

Project-Based Learning in English Language Teaching at a Rural School: A Case Study from Turkey

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Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) at rural schools may pose challenges like insufficient resources and a lack of students' interest. Integrating real-life-based and learner-centred methods like project-based learning (PBL) into rural English classes may help improve the quality of ELT in such contexts, yet the issue still remains underexplored. This case study aims to devise a PBL model for the English classes at a rural school and investigate the effects of PBL on the development of linguistic and non-linguistic competencies as well as the benefits and challenges of the process along with suggested solutions. The data were collected through closed- and open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and students' productions. According to the results, PBL was seen to affect students' progress in multidimensional ways. The data suggest that thanks to PBL, the students' interest and confidence in using English increased, and their English language proficiency improved. Besides, the students were found to have developed their real-life related skills like time management, creativity, autonomous decision-making, oral presentation, and computer use. However, PBL was also defined to be a challenging process requiring full devotion and a heavy workload. This study indicates PBL can be an effective means to improve the quality of ELT in rural education.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

proje tabanlı öğrenme, İngilizce dil öğretimi, kırsal eğitim, köy okulları, vaka incelemesi

Bir Köy Okulundaki İngilizce Dil Öğretiminde Proje Tabanlı Öğrenme: Türkiye'den Bir Vaka İncelemesi

Özet: Köy okullarında İngilizce dil öğretimi yetersiz kaynaklar ve öğrenci ilgisinin eksikliği gibi zorluklar ortaya koyabilir. Köy okullarındaki İngilizce derslerine proje tabanlı öğrenme gibi gerçek yaşam temelli ve öğrenci merkezli yöntemler entegre etmek bu türden ortamlardaki İngilizce dil öğretim kalitesini geliştirebilir, ancak bu konu üzerine halen yeterince araştırma bulunmamaktadır. Bu vaka incelemesi bir köy okulundaki İngilizce dersleri için bir proje tabanlı öğrenim modeli tasarlanmasını ve proje tabanlı öğrenmenin dilsel ve dilsel olmayan yeterliliklerin gelişimi üzerindeki etkilerini ve sürecin yararlarını, zorluklarını ve önerilen çözümleri araştırmayı hedeflemektedir. Veriler kapalı ve açık uçlu anketler, yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlar ve öğrencilerin üretimleri aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Sonuçlara göre proje tabanlı öğrenmenin öğrencilerin gelişimini çok boyutlu bir şekilde etkilediği görülmüştür. Veriler proje tabanlı öğrenme sayesinde öğrencilerin İngilizce kullanımına yönelik ilgi ve özgüveninin arttığına ve İngilizce dil yeterliliklerinin geliştiğine işaret etmektedir. Bunun yanı sıra öğrencilerin zaman yönetimi, yaratıcılık, özerk karar alma, sözlü sunum ve bilgisayar kullanımı gibi gerçek yaşamla ilişkili becerilerini geliştirdikleri bulunmuştur. Ancak, proje tabanlı öğrenme tam adanmışlık ve ağır iş yükü gerektiren zorlu bir süreç olarak da tanımlanmıştır. Çalışma, proje tabanlı öğrenmenin kırsal eğitimdeki İngilizce dil öğretiminin kalitesini geliştirmede etkin bir araç olduğunu göstermektedir.

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1. Introduction

The quality of education may differ severely in rural and urban schools due to the geographical and socioeconomic distinctions between rural and urban areas. The data drawn from Turkey Statistical Institute (TUIK) (2020) demonstrate that the total population of the rural areas in Turkey has been decreasing since the mid-twentieth century. Following the decline of the number of people living in the countryside, educational policies in Turkey have focused more on urban areas. As stated by Çiftçi and Cin (2017), in Turkey, the central education system applies the same curriculum and instruction to all children across the country, and this system does not always match with the interests or cultural or social differences in the rural areas and fails to supply knowledge that is discernible and relevant to all students. As shown by the studies of Aksoy (2008), Çiftçi and Cin (2017), Çakıroğlu and Çakıroğlu (2003), and Kızılaslan (2012) on rural education in Turkey, the distinctions between rural and urban areas lead to a big gap with regard to social and economic improvement and access to infrastructure; thus, rural education requires special care and attention in this context. Accordingly, the findings emphasize several challenges specific to rural education settings, including insufficient teaching materials, poor physical conditions, transportation problems, little value given to education by families and communities, and/or lack of pre-service or in-service teacher training related to rural teaching.

On the other hand, when the general socioeconomic status and education level of families in rural settings are taken into consideration, school education has a great deal of importance in these areas. According to the report published by The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012), children from disadvantaged environments can take advantage of skills and strategies learned at schools which are especially more difficult for them to acquire at their homes. Thus, schools can act as active and productive agents in developing rural learners' knowledge, experience, and real-life-based skills. Besides, the quality of education is highly significant in ELT in rural contexts where students would intensively need external support to learn and practice the language.

1.1. English Language Teaching at Rural Schools

Today English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a *sine qua non* in various aspects of life, including human relations, international, political, and business affairs, technology, and education all over the world. Thus, English language teaching (ELT) is essential to effectively equip learners with international communication skills and help them fulfil their potential via global opportunities. This necessitates efficient and real-life-oriented English lessons to prepare learners to communicate with global users outside the classroom (Kemaloglu-Er & Bayyurt, 2019). In rural education, the conditions to ensure effective English lessons could be influenced by several factors specific to the setting, as attested by various studies conducted in national and international contexts.

There is little research on ELT in rural education contexts in Turkey. Şahin (2021) conducted a study on the professional identity development of EFL teachers working at Turkish rural schools. Şahin (2021) states the rural teachers often got demotivated by the limited conditions of their environment identified with technological deficiencies, defects in school buildings, inadequate resources, and lack of opportunities for professional development. Moreover, lack of parental interest in educational issues and the students' lack of proficiency in English were common at rural schools. Most students were said to have poor English backgrounds and failed to understand even very basic concepts and instructions. The

teachers were seen to cope with the difficulties by using their own power and initiative. To illustrate, they perpetually explained the importance of learning a foreign language, adapted the curriculum to the students' level, created materials, arranged extracurricular activities, and often acted as guides, counsellors and role-models for the students. Kizildag (2021) studied the expectations of EFL teachers working in urban and rural public schools from the Ministry of National Education (MONE). The participants complained about the students' proficiency levels in English and expected MONE to consider the readiness levels of the students in designing their English curriculum.

ELT in rural education is also a challenging field of work in international contexts, as revealed by research on the issue. Relevant research findings indicate that schools often suffer from the lack of learning resources and inadequate facilities and often do not have technology-enriched classrooms with digital and audio-visual aids due to financial and resource constraints (Carrillo, 2019; Faisal & Ali, 2021; Izquierdo et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2020; Prabowo & Akmal, 2019; Putri, 2021; Saiful & Triyono, 2018). In several rural EFL classes, focus on grammar, rote learning, and extensive use of L1 and translation are common, communicative skills are often neglected, and technology-enhanced learning is not widely applied (Carrillo, 2019; Faisal & Ali, 2021; Izquierdo et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2020; Li et al., 2018; Musa et al., 2012; Prabowo & Akmal, 2019; Putri, 2021; Saiful & Triyono, 2018; Samaranyake, 2016). ELT in rural education is also impacted by teacher-related factors, including teacher shortage, teacher turnover, lack of qualified teachers, and teacher demotivation (Carrillo, 2019; Faisal & Ali, 2021; Izquierdo et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Prabowo & Akmal, 2019; Putri, 2021). Also, in most settings, rural students perceive English learning as a decontextualized subject matter unrelated to their lives due to their familial backgrounds often marked with low-level of education and income (Izquierdo et al., 2021; Khulel, 2021; Musa et al., 2012; Saiful & Triyono, 2018). Parents are also reported to show little, or no interest in educational issues (Khan et al., 2020; Khulel, 2021; Prabowo & Akmal, 2019; Saiful & Triyono, 2018), and this increases the power and prestige of teachers perceived by students as reliable authorities (Castañeda, 2014; Hardré & Sullivan, 2008). As pointed out by Hardré & Sullivan (2008), in rural schools, the relationship between the learners and teachers is robust, and the teachers as distinguished members in the society have a stronger influence on the motivation of students than their peers. It is a fact that teachers can benefit from this perception to increase motivation, broaden the students' perspectives, and lead them to improve their interpersonal relations along with language skills (Hardré et al., 2008). In doing so, they can develop and apply novel methodologies for their students including project-based language learning.

1.2. Integrating Project-Based Learning into ELT at Rural Schools

Project-based learning (PBL) is an approach which promotes learner-centered teaching through investigative, interactive, and creative activities extending beyond the classroom (Fried-Booth, 2002). In PBL, students actively engage in the learning process by in-depth investigation, analyzing data, solving problems, generating conclusions, creating products, and sharing knowledge (Beckett & Miller, 2006; Gras-Velázquez, 2020). In English lessons, when the lesson content is related to the learners' experiences and community, they become more interested and are able to have a deeper understanding of the content (Saenz et al., 2018). PBL encourages authentic target language use in classroom settings in relevance to the lives of students, learner decision-making, and autonomy, and it brings about several benefits to L2 classrooms including improved language, academic and real-life skills, repeated

opportunities for interaction, and intensity of motivation, engagement, creativity, and enjoyment (Hutchinson, 1991; Stoller, 2006; Stoller & Myers, 2020).

Blumenfeld et al. (2011) point out PBL gives learners opportunities to actively engage in the learning process, make preferences, and bring their interests to the learning environment, thus it has a high potential to make learners more attentive. However, it may be hard to apply innovative teaching methods like PBL in rural education since educational programs, teaching methods, and academic content are rarely compatible with learners' style of living or habits in the countryside (Moulton, 2001). Hence, teachers working in rural areas need to develop their professional skills to effectively implement PBL by adapting materials, making the content relevant, and building bridges between the subjects and students' previous experiences.

Research shows the pedagogical impacts of integrating PBL into ELT at rural schools. In their studies, Pichailuck and Luksaneeyanawin (2017) state that PBL helped EFL learners in a rural area not only develop learning strategies and become more autonomous learners but also get higher grades in the standardized national exam. Moreover, the development of self-confidence, metacognitive skills, and increased motivation and participation were reported as project gains. The research done by Castañeda (2014) demonstrated that through PBL, perceptions of the rural students about English as a disconnected phenomenon from their lives changed. The projects helped students raise awareness of English as a communicative tool rather than a subject to be studied. Besides, it improved not only their language skills but also participation, collaboration, self-regulation, self-confidence, individual and social values, and relationships with their peers and teachers. It was also emphasized that the teacher's professional satisfaction was enhanced with increased confidence of the learners in this rural context. In Santhi et al. (2019), PBL facilitated the acquisition of 21st-century skills, improved problem solving and critical thinking skills, and provided the learners with an opportunity to enhance their content knowledge in a meaningful context. In Saenz et al. (2018), the learners in the rural context reported not only highly positive attitudes towards PBL, but also increased awareness of community problems and cultural sensitivity and developed language proficiency.

Projects may also offer EFL learners' opportunities to experiment with language and decrease their anxiety levels of speaking in the target language. According to the study done by Fragoulis and Tsiplakies (2009) with EFL students in a village school in Greece, the students' speaking anxiety levels decreased, and they showed higher levels of participation in and willingness towards educational activities after the implementation of PBL. Another contribution of PBL was students' using different resources and finding and synthesizing related information through internet research. It can be concluded that with its emphasis on students' initiative and its potential to improve linguistic and real-life-based skills, project-based foreign language learning can be a beneficial tool in rural education. Yet, such cases are not common and ELT in rural education still remains underexplored.

In Turkey, there is very little research on ELT in rural education (Kizildag, 2021; Şahin, 2021), and there is no research on the integration of PBL into ELT at rural schools to the best of the researchers' knowledge. This study develops and implements a PBL model in ELT at a rural school and investigates the perceived effects of PBL on the development of linguistic and non-linguistic competencies as well as the benefits and challenges of PBL along with suggested solutions. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the i) most developed, ii) moderately developed, iii) least developed, and iv) non-developed competencies following PBL according to the students?
2. Do the students' project-related productions display developmental aspects in linguistic and non-linguistic competencies? If so, how is development represented in the students' productions?
3. What are the advantages of PBL according to the students and the teacher?
4. What are the challenges of PBL according to the students and the teacher?
5. How can the challenges be settled according to the students and the teacher?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

In this study, the descriptive case study design was employed as this design enables the researcher to describe the case in tandem with its contextualization through in-depth analysis (Yin, 2014). Therefore, this study aims to provide a complete understanding of the application of PBL in a genuine rural classroom setting via in-depth analyses and thick descriptions. In this regard, it elaborates on the implementation of PBL in a rural school context and its possible potential to develop EFL learners' linguistic and non-linguistic competencies, and documents the participants' perspectives about the benefits and challenges of the process with suggested solutions.

2.2. Setting

This study was conducted at a rural state school in Marmara Region in Turkey and lasted two semesters in the academic year 2017-2018. The school was located in a village that was 60 km away from the town centre. At the time of the study, there was only a grocer's and an internet cafe in the village and the roads to the village were not well-built and most of the people worked in nearby factories. The internet was usually accessed through the connections at school and the internet cafe. There were mostly low-income families in the setting. Stoves were used for heating so the families usually spent time in a common living area in the house, and the students usually did not have their own computers and rooms. On the other hand, the school and the classes were technologically well-equipped with smart boards and a stable internet connection.

The teacher was the only English teacher of the rural school. Before the teacher was appointed, there were part-time teachers coming from the nearby town to teach English in exchange of hourly payments, but their majors were not related to teaching or ELT and they were employed mainly due to their basic level of English that was deemed to be adequate to teach English at the rural school and their willingness to teach for extra payment in the village, since not many teachers prefer this option due to having to cover the distance between the town and the village every week.

The class where the research was conducted was the 7th grade. The students had four hours of compulsory English classes and two hours of elective English classes per week, taken by all the students since there were few elective courses available in the rural setting, and English was one of them. All the English classes were taught by the same teacher.

2.3. Participants

The participants were ten thirteen-year-old 7th-grade students (seven males, three females) and their teacher. They were all native Turkish speakers and had been learning English for six years. All the participants were from low-income families, and they lived with their families. They had limited access to technology and used their parents' smartphones to connect to the internet at their homes. Only one of the students had her own computer at home. The students reported they had not been able to practice English in real-life contexts outside the classroom due to their limited access to the internet and not receiving parental and financial support.

The teacher held a BA degree in ELT. She was appointed to the school soon after her graduation, and she had been teaching English to all the grades (between the 2nd grade and the 8th grade) for three years. Based on her self-report, she gave intensive and student-centred English education to her students, valued student participation, autonomy, and motivation, taught English interactively rather than focusing on purely grammar-translation, and related the topics to students' lives. Additionally, she stated that she only used English during class time, encouraged her students to speak English, and used different types of activities to improve her students' English.

2.4. Project Design

This research focuses on the PBL process in the English lessons of the 7th grade at a rural school in the fall and spring semesters of one academic year. Within each project process, the students and the teacher pursued the following steps developed for this study: 1) research, 2) interaction, 3) outcome production, 4) oral presentation, and 5) interactive feedback. According to this framework, in this study for each project, the students were supposed to i) form groups, ii) collect data on the given subject by research via the internet, iii) interact with their group members and other people for an in-depth comprehension of the topic, iv) construct an outcome of their own (an oral presentation often with an accompanying visual like a poster they prepare), iv) present it to their class, and v) receive feedback from their teacher and peers as well as make self-evaluation about their presentation.

The project themes were given in parallel to those in the curriculum. That is, after each unit, the students conducted a project related to the theme of the completed unit under the supervision of their teacher. The research group completed nine projects in the whole year. The projects topics were i) introducing oneself, ii) celebrities, iii) sport types, iv) wild animals, v) TV programmes, vi) parties, vii) superstitions, viii) public buildings, and ix) protection of the environment.

The teacher gave training to her students in the beginning of the term for two weeks about the project guidelines and how to make oral presentations. She also gave support to her students whenever they needed help and provided feedback for their written, oral and visual products on the basis of the defined rubrics. Also, parallel to the ongoing classroom projects described above, as a part of the Erasmus+ European Programme for Education, Training, Youth, and Sport, the teacher conducted an eTwinning Project with an English teacher from Italy and both teachers integrated some of the projects in this research into their eTwinning framework. eTwinning is a free online community for schools in Europe, which presents a platform for teachers to communicate and collaborate on projects (<https://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm>). Through this platform, the teacher in this study started an eTwinning Project with an English teacher from Italy and their classes in the

same age group did a certain number of projects on the decided topics from the ones listed above. In this process, the teachers shared the photos and videos of their project-related products on the platform and the classes had online interactions. Two groups also made caricatures about the related project topics via a caricature program and sent them to each other and made comments on them. There was one Skype meeting in each term between the classes so that they could get to know each other and have intercultural and project-related exchanges. In these meetings, first, the chosen representatives introduced themselves and gave culture-specific information about their country. Then there were spontaneous interactions between the groups about their projects, lives, and cultures.

2.5. Data Collection

Case studies entail collecting data from multiple sources of information, qualitative, quantitative, or both (Yin, 2018). From this standpoint, this study utilized both types of data to seek answers to the research questions. The data were collected by a closed-ended questionnaire and an open-ended questionnaire given to the students, semi-structured interviews conducted with the students and the teacher, and students' project-related productions.

The closed-ended questionnaire involved 18 items designed for this study to test the perceived competencies expected to be developed following PBL. All the items were designed according to the relevant literature and the project goals. The items aimed to test the perceived development in the linguistic and non-linguistic competencies regarding PBL and the participants were asked to rate to what extent they thought their competencies developed as a result of PBL on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The linguistic competencies within the questionnaire were concerned with i) fluency in four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), ii) communicative functions expected to improve via PBL (introducing oneself, introducing people, introducing one's environment, and telling stories in English), iii) oral presentation, iv) vocabulary use, v) doing research in English on the internet, vi) language use in daily communication, vii) communicative use of English with international partners, and viii) confidence in the use of English. The non-linguistic competencies intended to develop through PBL were i) time management, ii) use of creativity, iii) use of computer skills, and iv) autonomous decision-making.

In order to ensure the validity, feasibility and reliability of the closed-ended questionnaire, different procedures were applied. First of all, the questionnaire was tested in terms of its content validity. Content validity refers to how well a questionnaire measures the construct that it sets out to measure (Creswell, 2013). Expert opinion was sought to ensure the content validity of the measure (Olson, 2010). Two experts were consulted in this regard. Both of them were assistant professors in the Department of ELT at a state university. They generally provided positive feedback, on the other hand, they both stated that some items should be reworded. The rewording feedback mostly included suggestions to make the items simpler and more understandable for the target students.

Secondly, piloting was applied to ensure the feasibility of the questionnaire. The piloting group included eleven 6th grade students that had been exposed to PBL by the same teacher in the same rural setting. Based on the feedback received in the piloting process, some minor edits were made in the items and the format, and the questionnaire was finalized. Thirdly, Cronbach's alpha as a measure of questionnaire reliability was calculated and it was seen that Cronbach's alpha coefficient was sufficient (.91) to proceed with further analyses.

As for the open-ended questionnaire, the instrument was prepared by the researchers to provide an in-depth understanding of the issue and strengthen the validity of the study via triangulation. The participants were asked to state the learning gains, problems and suggested solutions about PBL. In order to establish the content validity of the questionnaire, the expert-opinion method was applied (Olson, 2010). That is, the experts that evaluated the closed-ended questionnaire were also asked to check the items of the open-ended questionnaire. The experts conveyed positive views and had no criticisms. Both the closed- and open-ended questionnaires were collected at the end of the academic year when the PBL process was over. First, the students were given closed-ended questionnaires and after they completed the closed-ended questionnaires, the open-ended questionnaires were administered.

The semi-structured interviews with the students and the teacher focused on the advantages and challenges of PBL along with recommended solutions for the challenges mentioned. The interviews were conducted after the questionnaires were administered. In each interview, the details given about the projects were questioned with further questions with the purpose of in-depth analysis. In addition to these interviews, the teacher was interviewed one year after the study about the likely impacts of PBL on the students' performance in English to explore the possible long-term effects of the intervention.

The students' project-related productions were also used as supportive data to analyse the developmental aspects of the PBL case in detail and ensure triangulation. The productions included the project-related writings the students wrote, the audio-visual records of their oral presentations, the posters, and other forms of visuals they prepared and presented within their projects.

2.6. Data Analysis

In this study, the data of the closed-ended questionnaire were analysed via descriptive statistics and a categorical scheme. The closed-ended items asked the respondents to what extent they thought they developed in the given competencies following PBL. Thus, the questionnaire design allowed the researchers to make a categorical scheme about the developmental level of the competencies. According to the questionnaire, for each competency, the respondents rated their level of development in the pertinent competency on a 5-point Likert scale and in this rating process, point 1 referred to "not developed", 2 to "slightly developed", 3 to "moderately developed", 4 to "developed" and 5 to "highly developed". Based on this categorization, a data analysis scheme was devised by the researchers to meaningfully analyse the item means of the questionnaire with respect to developmental levels. According to this scheme, the developmental categories of the competencies were identified according to the item means. As a result, the item means between 1 and 1.99 referred to "non-developed", 2 and 2.99 to "least developed", 3 and 3.99 to "moderately developed", 4 and 5 to "most developed" competencies (See Table 1). The scheme was shown to two statisticians for expert opinion and their views were received. They gave positive responses. Also, the scheme was shared with the experts whose opinions were taken about the closed- and open-ended questionnaire and they also gave confirmation and did not reveal any criticisms. In line with this finalized scheme, the developmental level of each competency was determined according to the item means and the results were grouped and shown in tables.

Table 1.

Developmental categories of competencies

Item means	Developmental category of competencies
4 -5	Most developed competencies
3 -3.99	Moderately developed competencies
2 – 2.99	Least developed competencies
1 -1.99	Non-developed competencies

The findings of the open-ended questionnaire and interviews, and students' project-related productions were analysed via thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013). Through multiple readings and meticulous analyses, the repetitive patterns were grouped under relevant themes. Coding was, therefore, inductive, i.e., driven from the data as the thematic categories were step by step formed by working through the data in an intensive manner.

3. Findings

3.1. Development in competencies

3.1.1. Findings of closed-ended questionnaires

Development in competencies following PBL was analysed via the closed-ended questionnaires given to the students and students' project-related productions. In the closed-ended questionnaires, as a result of the analyses, the most developed competencies were found to be the use of English daily life, oral presentation, introducing oneself in English and time management, respectively. Table 2 displays these competencies with the related item means.

Table 2.

Most developed competencies

Competency	Item Means
Use of English in daily life	4.56
Oral presentation	4.47
Introducing oneself in English	4.38
Time management	4.14

Among the competency categories, “moderately developed competencies” as a group was the one with the highest number of items (n=13). According to the findings, the competencies found to be moderately developed included using English confidently, introducing people in English, doing research in English on the internet, speaking, listening, reading and writing fluency in English, use of computer skills, use of creativity, autonomous decision-making, using newly learned vocabulary in sentences, telling stories, and introducing one's environment in English. Table 3 shows these items along with their means listed from the highest to the lowest.

Table 3.

Moderately developed competencies

Competency	Item Means
Using English confidently	3.96
Introducing people in English	3.87
Doing research in English on the internet	3.85
Speaking fluency in English	3.78
Listening fluency in English	3.76
Use of computer skills	3.75
Use of creativity in project tasks	3.75
Autonomous decision-making	3.66
Using newly learned vocabulary in sentences	3.58
Reading fluency in English	3.54
Writing fluency in English	3.43
Telling stories in English	3.42
Introducing one's environment in English	3.00

As for the least developed competency group, there was only one item found to belong to this category. The item concerned interaction with international partners and displayed a mean at the highest borderline of its group (2.99), very close to the lowest mean of the moderately developed competency group. Lastly, there were no items found to belong to the non-developed competency group.

3.1.2. Findings of students' project-related productions

The students' project-related productions were also analysed for further evidence to see whether they presented any signs of development in linguistic and non-linguistic competencies. As for linguistic competencies, the analyses displayed that the productions showed evidence for development in the use of i) grammar and ii) vocabulary as well as iii) writing and iv) oral presentations. Under the use of grammar, a certain level of development was observed in the i) accuracy and ii) complexity of the sentences. Overall, the analyses of the productions showed that the students' sentences both in their writings and oral presentations became more accurate and sophisticated over time. They were often found to make more grammatical mistakes in the beginning but their mistakes got fewer in the process. Most of the students were also found to have used simple structures in their projects at the beginning, but more complex structures towards the end of the PBL process. The structures in the latter category included longer compound sentences with linking words. In terms of vocabulary, there was a wider variety of nouns, verbs and adjectives used in the course of time. In the writings and oral presentations, coherence was also seen to have improved. That is, the writings and oral presentations got more coherent as evidenced by more neatly organized introduction, development and conclusion sections, and increased use of linking words. Table 4 shows sample excerpts from the first, fourth, and ninth project of the same student, revealing improvement in the accuracy, complexity, and coherence in her writing.

Table 4.

Sample excerpts from a student's projects

Project No	Subject	Sample Excerpts
1	Celebrities	She is singer. She is student, too. She sing songs. She lives in Istanbul. She very much loves pink.
4	Wild Animals (Pandas)	They are mammal. They have black and white fur. They eat bamboo and hunt fish. Their habitat is China. They are endangered animals because Chinese cut down bamboo trees.
9	Protection of the Environment	Environment is important because it is our home. There are the forests and animals in the environment. For example, there are birds, bears and squirrels. We should protect all animals. We should also plant and protect trees.

Besides, in oral presentations, the data showed signs of improvement in i) fluency and ii) confident use of language. According to the analyses, in their oral presentations, the students were seen to become more fluent with fewer hesitations. Their speaking confidence was also seen to have increased since they tended to present a more self-assured stance in the process with fewer pauses and filler words and a seemingly more confident posture and tone of voice.

The students' productions were also seen to provide evidence for development in non-linguistic competencies, which are i) the use of creativity and ii) computer skills. It was seen that the students used their creativity in their presentations and posters and enriched the content with a great variety of creative additions. To illustrate, they made use of different designs and varied visuals in their posters and presentations. They wore costumes and masks appropriate for the topic. For example, in the project of wild animals, they wore costumes and masks representing these types of animals. They sang songs and/or used audio-visual materials relevant to the theme of the project. As for computer skills, they were also seen to have used the PowerPoint more professionally over time. They tended to use more features in their presentations to design and arrange their slides and attract the attention of the audience. As a result, the students' project-related productions displayed development in several linguistic and non-linguistic competencies.

3.2. Project-based learning: Advantages, challenges and suggestions

3.2.1. Advantages

The pedagogical advantages of PBL were stated by both the students and the teacher. According to the data analyses of the students, i) making an oral presentation, ii) conducting internet-based research, iii) relatedness of the project topics to curricular units, and iv) project-related online interactions with an international partner were the themes identified as the pedagogical advantages of PBL.

Making an oral presentation was stated to be the most emphasized advantage of project work. The students said they did project-related oral presentations approximately every three weeks and this frequency in oral presentations put English in the centre of their lives. In this regard, being constantly busy with English in daily life was the mostly mentioned sub-theme. In this intense process, the students said they conducted research in English, wrote their own texts in English, turned their texts into attractive presentations, and rehearsed them several times. Below is a description that exemplifies such a case.

S1: *There was English, English, always English in my life. The presentations were so important. Our teacher wanted us to make good presentations. One day we were searching the internet, the other day I was working on my sentences. I was uttering these sentences everywhere to myself, at the breaks, in the meals, on my pillow looking at the ceiling (laughs). We were even saying these sentences in the middle of our conversations to our friends to make jokes.*

Through these intense preparations for the oral presentations, some students added that i) they regularly learnt new vocabulary items, ii) revised the already learnt grammar subjects, and iii) improved their speaking. Thus, some other advantages of oral presentations pointed out by the students include improvement in i) vocabulary, ii) grammar, and iii) speaking. Correct pronunciation was particularly a highlighted sub-theme in terms of speaking improvement. The students who mentioned this item stated that oral presentations laid the grounds for them to search for the correct pronunciation of new words and utter them again and again through rehearsals and active presentation, thus improving in this area. Here are some related excerpts.

S2: *My teacher says people cannot understand you if you say the words in the wrong way. So, I always checked the pronunciation of my presentation words or asked them to my teacher.*

S3: *In order not to forget the pronunciation of different words, I repeated them to myself several times.*

Another benefit specified by a great majority of students with regard to oral presentations was increased speaking confidence. Several students said through oral presentations, they were able to overcome their stage fright and gain confidence in speaking before others. Some students mentioned that this happened gradually as they felt embarrassed and/or anxious in their first presentations and then became more and more relaxed and confident throughout time. A sample excerpt is given below.

S4: *I was really afraid of presentations. My heart bumped madly. I did not want to make any presentations at first, but there was no other choice. I presented, I presented and I got used to them through time.*

Oral presentation was also said to improve technology-enhanced learning. Most students said they became competent in computer-based oral presentation skills since they mostly used the PowerPoint and other means to make presentations. Besides, technology and other means were found to be used creatively to attract interest. To illustrate, one student said

S5: *In order that our friends and our teacher like our presentations, we used the computer. We did them with the PowerPoint, the slides, and added nice titles and pictures. We used the animations in PowerPoint. We wore masks. We prepared posters. And there were songs. We sang songs. We really had fun.*

Lastly, oral presentations in PBL were found to give the students the opportunity to improve not only speaking but also listening skills. Through these presentations, they were able to listen to their classmates as presenters and also got intensely exposed to spoken English in the classroom via whole class interactions. The students also evaluated each other as presenters and this was said to make them listen more intensively and take the presentations seriously. Here is an excerpt of a student who commented on such a case.

S6: *My friends were always on the stage talking about different things. We were like a jury. We told them what we thought and gave them points. Thanks to this, we were more careful about our presentations.*

The second aspect the students found advantageous in terms of PBL was conducting internet-based research in English about the project topic. Thanks to this aspect, the students were exposed to various texts and videos in English. This intense exposure to English was said to broaden their horizons and help them gain new perspectives about the global use of English. Most students said before PBL, they thought of English as a subject matter limited to coursebooks and few words and sentences. However, after PBL, English was stated to become a living entity and they became conscious of the multiplicity and complexity of English use all over the world and this global awareness increased their motivation to use the language and produce and share their own written and oral outputs with others. As stated by one student

S7: (Before PBL), I didn't know that the internet was full of writings and videos in English that much. I was just using my father's phone to play games. There is a huge world and when you google a word, there is always English. Different people speaking in English in different ways, different pages, different pictures, videos... For all these, you must know English.

The third positive aspect the students mentioned about PBL was the relatedness of the contents of PBL to the given units. That is, the topics of the units and the projects were the same and this helped them not only revise the content-based knowledge learnt in the classroom but also extend it to more advanced levels. For example, if the unit was about wild animals, they did further investigation on the kinds of such animals, read more texts, watched varied videos and interacted with their classmates, their teacher, and elders and increased their knowledge, and improved their English in this area. Besides this, they spoke about the given subject that they had covered in class in detail by making oral presentations about it and expressed their feelings and opinions about the themes and suggested solutions for the given problems. Therefore, they said a seemingly simple unit became complex and varied through PBL and personalized learning.

S8: In projects, we dealt with the subjects we covered in the classroom. Indeed, we made them bigger. We searched the internet. We wrote writings. We made presentations. We were always doing projects.

The fourth benefit of PBL in the research context was project-related online interactions with an international partner. The students said these international online interactions and knowing that the projects would be shared with their Italian project partner increased the motivation and satisfaction they derived from doing project work.

S9: We were excited before our meetings with Italy. And when our teacher showed us their project products, I liked them. I thought in another part of the world, students were doing projects like me.

Besides, these online interactions increased the speaking confidence of students:

S10: We talked with the class in Italy and saw that we could speak English. Indeed, they didn't speak English so well (laughs). We were much better.

The teacher was also asked to state the pedagogical advantages of PBL. Project work was said to offer the advantages of intense exposure to English in and outside the classroom, enhancement in content-based learning, increased confidence in the use of English, and academic achievement in the centralized exams on the subject of English. As the teacher pointed out, before PBL, the students had been exposed to and practiced a limited amount of English, however through PBL, their exposure to English in and outside the classroom became more and more intense and varied. Moreover, project work was said to enhance

content-based learning in the English classes. Accordingly, the students were said to i) learn a great variety of life-based information, ii) improve their vocabulary and grammar by getting exposed to new items and practicing the already-learned ones, iii) form their own contents, and iv) present them both orally and in written form in multiple ways.

One further benefit of PBL was increased confidence in the use of English according to the teacher.

T: Since the students were in a rural setting, they felt both physically and psychologically distant to L2 learning opportunities and thought that they were restricted and inadequate in the use of English. Yet, after they started to apply PBL, the students became more and more aware of the online opportunities to improve their English and they became more and more confident in using English by the tasks of research, interaction and presentation they did within project work.

As the teacher emphasized, through PBL and the efficient use of technology-enhanced opportunities and by constantly collaborating with their teacher and peers, the students did not feel restricted and distant to English in their rural setting; rather than that, they felt free and equipped in making their project-related preparations, made use of multidimensional opportunities to improve their receptive and productive skills and thus got intensely involved with L2 and felt closer to it throughout the process.

Lastly, one year after the study was completed, the teacher was interviewed about the impacts of PBL on the performance of her students in English and she stated that she deemed project work had a substantial impact on the academic achievement of students in the centralized exams on the subject of English. As she explained, the class did intensive project work in the 7th and the 8th grade when they were getting ready for the centralized high school placement exam given by the Turkish National Education Ministry, through the effect of which the secondary school students in Turkey can be placed in state high schools giving education with higher quality. As she stated, the students had established achievements in English like having very high scores in these exams and being the first of the region. The teacher concluded

T: The students got more interested and became more confident in English and their proficiency improved thanks to projects. I think our hard work for project work and exams, and the support I have tried to give have all affected the academic achievement of the students.

3.2.2. Challenges and suggested solutions

As for the challenges of PBL, there were three themes pointed out by the students: i) heavy workload, ii) intense preparation for oral presentation, and iii) the high level of English in the project-related internet-based research. Regarding PBL, heavy workload was the most mentioned topic by the students. Almost all the students found PBL challenging in terms of workload and they said they were constantly busy preparing and presenting their English projects almost every three weeks and as each project required a novel field of investigation with a new topic and involved investigation, interaction and production steps, the students said they got exhausted in the long run. Some students who mentioned this challenge suggested the load of project work be lessened in the forthcoming terms. Despite this challenge, most students said they were content with project work as they thought it was a useful process.

S2: Project work was really very, very tiring. Once one project finished, another one started. We were busy with English all the time. On the other hand, thanks to our teacher and the projects we achieved many things.

Another challenge emphasized by the students was getting prepared for the oral presentations. The students said it was forbidden to read the things they planned to say in the oral presentation so, it was arduous to get prepared for this presentation stage. Most students mentioned that they had a hard time preparing to present their projects with accurate use of English and in a natural way with suitable gestures, voice tone, and mimics. They suggested that they had to make repetitive rehearsals to achieve their goals.

The third challenge was the high level of English in the project-related internet-based research of students and their difficulty in understanding the related reading and listening texts. The students said in the first stages of the project process, in order to feel safe, they mostly checked Turkish websites and made translations with the help of their teacher and adapted the information they found to the English they knew. But throughout time, their confidence increased and with the support of their teacher, they got more and more involved with English texts and videos on the internet and got exposed to mostly English texts. As stated by a student

S5: When I had difficulty in understanding the English on the internet, I asked my teacher or friends. I googled the words and looked up dictionaries. I didn't understand anything at first. It was like a melody to me. But now I am better.

As for the challenges mentioned by the teacher, the specified themes were i) project work's being effortful, ii) lack of parental support, iii) lack of computers at students' residences, and iv) integration of e-twinning into the project process. Firstly, similar to the students, the teacher also said the project work required a great deal of effort. She stated she had to devote a great amount of time and energy to each project group before, during and after each project. Besides, she pointed out that she constantly encouraged each of her students to do their best and with the effect of rural life she had close relationships with her students, thus giving intense psychological and linguistic support to her students. She derived satisfaction from each of her help but it was also an intense and exhausting process. She stated

T: Project work has been one of the most challenging works of my professional life. But when I saw my children achieve success, I forgot everything.

Also, as the teacher mentioned, the students lacked parental support in terms of English lessons. In addition, since the teacher was seen as the only authority figure in terms of English in the school and the rural setting, this made her feel more responsible. Hence, she made extra efforts to support her students. On the other hand, as the teacher pointed out, her students never complained to her about the workload and did whatever she told them with care. Thus, the teacher said her being the only authority figure in the rural setting about English and the students' respect and unconditional surrender to this figure and their taking this for granted might have caused her to work more than expected and with this impact, she possibly had her students work a lot.

Another rural life-related challenge was lack of computers at students' residences. This was said to make the teacher feel that she had to have the students make use of technological opportunities at school for project work, which meant that the groups did the research in the classroom with teacher support and asked their immediate questions to her. All these

tasks also created a comfort zone in the project processes of students, but increased the workload of the teacher at the same time.

Lastly, the teacher made efforts to have her students engage in international communications with their English-speaking peers. Hence, she conducted an eTwinning project with Italy and integrated the projects they fulfilled into the eTwinning framework. This was another challenge mentioned by the teacher as she was the one to arrange all the correspondence, oral interactions and project reports throughout the process. As for suggestions for the mentioned challenges, the teacher said she was fully satisfied with what she was doing and accepted her being the only authority in terms of English as a fact of the rural setting so she had no suggestions except for accepting this reality and doing her best for her students.

T: It feels that in this village, without the teachers' efforts these students would have never done such things. By the way I don't think I have done such an extraordinary thing. It was normal to me. I did what I had to do as a teacher. The process was so beautiful as my students did whatever I asked them to do.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has aimed to present an in-depth analysis of an implementation of PBL in ELT classes within a rural setting in Turkey. Typically, rural settings are considered to be limited in terms of opportunities for foreign language teaching and skills improvement, and this is verified by several studies on ELT in rural education (Carrillo, 2019; Faisal & Ali, 2021; Izquierdo et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Li et al., 2018; Musa et al., 2012; Prabowo & Akmal, 2019; Putri, 2021; Saiful & Triyono, 2018; Samaranayake, 2016; Şahin, 2021). On the other hand, in this study with a multifaceted project work design, effective use of the internet and continuous teacher support, the students have intensely been exposed to English and efficiently used it in meaningful and purposeful ways.

The findings of the study have shown that PBL has been favoured as an educational means contributing to the development of various competencies. Firstly, according to the students' responses, English was used at a high level in daily life. Further student and teacher reports were seen to support this finding. They were reported to spend a lot of time and energy investigating the given topic, interacting about it with their project partners, classmates, teacher and elders, creating written and oral outputs, and presenting them to their classmates as well as their international audience. The PBL process also made them feel that they were able to effectively use English for investigation and communication purposes. Besides, as this communication was not restricted to their monolingual rural environment but included a wider audience consisting of international partners, they realistically experienced the use of English in daily life with genuine interlocutors. In this study, in addition to the use of English in daily life, the highly developed competencies thanks to PBL were reported to be the oral presentation, introducing oneself in English and time management.

Apart from the competencies mentioned above, almost all the other competencies concerning PBL were thought to be developed moderately. The only competency falling into the least developed group concerned interaction with international partners and the item displayed a mean at the highest borderline of its group (2.99), very close to the lowest mean of the moderately developed competency group. Additionally, there were no competencies reported to be non-developed. The fact that the competencies mostly revealed to be highly and moderately developed and that the least developed competency level still remained very close to the moderately developed category and that there were no non-developed

competencies implies that project work has substantially influenced the development of the students in terms of linguistic and non-linguistic competencies. That is, the students not only developed with regard to reading, writing, listening and speaking in English, but they also improved in the aspects of time management, autonomous decision-making, use of creativity and computer skills. As emphasized by Stoller and Myers (2020), PBL not only improves students' language skills but also helps them gain mastery of life skills. This was seen in this research as well as in Castañeda (2014), Fragoulis and Tsiplakies (2009), Pichailuck and Luksaneeyanawin (2017), Saenz et al. (2018), and Santhi et al. (2019), reporting a variety of improvements in linguistic and real-life-based competencies.

When the students' productions were examined to answer the second research question about the developmental aspects observed in PBL, it was seen that there was progress in some linguistic and non-linguistic competencies. Firstly, the students were found to improve their use of grammar and vocabulary as well as writing and oral presentation skills. They were also seen to have used English more confidently and fluently in their oral presentations. Apart from the improvement of linguistic skills, there was also evidence that the learners' computer skills and creativity were boosted in the process of PBL. They were encouraged to investigate the topics through various sources and present their products in a way that attracted their classmates' attention. Thus, throughout the duration of the study, the students made use of different technological tools and added variety to their visual products and oral presentations.

In addition to the development in competencies, the advantages and challenges of PBL and the ways suggested to deal with the challenges were investigated. The advantages pointed out by the students include intense improvement in oral presentation skills, regularly held internet-based investigation about the topics and relevant reading and listening tasks and interactions, relatedness of the topics to the units of the coursebook and students' lives as well as international interactions with the partner class as a part of the eTwinning project. The teacher also emphasized the students' intense and multivariate exposure to English and their noteworthy progress in the use of English and content-based knowledge. According to the teacher, prior to PBL, she witnessed that her students felt both physically and psychologically distant to L2 learning opportunities and thought that they were limited and insufficient in the use of English. Yet after PBL, her students got closer to English and improved in various ways and had notable academic achievements in the centralized English exams.

The findings of this study are in compliance with Castañeda (2014), Fragoulis and Tsiplakies (2009), Pichailuck and Luksaneeyanawin (2017), Saenz et al. (2018), and Santhi et al. (2019) in that PBL was found to offer several pedagogical benefits to the students learning English in rural settings. As in those studies conducted in rural contexts, PBL was reported to improve not only students' linguistic skills but also content knowledge. It has paved the way for students' participatory, collaborative, communicative, and autonomous learning. It has increased participation, motivation and self-confidence among learners and aided them to raise awareness of English as a communicative tool rather than a subject matter in the curriculum without any context. Likewise, PBL in this study has also provided the learners with an opportunity to express their feelings and ideas and suggest solutions for local and international problems in meaningful ways. Moreover, through PBL as well as the continuous efforts of the teacher, the class had remarkable success in the centralized English exams as in Pichailuck and Luksaneeyanawin (2017).

The project process was also said to pose some challenges. Heavy workload was stated to be the most emphasized challenge due to the high number and intense content of projects involving an effortful process of investigation, writing and oral presentation. On the other hand, the participants overall thought PBL had been a very useful and productive means to improve English and the advantages of PBL outweighed the drawbacks, thus, they suggested with hard work and high motivation and with the teacher's and classmates' supports, projects can be managed in the best way. Compared to the findings related to the challenges of PBL in ELT in rural contexts, this study presents novel results. Fragoulis and Tsiplakies (2009) state implementation of PBL in rural schools posed problems related to the students' unfamiliarity with group work, long duration of project work and the shift in the role of the teacher from being a knowledge provider to a facilitator. Santhi et al. (2019) also mention that in applying PBL in rural English lessons, the students had problems in adapting to the technology. In the current study, the participants did not have such problems, but overall, they thought that the project work was not only an arduous but also a beneficial process with multifarious tasks targeting at students' improvement in several areas.

The study is also unique in the way that it has integrated international interaction and collaboration into PBL with an eTwinning partnership. Moreover, the projects in this study were designed in such a way that they complemented the syllabus already covered in the English lessons by focusing on the same themes of the units from multiple perspectives. Technology-wise, the study also presents a different case because, in rural schools in both local and international contexts, lack of technology is often reported to be a common problem (Aksoy, 2008; Carrillo, 2019; Çiftçi & Cin, 2017; Çakıroğlu & Çakıroğlu, 2003; Faisal & Ali, 2021; Izquierdo et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2020; Kızılaslan, 2012; Prabowo & Akmal, 2019; Putri, 2021; Saiful & Triyono, 2018; Şahin, 2021). However, this rural school setting was technologically well-equipped and the teacher made use of this opportunity by having her students utilize this technology to improve their English via PBL through activities including internet-based research and oral presentation. Besides, even if the students did not have computers and internet connection at their homes, the teacher did not see this as a problem and took advantage of the technology supplied by the school and had her students prepare their projects in the school setting. Taneri and Engin-Demir (2011) mention that education at rural schools does not often provide students with the necessary skills. Yet, in this study, it was concluded that PBL, with its intense content, had a remarkable influence on the development of students' linguistic skills particularly speaking, as well as real-life oriented skills such as autonomous learning, time management, and analytical and creative thinking. Also, the students had global interactions with their Italian project partners, became aware of their own use of English as well as the importance of ELF, and witnessed a genuine English variety from Europe via real-life communications. Thus, they personally experienced the benefits of the approach of ELF-aware pedagogy (Kemaloglu-Er & Bayyurt, 2019).

The study indicates that it is beneficial to integrate PBL into rural English language education and improve students' English via multivariate opportunities such as internet-based research, analytical and creative thinking, oral presentations and international collaborations conducted in online settings. Teachers in rural settings are often highly respected in their contexts and with their devoted efforts and continuous support, it is possible to supply students with a wide range of opportunities to make them competent in English and broaden their horizons with intense content knowledge and online interactions. As stated by Holguín and Morales (2016), English courses may be conceived by rural students as a decontextualized subject matter not relevant to their lives owing to their familial status often identified with a low level of education and income. In their mindsets, English may be

perceived as one of the subjects to pass in the curriculum to get to the upper grade and as most of them may not have a chance to practice it communicatively, they may not be aware of the significance of English as a global language. This makes it necessary to raise their awareness of the importance of English as a global means of communication and increase their motivation and interest in learning this foreign language. In this study, PBL has been used as a vehicle to serve these purposes and thanks to the intense projects carried out by the students, their interest in English was found to increase and through continuous collaboration with their teacher, they were seen to overcome the feeling of being distant to English and develop in several competences.

The study also shows that applying PBL is possible in the current English curricula of state schools in Turkey, and it is even more doable in rural settings with the teacher's authority and power in the nature of rural settings provided that teachers are willing to spend extra time and energy for their students' progress. The utilization of PBL is also recommended in the English course books used at state schools, but the suggested projects may not be implemented by English teachers in action since they are not compulsory. Some other reasons for not doing project work might be concerns for extra work and/or limited course time. This study shows that all these barriers can be overcome through high levels of teacher and student motivation and hard work, and well-organized planning.

Another implication is that ELT at rural schools should be given by teachers with a professional licence. Before the teacher was appointed, the English classes either remained teacherless or were conducted by temporary teachers who did not have any professional license and/or experience. There were no attempts to teach English communicatively then since the lessons were often governed with mechanical exercises and misguided practices. However, after the teacher in the research setting who had recently graduated from an ELT department at a reputable state university in Istanbul was appointed, there was a remarkable shift in the lessons and the English lessons became productive and PBL-oriented. This shows us the significance of appointing teachers with relevant educational and professional backgrounds to particularly rural settings so as to accomplish effective outcomes. Also, ELT at rural schools should be a part of pre-service and in-service language teacher education programs and teachers should be provided with relevant knowledge and experience and both scholars working on this topic and practitioners with pertinent experience should share their knowledge and practices in such programs.

As a result, in this study which has taken place in a rural education setting, PBL has proved to be an effective way to improve students' English and develop their linguistic and non-linguistic skills. The teacher as the only authority figure with regard to English, was seen to have devoted a great deal of time and energy to PBL to make it as multifaceted and productive as possible. The students who were respectful to their teacher were seen to have developed their English. This happened despite the seemingly limited conditions of their rural environment such as lack of internet in their residences, lack of international travel opportunities, lack of parental support, and lack of urban experience. By using the internet and eTwinning partnership opportunities and with constant care and support, the teacher was able to create a PBL-based atmosphere and improve her students' English and increase their confidence in using English. She also managed to equip her students with several real-life-related competencies such as time management, use of creativity, autonomous decision-making, use of computers, conducting an investigation, and making an oral presentation.

Future studies may focus on PBL application at rural schools in wider contexts with larger populations and/or compare PBL in rural and urban settings. In this research context, PBL has been successfully implemented via the teacher's and students' strenuous efforts and made remarkable contributions to the students' educational development. This study has intensely described this practice to present a sample for ELT practitioners at other rural schools as well as scholars, policymakers, material writers, administrators, teacher trainers, and all the other stakeholders concerned with the field of rural education and /or PBL. It is a fact that only with the collaborative efforts of stakeholders can PBL become a common pedagogical means in ELT in rural educational settings and impactfully influence students' L2 development, make them discover their strengths, and open them the windows of different worlds.

Note on Ethical Issues

The authors confirm that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country (Date of Confirmation: 30/03/2022).

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