated that the integration of culture within Project-based Learning (PjBL) helps induce positive attitudes towards the cultures under investigation and the pedagogical approach employed. For instance, Gu (2002) observed among Chinese participants a significant enthusiasm towards engaging in authentic and purposeful cross-cultural communication following the completion of their PjBL projects. Similarly, findings from an exploratory study conducted by Kwe and Kean (2014) suggested that Project-Based Instruction (PBI) serves as a more viable and effective instructional alternative for teaching culture, benefiting both students and their foreign language instructors.

In the Japanese educational context, Bulach (2003) discovered that the exploration of various phases of culture shock and its implications on foreign residents in Japan through PjBL activities motivated some participants to engage in conversations with foreigners and expressed a heightened interest in understanding culture shock. Likewise, Hsu's (2014) study revealed that participants found it intellectually stimulating to learn about foreign cultures through their engagement in projects centered around international festivals, thus fostering favorable attitudes towards cultural learning through PBI. Participants reported that PBI facilitated a deeper understanding of cross-cultural topics and enhanced their appreciation of diverse cultures.

Similarly, Bouchouk (2017) documented positive feedback from American students who participated in projects focusing on various aspects of Moroccan culture. Some students expressed fascination with elements such as the Hammam culture, viewing it as a means of community socialization (p. 63). Moreover, their attitudes towards PjBL as an effective approach for exploring Moroccan cultures were overwhelmingly positive. In alignment with these findings, Kim (2019) reported that participants developed a genuine interest in the countries they explored and expressed a desire for further research opportunities, indicating a profound sense of connection with the cultures investigated (p. 8).

In accordance with the aforementioned findings, it was observed that the utilization of Project-based Learning (PjBL) methodologies in language instruction, particularly through the project work approach, fosters a favorable attitude towards the various components inherent in PjBL. Peterson (2004) conducted a mixed-methods investigation across two ESL schools in Victoria, Canada, aimed at exploring the perceptions and utilization of PjBL among teachers and students. The study encompassed two different schools of 33 instructors and 88 learners with different age, cultural backgrounds, and motivations for ESL learning. While the details about PjBL implementation were not explicitly delineated, analysis of data derived from questionnaires, interviews, and artifacts indicated a prevalent positivity among both educators and learners towards PjBL practices.

Similarly, within the Turkish educational milieu, Baş (2011) concluded that the students who were exposed to project-based learning exhibited markedly more favorable attitudes towards instructional content compared to their counterparts instructed via traditional textbook-based methods (p. 10). In the same vein, Yaman's (2014) investigation into the impact of PjBL on EFL students' speaking proficiency corroborated these findings. Following a semester-long intervention, statistical analyses revealed a significant disparity in attitude dimensions between the experimental group, which underwent PW

instruction, and the control group, which followed conventional coursebook-based instruction, with the former revealing greater positivity towards the learning experience.

Furthermore, Hsu's (2014) research participants displayed a generally favorable disposition towards Project-Based Instruction (PBI), attributing their enthusiasm to its facilitation of active learning, enhancement of English reading skills, and utilization of online resources (p. 79). Shin's (2018) investigation yielded similar results, with over 70% of participants expressing strong confidence in English learning through PjBL and expressing a wish for its continued integration into future curricula (p. 108).

In a recent inquiry by Kartika (2020) at Universitas Sebelas Maret in Indonesia, students' perceptions of PjBL were explored within the context of a Critical Reading class. Fourteen participants were divided into groups and were required to critically analyze the phenomenon of K-pop through authentic readings over a five-week period. Post-presentation, questionnaire responses and interviews revealed a positive reception to PjBL methodology among participants, particularly in the context of critical reading instruction.

Despite the evident satisfaction expressed by participants in the aforementioned studies regarding their engagement in Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Eyring's (1997) investigation presents contrasting findings. In spite of the substantial amount of time spent on planning, researching, and evaluating project-related endeavors, participants did not largely report satisfaction with project work instruction. The findings revealed that expected group solidarity and empathy were absent. Moreover, male students displayed less responsiveness to the project approach compared to their female counterparts. Issues of focus were also more evident within the project group relative to the control group. Nevertheless, participants acknowledged favorable aspects such as positive student-teacher rapport and the degree of autonomy afforded during the project-based process. These dilemmatic perceptions towards Project Work (PW) among students were also reflected in Beckett's (1999) inquiry. Beckett's findings revealed a conflict in student feelings, with 25% expressing mixed feelings towards projects—enjoying certain aspects while disliking others—while a majority (57%) evaluated Project-based Instruction (PBI) negatively. Criticisms centered around the efficacy of PW as a pedagogical tool, with participants asserting that it did not represent an effective mode of learning (p.137).

The adoption of the Project-based Learning (PjBL) approach in language classrooms leads to a redistribution of roles between students and teachers. These new roles generate a spectrum of attitudes ranging from acceptance to resistance. For example, Gu (2002) observed a high level of discomfort, particularly at the beginning of the project, to the extent that six students quit the class after the first week claiming it was too hard for them (p. 206). However, those who stayed expressed appreciation for the cooperative and collaborative nature of the learning strategy. Similarly, Bulach (2003) noticed uncertainties among participants concerning the facilitative and guiding role assumed by teachers in the context of PjBL. Simpson (2011) observed the same negative reaction to the new role of the teacher at the beginning of the study, but later on, it was appreciated as students got used to it. The transition from a teacher-centered to a student-centered instructional approach was reported as a prominent challenge during the preliminary phases of Project Work (PW). Conversely, Kean and Kwe's (2014) participants "felt comfortable participating actively in the project" (p. 196).

The abovementioned comprehensive review underscores a consistent consensus among various investigations, affirming that participants consistently reported favorable perspectives subsequent to the completion of project-based work. The review also concluded that the studies exploring students' perceptions about PjBL inside language education are still eclipsed by those done in relation to language. Unlike the previous studies, this study aimed at tapping into EFL students' beliefs and opinions of using project-based learning together with the cultural framework of the 3Ps to learn about the English cultures and their own cultures.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study addresses one major question.

- How is the combination of project-based learning strategy and the three-part framework perceived by the EFL learners as a tool for learning about cultures?

METHOD

4.1 Research Participants and Setting

The research participants were 34 (N=34) second-year Baccalaureate students learning English as a foreign language at a state school in Morocco. The participants studied English as a mandated school subject for a number of reasons: (1) to prepare for a standardized national examination administered by the Ministry of Education, (2) to bolster their communicative skills, and (3) to facilitate their entry into the workforce. After their exposure to 24-week lessons on cultures, the research participants were kindly asked to complete questionnaires and sit for interviews.

4.2. Instrumentation

Three data collection instruments were used in this study: Questionnaires, focus-group interviews, and students' reflective reports.

4.2.1. Questionnaire.

The researcher developed a questionnaire to generally elicit students' perceptions of the combination of Project-based Learning (PjBL) and the 3Ps framework as a means of integrating cultural elements within Moroccan EFL classrooms. More specifically, in light of multiple benefits and challenges reported in the existing research findings reviewed in this study, the questionnaire items were meant to investigate whether the research participants agreed that PjBL fostered their cultural content knowledge. The questionnaire comprised seven sections, each of which included three items with a five-point Likert scale accompanying each item. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Scores ranged from 1 to 5 for positive responses and from 5 to 1 for negative responses. Table 2 provided an overview of the seven sections and the number of items contained within each section.

Table 2
Questionnaire Section Headings

<i>The PjBL sections</i>	<i>Number of items</i>
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<i>Education</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Marriage traditions and festivals</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Women issues</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Humor</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Internet penetration and online shopping</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Benefits of relating cultural products and practices to perspectives</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Challenges</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>21</i>

4.2.2. Follow-up focus group interviews

The follow-up interviews were carried out eight days after students' completion of the culture projects. All the group members were kindly asked to sit for the interview. However, only 18 students participated. To establish this trust and rapport, the researcher used the procedure in conducting a focus group interview suggested by Schensul et al. (1999). The group discussion took two hours and forty minutes, and while students were answering the questions, the researcher was briefly taking notes for later elaboration. Finally, the clarity of questions was intensified by paraphrasing and elucidation during the focus group interviews. The use of the Arabic language during the interviews was tolerated to allow participants to voice their opinions away from language hurdles.

4.2.3. Students' reflective reports.

Closely after completing each of the five projects, group members, irrespective of their roles in the process of PW, were required to submit a short report about their reflections on the five projects. To help with this task, the researcher developed a reflection sheet based on Fried-Booth's (2002) suggested review questions and Stoller's (2010) suggested questions for the PW evaluation. The researcher believed that students' reflections were so necessary that they helped gain insight into students' opinions, content knowledge, and needs. Also, by reflecting on PjBL, students got the opportunity to voice out what they learned and what they were struggling with.

4.3. Data Analysis and Statistical Procedures

The quantitative data collected through questionnaires were analyzed statistically using the SPSS software version 23. In contrast, the qualitative data collected using focus group interviews and reflective reports were analyzed thematically.

4.3.1. Questionnaire.

As soon as the research participants from the experimental group completed the questionnaires, their responses were computed using the SPSS version 23. The researcher calculated all the participants' total scores on the item pool to measure the subjects' general perception using descriptive statistics. To decide

whether the participants' overall perception of PjBL is positive or negative, the midway point

Given that the total number of the research participants was 34 and that the total number of items was 21, the possible range of total scores was from 714 (34×21) to 3570 (170×21) for all the subjects. Therefore, the midway point would be $(714 + 3570) \div 2 = 2142$. What does this mean? If the total score was below 2142, the participants' perceptions of PjBL were considered negative and vice versa. That is, if the total score was above 2142, the perceptions of the PjBL approach were considered negative. After the research participants' overall scores on the item pool were calculated, the total score on each item for all the research subjects was calculated using descriptive statistics. Given that the total number of the research participants was 34 and that the numerical values assigned to each tick (from 1 to 5), the necessary minimum score would be 34 (34×1), whereas the maximum score would be 170 (34×5). Therefore, the midway point would be $(34 + 170) \div 2 = 102$. If the total score on a given item was less than 102, the participations' perceptions of the item were considered negative and the other way around.

For data analysis, a high scale score meant a positive perception, and a low score meant a negative one. The data numerically and consistently coded as follow: strongly disagree was assigned a numerical value of 1 pt.; disagree was assigned 2 pts; uncertain was assigned 3 pts; agree was assigned 4 pts; strongly agree was assigned 5 pts.

4.3.2. Focus group interviews.

Closely after the researcher took notes based on the interviewees' responses, the researcher elaborated on those notes vis-à-vis the themes structured in the questionnaire. To analyze the data, the researcher adopted the tips suggested by Anderson and Arsenault (2005). Because the themes were already shaped, the researcher jotted down the most recurrent comments under their corresponding headings (themes). Interviewees' comments were edited to avoid redundancy. The comments that reflected only one person's perspective were discarded to create a balanced and accurate reflection of what was referred to in the group. Finally, the summary statement for each theme was written. The summaries of the main ideas and themes were used to crosscheck and extend on students' answers to the questionnaires. In reporting the data, the researcher mingled "narrative summaries with actual quotes that illustrate views in the participants' words" (Anderson & Arsenault, 2005, p. 221).

4.3.3. Students' reflective reports.

Students' reflections on the five projects during the experiments were analyzed following the themes structured in both the questionnaires and the focus group discussions. By analyzing students' thoughts thematically, the researcher could draw conclusions about students' perceptions of PjBL as a tool for incorporating culture in the EFL classrooms. By triangulating students' reflective reports with the questionnaire and the focus group discussion, the researcher can crosscheck the validity of the data gathered qualitatively.

RESULTS

5.1. Questionnaire Findings

After the research subjects in the experimental group had been exposed to their home and the English cultures through PjBL, they were administered questionnaires. As stated earlier, the purpose was to explore their perceptions of PjBL as a tool for integrating culture in the Moroccan EFL classrooms. The

whole questionnaire was administered three days after the research participants had completed five culture projects on five thematic units. As soon as the questionnaires were completed in the classroom with the presence of the researcher, the raw data were entered into the SPSS software program. For the sake of data analysis, three things were calculated: the total score of the item pool for all the participants, the total score per item for all the participants, and the level of agreement were calculated using percentages and frequencies.

Table 3
Students' Perceptions of PjBL

N	Items	Sum	34	Item 11	110
34	Item1	134	34	Item12	121
34	Item2	127	34	Item13	109
34	Item3	131	34	Item14	112
34	Item4	141	34	Item15	110
34	Item5	144	34	Item16	147
34	Item6	147	34	Item17	127
34	Item7	147	34	Item18	123
34	Item8	143	34	Item19	112
34	Item9	137	34	Item 20	85
34	Item10	115	34	Item 21	95
Total sum				2617	

As shown in Table 3, the total item scores for all the research subjects is 2617. As stated earlier in the methodology chapter, the midway point was used to determine whether students' oval perceptions would be positive or negative. A score of 2617 is far above the midway point of 2142 towards the positive end of the scale. Therefore, the treatment group students' perceptions of the PjBL approach were very positive.

Cultural Awareness by Thematic Units

Theme 1: Education

Table 0

Students' Perceptions of Exploring Education through PjBL

Items	Statements	N	SD%	D%	UN%	A%	SA%	Sum
1	Project work helped me learn about the American system of education in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	2.9	11.8	8.8	41.2	35.3	134
2	Project work helped me learn about the British system of education in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	8.8	2.9	14.7	52.9	20.6	127
3	Project work helped me know more about the Moroccan system of education in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	5.9	8.8	8.8	47.1	29.4	131

Note. SD = Strongly agree. D = Disagree. UN = Uncertain. A = Agree. SA = Strongly agree

As shown in Table 4, all the total scores of the three items are all above the midway-point, indicating that a large number of the participants were positive towards the impact of the PW tasks on their cultural awareness of the system of education in the USA, the UK, and in their home country. This awareness involved cultural products, practices, and perspectives. However, few participants disagreed, and some others felt unsure whether the PjBL tasks helped them enrich their knowledge of systems of education in the three countries.

Theme 2: Marriage Traditions and Festivals**Table 5***Students' Perceptions of Exploring Marriage Traditions and Festivals through PjBL*

Items	Statements	N	SD%	D%	UN%	A%	SA%	Sum
4	Project work helped me learn about American marriage traditions and celebrations in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	2.9	5.9	8.8	38.2	44.1	141
5	Project work helped me learn about marriage traditions and celebrations in the UK in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	0	5.9	5.9	47.1	41.2	144
6	Project work helped me learn more about Moroccan marriage traditions and celebrations in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	5.9	0	5.9	32.4	55.9	147

Note. SD = Strongly agree. D = Disagree. UN = Uncertain. A = Agree. SA = Strongly agree

According to the data displayed in Table 5, a large number of participants strongly agreed that the PW tasks substantially helped them learn about Marriage traditions and celebrations with regard to cultural products, cultural practices, and cultural perspectives in the three countries. This positive opinion was evident through the higher total scores, which were far above the midway point towards the positive end of the scale.

Theme 3: Women Issues**Table 6***Students' Perceptions of Exploring Women Issues through PjBL*

Items	Statements	N	SD%	D%	UN%	A%	SA%	Sum
7	Project work helped me learn about women's issues in the USA in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	0	2.9	8.8	52.9	55.9	147
8	Project work helped me learn about women's issues in the UK in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	2.9	5.9	8.8	50	35.3	143
9	Project work helped me learn more about women's issues in Morocco in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	2.9	8.8	5.9	41.2	32.4	137

Note. SD = Strongly agree. D = Disagree. UN = Uncertain. A = Agree. SA = Strongly agree

A close inspection of the obtained total scores demonstrates that the scores surpass the midway point, meaning that a large number of participants agreed that the PW tasks helped them learn about women's issues at the level of cultural products, practices, and perspectives.

Theme 4: Humor

Table 7

Students' Perceptions of Exploring Humor through PjBL

Items	Statements	N	SD%	D%	UN%	A%	SA%	Sum
10	Project work helped me learn about humor and comedy festivals in the USA in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	8.8	20.6	23.5	17.6	29.4	115
11	Project work helped me learn about humor and comedy festivals in the UK in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	11.8	17.6	29.4	17.6	23.5	110
12	Project work helped me learn more about humor and comedy festivals in Morocco in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	8.8	11.8	23.5	26.5	29.4	121

Note. SD = Strongly agree. D = Disagree. UN = Uncertain. A = Agree. SA = Strongly agree

Based on the data displayed above, the total scores are slightly above the midway-point except for item 12. The scores suggest that the PW tasks helped students learn more about humor in their home cultures than in American and British cultures.

Theme 5: Internet Penetration and Online Shopping

Table 8

Students' perceptions of exploring the Internet and Online Shopping

Items	Statements	N	SD%	D%	UN%	A%	SA%	Sum
13	Project work helped me learn about Internet issues and online shopping in the USA in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	5.9	23.5	38.2	8.8	23.5	109
14	Project work helped me learn about Internet issues and online shopping in the UK in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	2.9	26.5	32.4	14.7	23.5	112
15	Project work helped me learn more about Internet issues and online shopping in Morocco in terms of products, practices, and perspectives.	34	5.9	23.5	32.4	17.6	20.6	110

Note. SD = Strongly agree. D = Disagree. UN = Uncertain. A = Agree. SA = Strongly agree

As shown in Table 8, the total scores of items 13, 14, and 15 are slightly above the midway point. The percentages also show that a large number of subjects were uncertain about whether the PW tasks helped them improve their cultural knowledge of online shopping issues. Similarly, more than 20% replied disagree to the three items. These results were in large part due to the nature of the theme

Table 9

Students' Perceptions of the Benefits of Relating Cultural Products and Practices to Perspectives in PjBL

Items	Statements	N	SD%	D%	UN%	A%	SA%	Sum
16	My home culture awareness increased when I compared it with both American and British ones in project-based learning.	34	5.9	2.9	5.9	23.5	61.8	147
17	Project work offered me the opportunity to understand how American and British people use cultural products.	34	8.8	0	17.6	55.9	17.6	127
18	Project work offered me opportunities to understand how cultural products are directly related to people's beliefs and values.	34	5.9	8.8	17.6	52.9	14.7	123

Note. SD = Strongly agree. D = Disagree. UN = Uncertain. A = Agree. SA = Strongly agree

As shown in Table 9, it is clear that a large number of students strongly agreed that their awareness of their home cultures increased as a result of comparing them with the English cultures through PjBL. This positive agreement was evident through the higher percentage of 61.8 of students who replied strongly agree and the total score of 147, which was far above the midway point towards the positive end of the scale. Besides this, most students agreed that the PW tasks provided them with opportunities to understand how members of the English cultures use cultural products and how cultural products are directly related to people's values and beliefs. This agreement was apparent in the very big number of the subjects who replied agree to items 16 and 17.

Table 0
Students' Perceptions of Challenges in PjBL

Items	Statements	N	SD%	D%	UN%	A%	SA%	Sum
19	I think learning culture through project work was time-consuming.	34	8.8	23.8	20.6	23.5	23.5	112
20	Group work was one of the main problems I had with project work.	34	35.3	20.6	20.6	5.9	17.6	85
21	Learning through project work was new to me, and it was difficult to adapt to.	34	14.7	38.2	14.7	17.6	14.7	95

Note. SD = Strongly agree. D = Disagree. UN = Uncertain. A = Agree. SA = Strongly agree

To elicit students' perceptions of the major challenges they faced while using the PjBL approach to learn about foreign cultures, a section on challenges was added. Regarding the results on item 19, although the total sum was a little above the midway-point, only 47% agreed that learning about culture via PW was time-consuming, 20.6% felt uncertain, and almost 32% disagreed. Besides, the total scores on items 20 and 21 were all below the midway-point. The scores suggest that the participants were negative for the challenges addressed by the items. A large number of students thought that group work was not a big problem while conducting PW tasks. Additionally, they believed that adapting to the PW approach was not a challenge.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS RESULTS

Question 1. How did the project work tasks help you learn about American and British cultures?

All the participants agreed that they learnt a lot about the English cultures. Students mentioned multiple examples related to cultural products, cultural practices, and perspectives. Most respondents were surprised to find out that the English cultures and Moroccan cultures have a lot of things in common, including marriage traditions and celebrations. However, they were surprised that women's issues and wedding practices in English cultures are not usually governed by religion, as the case in Morocco. For example, some students stated that this is the first time to learn that co-habitation is acceptable in other cultures, whereas it is forbidden in their own cultures.

Question 2. How did Learning about British and American cultures help you learn more about your home culture? Give examples.

All the respondents claimed to have improved their knowledge of their own cultures while comparing them with the English cultures. It was reported that comparing their own cultures with the English cultures helped them learn "a lot of things" with regard to the five themes. Most respondents stressed that they have learnt about the attitudes, values, perceptions, and beliefs that drive cultural products and practices. Some participants said that "before the projects, we did not know why people do many things in life." Examples referred to the unspoken rules that drive both products and practices: celebrations, including Ashura in the Sunni and Shi'ist communities.

Question 3. How did the project work tasks help you relate cultural products to cultural practices and cultural products to cultural perspectives?

Most respondents highlighted that the PW tasks taught them to think about culture by asking three questions (what = products, how = practices, and why = perspectives). They also stated that both cultural products and practices are interrelated, and the two are driven by the values and attitudes ingrained in people's culture.

Question 4: Which of the 3Ps was difficult to learn about?

All the interviewees agreed that cultural perspectives were too challenging to find out compared to products and practices.

Question 5. Which of the five project work themes did you enjoy exploring? Why?

The vast majority favored marriage traditions and celebrations, education, the Internet, and online shopping, but the theme of humor did not grab their interest. Humor was seen as a complex and challenging issue to explore, they added that it was easier to find out products than practices and perspectives.

Question 6. How have your perceptions of the place of culture in the learning of English changed?

The respondents confirmed that their perceptions of the place of culture have changed. A student said that "I always think that learning a language is just grammar, vocabulary, and communication, but now there is culture too." Meanwhile, some respondents suggested that we should not have focused only on the English cultures.

Question 7. What main challenges did you face while working on your projects?

Plenty of challenges were highlighted. All the participants agreed that doing project work tasks on culture took a lot of their time outside the classroom. One of the students said that "we have other school subjects, not just English." Also, students reported that doing five PW tasks was stressful because it required considerable effort, adding that they were not used to doing projects systematically. Group work management was another major challenge. Some students expressed their preference for working individually, as it was too difficult to collaborate with other group members. They disagreed about timing, contribution, the end-product forms, meeting place, meeting time, who should present first, etc. Other challenges that were referred to were the difficulty to do PW, especially at the beginning, and the problem of language. Some students said, "we use google translator to translate sentences into Arabic so that we can know what they mean."

Question 8. Would you recommend project work as an approach to teach culture?

Most participants agreed that project work is a great tool to learn about content and language and to develop skills.

5.3. Reflective reports findings

As stated in the methodology section, the research participants were required to submit a short reflective report on what they learnt about the culture closely after presenting the end-products. To help students to write their reports, stimulus questions were provided by the researcher. After all the reports were collected, the researcher analyzed them. Below are the most recurrent answers given to the questions in the five projects. Some answers were reported as the participants wrote them; others were corrected in terms of language, and others were translated. The researcher presented the data by question items and

by projects.

Question 1. Concerning the five thematic units, what have you learnt about American and British cultures that you didn't know before doing the projects?

Project 1. The System of Education and Illiteracy in the UK, the USA, and in Morocco.

- After doing the project, I learn more about the system of education in the UK and the USA, for example, the difference between public and private schools.
- Before the projects, I did not know anything about education in the USA and the UK. After the project, I have learnt about the number of stages in the UK system of education and the differences and similarities among the systems of education in the three countries (Edited).
- I learn that the number of students is small in every class, and I know that British students take a GCSE certificate.
- I learnt that both the USA and the UK have a better system of education compared to the Moroccan one.
- America and Britain give more importance to education, and their students study only for a few hours, unlike Morocco (translated).
- I learn that there is a small number of illiterate people in the USA and the UK and have a good education system. That's why they are developed countries (edited).
- I learnt that American students celebrate proms at the end of the last level in high school.
- I learnt that education is very important for development in the UK and the USA.

Project 2. Marriage Traditions and Celebrations

- Despite small differences, marriage traditions in the USA and the UK are very similar
- The bride's clothes symbolize purity and innocence
- I learnt that wedding ceremonies in the English cultures are beautiful and unique (edited)
- I learnt that the groom carries the bride over the threshold to avoid bad luck.
- Marriage is done in the church (translated).
- I learnt that boys and girls can have children before marriage. This is impossible in Morocco. (translated).
- I learnt about the origin of the Halloween celebration.
- I learnt many things, like the bride throws a bouquet of roses to single girls, and the one who catches it will get married soon (edited).
- I learnt that there are some similarities between Moroccan marriage traditions and American and British ones.

Project 3. Women Issues

- Unlike women in Morocco, those in the UK and the USA participate a lot in politics (edited).

- Men and women in the UK and the USA are the same. There is no difference between them.
- Women suffered a lot to participate in politics (edited).
- I learnt about some female politicians.
- American and British women have the same culture.
- I learnt that women play a significant role in English societies (edited).
- I learnt about some women's rights and women's occupations in the UK and the USA.
- I know why people celebrate Women's Day.
- Women and men usually don't have the same salary. Men's salaries are higher (edited).

Project 4. Humor

- I learnt about the types of humor.
- I learnt about some humorists in the UK and the USA.
- I learnt about the Chicago Sketch Festival in the USA and Festival Fringe in Scotland and why people celebrate them. (translated)
- I learnt about some TV programs on comedy like Stand Up.
- I learnt about some humorists in the UK and the USA.
- I understand that Mr. Bean is not a real name; it is a nickname
- I learnt that laughter is very important in the UK more than in the USA (translated)

Project 5. Online Shopping and Internet Penetration

- Through this project, I learn that e-shopping plays a vital role in American and British people's lives (translated).
- I know a number of cell phone brands and the countries that make them (translated).
- I learnt that internet access is not a problem in the USA and the UK, unlike Morocco (edited).
- I know some names of online shopping sites like ASOS and Argos and I know their origins.
- I learnt about the reasons why online shopping is rapidly growing in the UK and the USA (edited).
- I know about the number of people who are addicted to the Internet.

Question 2: What have you learnt about Moroccan cultures that you didn't know before doing the projects with reference to the five thematic units having been explored?

Students' written responses suggested that they all have improved their cultural knowledge with respect to the five thematic units. Below are the most recurrent ideas highlighted across all the submitted reports.

Project 1. Education

- Illiteracy is a big rate in Morocco.
- The government has made a lot of efforts to improve education, but it is not enough.

- I learnt about the Moroccan system of education. It is not as developed as the American and British ones, and we have a big number of illiterate people in Morocco (edited).
- Illiteracy has been reduced in recent years, but about the system of education from 1999 to 2019, it is the same (edited).
- I learnt about how many students have access to private and public schools.
- Frankly, I knew all about the system of education and illiteracy in Morocco.

Project 2: Marriage Traditions and Celebrations

- I knew the reasons why Moroccan celebrate Ashura.
- I learnt about the origin of some traditions in Moroccan wedding ceremonies.
- I learnt that Sunni and Shi'ist people celebrate Ashura for different reasons for the Ashura celebration.
- Every area has its own marriage traditions.
- I learnt about some traditions in Morocco, and I did not know them in the past.
- I learnt that the Moroccan marriage tradition is different and beyond compare (translated).

Project 3: women Issues

- Moroccan women are undervalued (translated).
- Moroccan women still suffer from discrimination and a lot of problems.
- Women are not equally represented in politics (edited).
- Women in Morocco are still viewed as housewives.
- I learn that the number of women in parliament is the result of the quota system.
- Women in Morocco are the victim of people's misunderstanding of the Quran (edited).

Project 4: Humor

- I learnt that Jamal Debbouz is the founder of Marrakesh du Rire Festival. He did that to promote tolerance (edited).
- I learnt nothing about Humor (translated).
- I learnt that humor in Morocco is not important, and we do not have great comedians. (translated)

Project 5: Internet penetration and online shopping

- I learnt that haggling over the price is the top reason why a lot of people in Morocco do not shop online (edited).
- I knew how many people have Internet access and how many people use the 4G Internet in Morocco.
- I learnt that Morocco does not make mobile phones because all the phones we use in Morocco are not Moroccans.
- I learnt that Morocco is not a developed country when it comes to technology (edited).

- I learnt that one of the main reasons why online shopping is growing slowly in Morocco is time. People have enough time to go shopping, unlike in the UK and the USA (edited)

Question -3. What are the problems/challenges/difficulties you have faced while doing projects?

Students referred to several challenges. Below are the most recurrent ideas highlighted by the research participants in the reports.

- It was difficult to finish the project in time (edited).
- Group work is hard when other students are not serious (translated).
- Not everyone helped in the completion of the project (edited).
- Searching for the relevant information was hard on the net (translated).
- Doing projects is stressful (edited).
- We did not have enough time to present my project.
- I did not find the equivalent words in English to describe my culture, so I used Arabic.
- We found a lot of information, and we should summarize it (translated).
- The difficulty to spot online information related to the theme under investigation (edited)
- It is challenging to find information about perspectives on Google(edited).
- We asked Google all my questions, but we did not get what we want.
- It is easy to find products and practices, but it is too difficult to find perspectives (edited).

Question 4. What's your opinion about project work as an approach to learning about culture?

These are some extracts from students' written reports.

- I think PW is a useful method to learn more about the system of education and illiteracy in other cultures
- PW is the best way to learn about the system of education because when I search for information about this project, I learn more than I do in the classroom (translated).
- I like this method (translated).
- Of course, this type of projects is the best way to explore the system of education in the English cultures and Morocco" (translated)
- It is tough to do projects because of time.
- Doing PW is the best way to learn about foreign cultures.
- These projects are good because they change the instructor's role from a knowledge provider to a facilitator and the student to a researcher (translated).
- It is good, but the problem is time.
- I like PW because I search for information, and I don't receive it (edited).

- Of course, PW is a fantastic way to learn more about marriage in the UK and the USA and to discover other cultures (edited).
- It is good because it teaches me how to do projects by myself (edited).
- PW is the best method to learn about Marriage traditions because we find a lot of answers to our questions about celebrations, for example, why Moroccans do that and British/American people do that (edited).
- The project method is the best method to learn about women in the UK and the USA because most students learn more about women while doing projects (edited).
- It is the best method because we search for information; we don't get it from the teacher.
- PW pushes us to help one another (edited).

DISCUSSION

Based on the results, students had very favorable opinions about PjBL as a useful strategy to learn about cultures. Students acknowledged that they gained a deeper understanding of the American, British, and their home cultures with specific reference to the five thematic units following their project completion. Also, they agreed to have gained more knowledge of cultural practices, products, and perspectives. The value and the utility of exploring cultures in English for students' development of language ability and cultural content knowledge might explain their positive perceptions of PjBL. Dörnyei (2001) argued that "the more direct this link is, the more valuable the consequences are, the more effective the strategy is" (p. 56). Data from focus group interviews and reflective reports congruently showed the participants were considerably satisfied with the approach to the point that some students recommended it as the best method for learning about cultures.

Students' positive feelings about PjBL as an effective tool to learn about cultures substantiate previous research studies that incorporated PjBL for culture learning in the context of language education. For example, after Liu et al.'s (2006) 64 sixth graders from two middle schools in the USA completed their inquiry-based web projects in the form of electronic copies of their travel guide, they described their online culture learning experience as funny and helpful. Likewise, Hsu's (2014) participants viewed PBI as a useful approach to learning about cross-cultural topics after completing their projects on international festivals. Similarly, Kwe and Kean's (2014) concluded that PBI is a more viable and effective alternative instruction to teaching culture for students and their foreign language teachers. The two authors came to that conclusion after their participants had developed meaningful learning attributes in the teaching of culture using PjBL and a variety of technological integration.

Another major study finding is students' positive perceptions of the 3Ps framework in developing a deeper understanding of the cultural issues explored through the seven-step process. Students were able to profoundly enhance their cultural awareness of the English cultures at the level of cultural products, cultural practices, and cultural perspectives. The instructor's carefully-designed stimulus questions seemed to have played a significant role in grabbing the treatment group students' attention to the types of culture. During the data gathering, compiling, and synthesizing stages of PjBL, students were encouraged to link cultural products to cultural practices and cultural products to cultural perspectives. In so doing, students' knowledge of the target cultures revolved not only around factual information and

cultural practices but also around the underlying values, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs held by the members of those cultures. The opportunity to reflect on cultural products and cultural practices and the way in which cultural perspectives govern the two were believed to have helped the research participants to develop an in-depth understanding of the target cultures.

The participants also reported having understood their own cultures better while exploring the English cultures. Having put their own cultures in relation to the English cultures in terms of products, practices, and perspectives, students enhanced their knowledge of perspectives more than that of products and practices about their own cultures. Clouet (2006) confirmed the usefulness of comparing and contrasting cultures. Clouet pointed out that the process of comparison and contrast will lead to a better appraisal of the target culture and a greater understanding of the learners' own culture. In this study, gathering, analyzing, synthesizing, and presenting the cultural information about the three cultures led the students to important discoveries about the significant similarities and differences among the three cultures concerning the five topics.

According to Beckett (2002), we cannot always anticipate what students learn during their project work in advance. A large number of subjects in this study reported having adjusted their conceptualization of culture; they realized that it is dynamic and never static. They also reported having modified their specific cultural knowledge by understanding the amorphous nature of culture embodied in different cultural products, practices, and perspectives even within their own cultures. They understood that many different cultural products and practices have the same significance in Moroccan and English cultures, which drew students' attention to the fact that the world cultures are similar and different at the same time.

Nothing exists without challenges. While the research participants referred to a wide array of benefits that accrue from culture projects, they reported several difficulties. First, students reported having to invest more time than anticipated to complete their projects, which was stressful for them. During the five projects, several students usually found it hard to meet the deadlines set for the final projects. Second, although students' overall perceptions of group work were positive, data from the follow-up focus group interviews and reflective reports revealed that free riding, procrastination, and lack of commitment prompted several students to show a preference for individual work. Some of the reported challenges are consistent with the previous research in the context of language education. Eyring's (1997) findings exhibited that unlike the control group teacher, the PjBL teacher "spent more time on planning, researching, and assessing activities" (as cited in Doherty & Eyring, 2006, p. 97). Also, Hsu's (2014) participants reported several challenges associated with the course, such as requiring too much time and effort. They also reported having difficulty in keeping the reflective journals.

CONCLUSIONS

Evidence from the questionnaires, follow-up focus group interviews, and students' reflective reports suggest that students have had very positive perceptions of the PjBL strategy. The favorable perceptions essentially stemmed from the benefits that accrue from working on culture projects. The route to the end-products gave the research participants opportunities to develop their cultural content knowledge and enrich their arsenal of vocabulary. Students' massive exposure to culture input on the Internet was reported to have fostered their cultural knowledge during data gathering and reporting stages. Students

also reported having developed their learner critical cultural awareness.

While the study results corroborate the previous research, it has made invaluable contributions to the teaching of both culture in the Moroccan EFL context and other similar educational settings. In light of this exploratory study findings and conclusions, some pedagogical implications for PjBL in teaching culture in the Moroccan EFL classrooms are suggested below:

1. The teaching of cultures through the PjBL approach, by adopting Stoller's seven-step model, in particular, has been more effective in injecting positive attitudes towards integrating foreign culture in the EFL teaching. So, it is highly recommended that EFL teachers use the approach in their teaching of culture. At the practical level, during the preliminary stage, teachers are recommended to highlight the utility of the projects by setting clear cultural goals of the projects. They also need to be explicit about the content knowledge, language, and other related learning benefits that students can accrue from working towards those pre-set goals through the seven-step process.
2. The amalgamation of the theoretical framework of the 3Ps (cultural products, cultural practices, and cultural perspectives) and the seven-step model in the teaching of cultures can lead students to heighten a deeper understanding of culture with the support of the teacher's guidance. When students relate cultural products and practices to cultural perspectives through discovery learning, they are more likely to deepen their understanding of the cultural themes under exploration.
3. Given that we cannot separate language from culture without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown, 2007), Moroccan coursebook designers are highly recommended to inject more cultures in the language textbooks. Methodologically, instructional techniques, methods, or approaches that lead students to learn about those cultures as a process, "not a storage of truths" (Wright, 2000, p. 331) are highly recommended.

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