

Design and Implementation of the Holistic Unit Teaching for Upper Primary School Grades English Based on Project-based Learning

Huiyi Liu^{1,*}

¹ Beijing Union University, Beijing 100101, China

*** Correspondence:**

Huiyi Liu

yeyi1023@126.com

Received: 21 April 2025/ Accepted: 3 June 2025/ Published online: 8 June 2025

Abstract

Current English teaching in upper primary grades often suffers from fragmented content delivery and insufficient systematic integration of project-based learning, resulting in limited development of students' language application skills and innovative thinking. To address these issues, this study focuses on enhancing students' comprehensive competencies through the design and implementation of a holistic project-based learning intervention. Taking the "Personal Preferences" unit from the Beijing Edition Grade 5 English Textbook as a case study, this study developed the "Hobby Square" project activity. This initiative explores effective strategies for deeply integrating project-based learning with English unit instruction while employing multi-dimensional assessment tools to monitor learning progress. Teaching practice shows that students' language skills in authentic contexts have significantly improved. At the same time, their critical thinking, interdisciplinary integration, and collaborative communication abilities have also been strengthened. The combination of project learning-based and holistic unit teaching offers a feasible way to reform primary English teaching. In the future, studies should focus on improving process-oriented assessment mechanisms and expanding design frameworks for diverse thematic units. This will promote systematic and innovative practices to enhance students' core competencies in a sustainable way. This study offers actionable insights for advancing primary English education reform under updated curriculum standards, emphasizing systematic innovation and sustainable core competencies development.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning; Upper Grade In Primary School; English Teaching; Holistic English Unit Instruction

1. Introduction

The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) points: "Promote holistic unit-based instruction, emphasize competency cultivation through thematic exploration,

and fully realize educational values” (Shin et al., 2021). This framework advocates theme-driven, competency-oriented pedagogy that systematically enhances students’ core competencies by integrating curricular content and optimizing instructional approaches. Its essence lies in organizing teaching content, objectives, activities, and assessments at the unit level to counteract fragmented teaching. By centering on themes such as “Human-nature relationships,” “Social interactions,” and “Cultural heritage,” it synthesizes language knowledge, cultural literacy, skill development, and learning strategies, fostering integrated growth in linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, cognitive skills, and learning autonomy.

However, current implementations reveal a disproportionate focus on project design over systemic execution, characterized by inadequate evaluation diversity and insufficient innovative depth in project-based learning (Li and Gao, 2024). Common issues include repetitive activity formats, disconnection between projects and unit objectives, and oversimplified assessment criteria, which deprive students of holistic learning experiences and creative output opportunities, thereby hindering language application skills. Furthermore, constrained project designs often fail to engage students in reflecting on underlying values, limiting the realization of core competency development and innovative educational goals.

To address these challenges, this study proposes integrating project-based learning with holistic English unit instruction for upper primary students, aligning with their developmental characteristics. Using textbook units as foundations, we design innovative projects like “Hobby Square” that resonate with students’ interests. These projects immerse learners in authentic contexts where they apply English to solve problems through investigative tasks, creative productions, and collaborative presentations. Process-oriented assessments are embedded to monitor practical performance, facilitating a shift from “learning English” to “learning through English.”

This approach transcends traditional single-lesson constraints, exemplifying the curriculum standard’s vision of systematic, contextualized design for competency enhancement. Preliminary results demonstrate significant improvements in logical thinking, including abstraction and critical thinking (Sasson et al., 2018), while fostering interdisciplinary knowledge integration and divergent thinking across developmental stages (Shin et al., 2021). The synergy of project-based learning and unit-based instruction offers a Sustainable model for advancing English education reform, though future efforts must refine assessment tools and expand thematic unit designs to sustain systemic innovation in core competency cultivation. This study bridges this gap by synthesizing project-based learning’s student-centered principles with holistic unit frameworks, aligning with Dewey’s (1986) emphasis on experiential learning.

2. Project-Based Learning and Holistic Unit Instruction

This section examines the integration of project-based learning with holistic unit instruction as a transformative pedagogical framework for primary English education. This approach emphasizes the seamless blending of project-based learning principles with comprehensive unit design. By aligning project-based learning activities with the objectives and content of each

English unit, students are immersed in authentic learning experiences that foster critical thinking, collaboration, and real-world application of language skills. The integration creates a cohesive learning environment where language acquisition is situated within meaningful projects, enabling students to see the relevance of what they are learning and encouraging deeper engagement with the subject matter. It represents a shift from fragmented teaching methods to a more connected and contextualized approach, aiming to enhance students' overall language proficiency while cultivating their ability to innovate and solve problems. This pedagogical framework not only improves students' English abilities but also equips them with essential skills for lifelong learning and adaptability in a rapidly changing world.

2.1. Defining Core Concepts

Project-based learning is an instructional approach that guides students to address real-world problems or complete challenging tasks through self-directed learning and collaborative inquiry, thereby acquiring knowledge, skills, and core competencies. Project-based learning facilitates the progression from isolated knowledge points to interconnected systems, ultimately enhancing students' comprehensive qualities and capacity to tackle future challenges. Within this task-driven pedagogical framework, teachers play a critical role in directing learning trajectories, empowering students to conduct in-depth analysis and critical thinking during classroom activities. Through iterative cycles of knowledge acquisition and application, students deepen their understanding, fostering sustained improvement in integrated English language proficiency. As Stephanie Bell (2010) states, "Project-based learning is a dynamic approach to teaching in which students explore real-world problems and challenges, simultaneously developing cross-curriculum skills."

Holistic unit instruction emphasizes the integration of teaching content, objectives, activities, and assessments at the unit level. It counters fragmented teaching by organizing instruction around themes such as "Human-Nature Relationships," "Social Interactions," and "Cultural Heritage." This approach synthesizes language knowledge, cultural literacy, skill development, and learning strategies, fostering integrated growth in linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, cognitive skills, and learning autonomy.

2.2. Theoretical Synergy

The integration of project-based learning with holistic unit instruction creates a pedagogical synergy that offers unique advantages. First, it promotes student-centered learning. Students shift from passive recipients to active agents, constructing understanding through self-directed exploration, peer collaboration, and reflective practice while solving authentic problems. Second, it emphasizes authenticity and contextualization. Projects are grounded in real-life scenarios, ensuring practical relevance. Third, it achieves structured unit integration of teaching objectives. By transcending traditional class-hour divisions, unit components are woven into cohesive project frameworks, aligning each phase with specific linguistic and competency objectives. Finally, it adopts multimodal outcomes and process-oriented evaluation. Interdisciplinary creations demonstrate language-art-technology integration, while tripartite assessments measure linguistic fluency, collaborative contribution, and creative innovation.

2.3 Benefits of Holistic Unit Instruction Based on Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning operates by guiding students to address real-world problems or complete challenging tasks through self-directed learning and collaborative inquiry, enabling them to acquire knowledge, skills, and core competencies. This approach facilitates the progression from isolated knowledge points to interconnected systems, ultimately enhancing students' comprehensive qualities and capacity to tackle future challenges. Within the task-driven pedagogical framework, teachers play a critical role in directing learning trajectories, empowering students to conduct in-depth analysis and critical thinking during classroom activities. Through iterative cycles of knowledge acquisition and application, students deepen their understanding, fostering sustained improvement in integrated English language proficiency.

By embedding authentic problem-solving scenarios and collaborative tasks, project-based learning transforms fragmented language learning into cohesive, competency-driven experiences. Teachers strategically scaffold activities to ensure alignment with unit objectives while nurturing students' autonomy in knowledge construction. This pedagogical synergy not only reinforces linguistic mastery but also cultivates transferable skills such as creative problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptive thinking-attributes essential for 21st-century global citizenship (Wu, 2017).

Recent international studies have shown that project-based learning can significantly improve students' basic skills, including teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking, which have positive effects on their learning. Researchers such as Stephanie Bell (2010) have shown that project-based learning's authenticity and flexibility, centered around student-driven problems, self-set learning goals, and project integrity, can enhance students' critical thinking, problem-solving skills, willingness to collaborate, communication abilities, and self-directed learning capabilities.

Building on these findings, PBL-integrated holistic unit instruction exhibits four defining characteristics: Firstly, student-centered learning. Students shift from passive knowledge recipients to active agents, constructing understanding through self-directed exploration, peer collaboration, and reflective practice while solving authentic problems. Secondly, authenticity and contextualization. Projects are grounded in real-life scenarios (Lu, 2024), such as designing community initiatives or simulating cross-cultural exchanges, ensuring practical relevance. Thirdly, structured unit integration of teaching objectives. By transcending traditional class-hour divisions, unit components (vocabulary, grammar, functional language) are woven into cohesive project frameworks, aligning each phase with specific linguistic and competency objectives to synchronize language mastery with core competences development. Finally, multimodal outcomes and process-oriented Evaluation: Interdisciplinary creations (e.g., English skits, digital storytelling, interview videos) demonstrate language-art-technology integration, while tripartite assessments (self, peer, teacher) measure linguistic fluency, collaborative contribution, and creative innovation, fostering achievement and reinforcing the purpose-driven nature of language learning.

This approach transforms fragmented instruction into systemic, context-rich experiences, empowering students to connect language use with real-world relevance while cultivating 21st-century competencies such as adaptive thinking and interdisciplinary problem-solving. By bridging theory and practice, PBL-integrated unit instruction offers a sustainable model for advancing English education reform in alignment with global pedagogical trends.

2.3. Addressing the Limitations of Current Unit-Based Practices through Project-Based Learning-Integrated Holistic Instruction

Project-based learning can systematically integrate fragmented knowledge. Traditional unit-based teaching frequently compartmentalizes language components (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) into isolated lessons, impeding students' ability to synthesize knowledge into cohesive systems. Project-Based Learning addresses this fragmentation by embedding unit objectives into theme-driven projects, such as designing a "Hobby Square." This structured unit integration contextualizes linguistic elements within real-world tasks, enabling holistic language application. For example, grammar rules and functional language are practiced not as standalone exercises but as tools for completing project milestones, fostering systemic understanding (Anette and Maija., 2022).

Project-based learning is an active way to transform passive learning into students' autonomous learning. Conventional pedagogy often positions students as passive recipients of knowledge, stifling engagement and critical thinking (Bell, 2010). Project-based learning repositions learners as active agents through self-directed exploration and collaborative problem-solving. Teachers scaffold tasks such as cross-cultural exchange simulations, empowering students to set goals, analyze challenges, and dynamically construct knowledge. This shift aligns with Bell's (2010) assertion that project-based learning "prioritizes learner autonomy and intellectual ownership."

Project-based learning can also effectively transform artificial contexts into real relevance. Many unit-based practices lack real-world relevance, diminishing student motivation and practical skill transfer (Lu, 2024). Project-based learning projects, such as community initiatives or digital storytelling, ground learning in authentic scenarios. By linking language use to tangible outcomes—for instance, creating interview videos—students perceive English as a tool for meaningful communication rather than rote exam preparation (Lu, 2024).

The evaluation system based on project-based learning can transform single evaluation into multimodal evaluation. Traditional assessments often prioritize memorization over competencies like creativity or collaboration (Wu, 2017). Project-based learning employs tripartite assessments (self, peer, teacher) to evaluate linguistic fluency alongside 21st-century skills. Interdisciplinary outputs, such as English skits, demonstrate holistic growth, while process-oriented feedback promotes iterative improvement. As Wu (2017) notes, this approach ensures "assessment mirrors real-world performance criteria."

PBL-integrated holistic instruction directly addresses the limitations of fragmented, passive, and context-poor unit practices. By emphasizing systemic knowledge application, student agency, authentic relevance, and competency-driven evaluation, it redefines language learning as a

purpose-driven, future-ready endeavor. This aligns with global pedagogical trends advocating for adaptable, creatively agile learners (Shin et al., 2021).

3. The practice of Holistic Teaching of English Units for Upper Primary School Grades Based on Project-based Learning

Project-based learning, a student-centered pedagogical model, engages learners in solving real-world problems or completing challenging tasks, fostering active exploration and mastery of knowledge and skills. Rooted in constructivist theory, project-based learning emphasizes autonomous learning, collaborative interaction, and the construction of personalized knowledge systems during problem-solving processes. Drawing on practical implementation insights, this study explores effective pathways for designing and executing PBL-integrated holistic unit instruction, using Unit 1: Which Do You Like Better? from the Beijing Edition Primary English Textbook (Grade 5) as a case study.

In practice, teachers must transition from a “teaching-focused” to a “learning-driven” paradigm, guiding students to actively participate in projects and shift from passive absorption to proactive inquiry. This approach cultivates competency discovery and competences development. Additionally, teachers should enhance unit coherence by deeply exploring educational values around thematic content. The paper employs Lesson 3: Which Hobby Do You Like Better? from Unit 1 of the Beijing Edition Primary English Textbook (Grade 5) as a pedagogical case study to illustrate the integration of moral education and talent development within English language instruction. By adopting diversified pedagogical approaches and multifaceted classroom dynamics, this practice aims to cultivate students’ core competencies — linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, critical thinking, and autonomous learning capabilities — while aligning with the fundamental mission of nurturing well-rounded, responsible future citizens equipped with ideals, skills, and social accountability.

3.1. Unit Content Analysis

Moral education and talent development form the cornerstone of pedagogy, with a focus on guiding students to narrate Chinese stories effectively in English. This requires teachers to anchor pre-class tasks in core knowledge and essential questions. Aligned with the 2022 curriculum standards, themes span three domains: “Self and Identity,” “Society and Interaction,” and “Nature and Sustainability.” Unit 1 of the Beijing Edition Grade 5 textbook centers on “Personal Preferences,” exploring subtopics such as food choices, academic interests, and hobbies. It corresponds to the “Self and Identity” domain, specifically the subtheme “Self-Management in Learning and Life.” Each unit text employs illustrated dialogues that integrate grammatical structures (e.g., simple present and present continuous tenses) with social expressions for inquiring about and articulating preferences.

Text 1: A daily conversation about dietary preferences. In a supermarket setting, Maomao asks Lingling about her preferences for meat and beverages. Students internalize question-answer

structures (e.g., “Which do you like better?”) while acquiring comparative adjectives and food-related vocabulary.

Text 2: A peer dialogue on academic preferences. Lingling, Maomao, Sarah, and Baobao discuss favorite subjects during a break, reinforcing interpersonal communication skills. Through this text, students learn to express preferences courteously and practice peer support norms.

Text 3: A community-based dialogue on hobbies. The characters engage in leisure activities, synthesizing knowledge from previous texts to compare book genres and articulate preferences. This enhances linguistic expression and self-confidence in voicing opinions.

The unit’s thematic framework and its sub-thematic progression across lessons are illustrated in Figure 1.

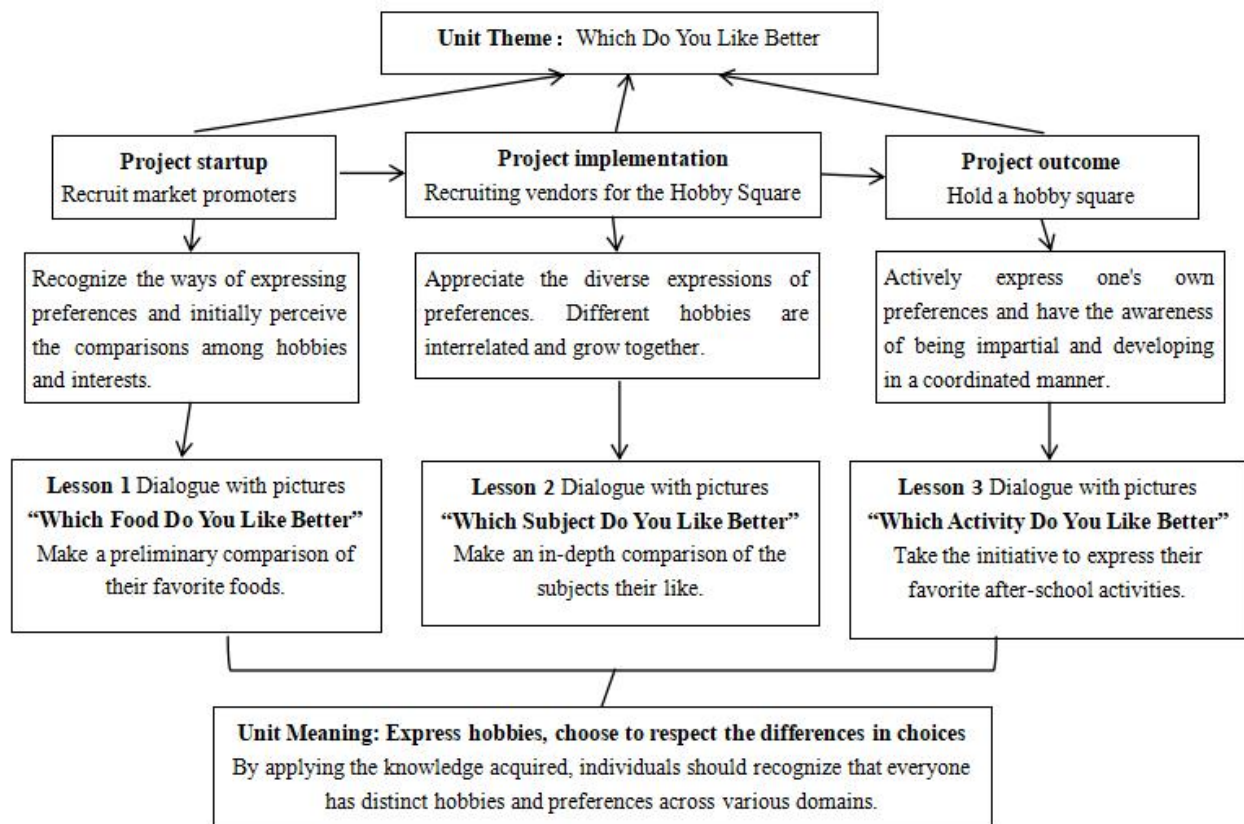


Figure 1. Unit theme content framework diagram

Based on the comprehensive unit analysis above, the core knowledge of this unit lies in the linguistic skills of inquiring about and expressing personal preferences. Through this unit, students will acquire vocabulary and sentence structures to discuss and articulate preferences regarding food, academic subjects, and hobbies. They will learn to respect and appreciate diverse choices while effectively communicating and sharing perspectives with peers. Additionally, by studying comparative and superlative forms of adjectives, students will enhance their grammatical accuracy and expressive capabilities, thereby advancing their practical language proficiency and cultivating appropriate communicative norms and value judgments.

3.2. Designing Project Themes and Establishing Instructional Objectives

Based on the holistic unit analysis and the authentic contextualization principles of Project-based learning, this study establishes the thematic project “Hobby Square” to enable students to synthesize unit knowledge, enhance linguistic expression, and foster innovative critical thinking, while cultivating social skills through enriched campus activities.

The unit’s instructional objectives, aligned with the thematic framework, are structured as follows:

Communicative Competence: Exchange personal preferences with peers in contextualized settings (e.g., preferred or favorite foods, subjects, and extracurricular activities).

Creative Application: Independently or collaboratively complete task sheets, design “store promotional flyers”, “subject ambassadors”, and “extracurricular activity booth advertisements” to articulate reasons for personal preferences.

Real-World Transfer: Apply acquired language skills to participate in school event designs and express emotions and preferences, following model templates.

3.3. Student Analysis and Project Planning

Unit 1 Lesson 3: Which Class Do You Like Better? from the Beijing Edition Primary English Textbook (Grade 5) features an illustrated dialogue among four students: Sara, Mike, Lingling, and Baobao, discussing and sharing their hobbies, including the content and categories of these activities. The text reinforces core communicative language, guiding students to appreciate the nuances of expressing preferences, respecting differences in choices, and developing positive attitudes toward diverse interests.

After identifying core issues and analyzing textual meanings, we designed Subtask 1: Pre-Class Survey (see Table 1) for this project-based learning lesson. The task focuses on exploring various hobby types, motivations, and developmental benefits, encouraging students to collect and categorize extracurricular activities. This pre-class preparation aims to enhance information-gathering skills, build a preliminary understanding of the lesson’s thematic focus, and foster critical discernment of information, thereby laying the groundwork for articulating personal interests in subsequent classroom activities.

Table 1. Investigate before the project implementation

| Name | Activity | Category | Why |
|---------|----------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Melinda | Reading | Fairy tale; Science fiction; Novel... | we can read a lot of wonderful books. |

3.4. Aligning Learning Progressions to Facilitate Project Implementation

The 2022 Curriculum Standards advocate an activity-based learning approach centered on students' core competency development, emphasizing experiential learning, practical application, and innovative knowledge transfer. This pedagogical framework requires teachers to structure instructional content through three interconnected phases: comprehension, application, and innovation. By engaging students in layered, thematically linked activities, this approach integrates learning with critical thinking, practical use, and creative adaptation, progressively enhancing students' core competencies and comprehensive abilities.

Project-based learning positions students as active learners. Teachers are tasked with creating authentic, goal-oriented scenarios that challenge students to apply knowledge meaningfully. As the third lesson in this unit, students have already acquired foundational knowledge, allowing this session to focus on guiding them through purposeful, engaging project activities within real-world contexts.

3.4.1 Project Content and Overview

Building on the unit's thematic focus, the paper designed the authentic scenario "Hobby Bazaar Exploration—I'm a Little Ambassador" (see Table 2). This project encourages students to utilize acquired knowledge to explore connections among diverse hobbies, categorize them systematically, and confidently articulate personal preferences.

Table 2. Project content and overview

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Project • Grade • Subject | Hobby square – I’m a Little Spokesperson • Grade 5 • English | |
| Project Introduction | | |
| <p>In the context of the upcoming “Pomegranate Fair” at school, to stimulate students’ interest and participation, cultivate their social skills, expressiveness and self-confidence, students are encouraged to choose their favorite hobby after having a basic understanding and mastery of the connotations, types, approaches and effects of different hobbies. They are required to create promotional posters or videos, exerting their creativity and imagination to attract more students to join. The final products will be included in the assessment and evaluation as part of this project.</p> | | |
| Learning content | In-depth understanding | Basic questions |
| Distinguish between fairy tales and science fiction novels. | <p>Fairy tales are a genre of children's literature. The rich imagination and exaggeration in fairy tales are conducive to stimulating students’ innovative thinking.</p> <p>Science fiction novels are stories written based on scientific knowledge, mostly fictional events that take place in the future.</p> | <p>What kind of hobbies do the two belong to?</p> <p>What are the representative works of both respectively?</p> <p>What are the differences and connections between the two respectively?</p> |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| Understand the content of different hobbies. Master the roles of different hobbies. Express one's favorite hobbies. | Reading helps students broaden their horizons. Drawing helps students improve their ability to appreciate and appreciate art. Growing flowers cultivates students' habit of being diligent and hardworking. ... | What are the connections among different hobbies? What's your favorite hobby? What can it help you with? Why do you like this hobby? |
| Learning Objectives | | |
| <p>(1) Through activities of watching, listening and speaking, obtain the types and contents of after-school activities;</p> <p>(2) With the help of the teacher, practice the core sentence patterns and perform the dialogue in roles.</p> <p>(3) Use language knowledge to conduct a survey on the preferences for after-school activities within the group;</p> <p>(4) In the scenario of “advertising and promotion at after-school activity booths”, design your favorite advertising slogan for after-school activities and record it as a promotional video after class.</p> <p>(5) Comprehensively use language to talk about preferences in daily communication.</p> | | |

3.4.2. Designing Comprehension-Based Learning Activities

This phase of learning activities is text-driven, aiming to help students perceive and comprehend textual content. For thematic introduction, the authentic scenario of “Hobby Bazaar” is introduced within the broader context of the school’s “Hai Tang Bazaar” (Crabapple Bazaar). A teacher-designed keyword-guessing game is employed to spark student interest, activate prior knowledge, and facilitate the acquisition of new concepts. Through the exploration of four key terms and a structured question chain (see Table 3), students establish connections between existing knowledge (e.g., Lesson 1’s food-related vocabulary) and new content (Lesson 2’s subject preferences), ultimately transitioning to the activity-focused topic of this lesson. This scaffolded approach cultivates a problem-oriented thinking mode, enabling students to systematically navigate thematic shifts while reinforcing logical reasoning and contextual adaptability.

Perception and Attention Activities: Students engage in predicting dialogue content through listening tasks, fostering discourse comprehension and linguistic expression. By utilizing a structured question chain (see Table 4), learners systematically extract textual information, laying a foundational understanding for subsequent project implementation. This phase enhances students’ ability to synthesize contextual clues and anticipate thematic progression.

Information Acquisition and Structuring Activities: Teachers strategically interlink unit components to strengthen students' pragmatic awareness, guiding them to actively apply acquired knowledge in communicative exchanges. Driven by the question chain framework (see Table 4), students participate in integrated viewing, listening, and speaking tasks. Through iterative questioning techniques — including probing inquiries, counter-questions, hypothetical scenarios, and follow-ups — learners spiral progressively toward thematic depth. This methodology ensures dual focus on linguistic application and cognitive development, training students to analyze both the content and underlying thought processes embedded in language use.

Table 3. Design of a chain of theme import question

| | |
|--|---|
| T:Do you wanna know more about me? | S:Yes! |
| T:What is two for? | S: You have 2 children, you have 2 sisters, your lucky number is 2... |
| T:How old am I? | S: 18/20/22... |
| T:Juice and milk, which do you like better? | S: I like juice,because... S: I like milk, because... |
| T:Do you like shooting? | S:Yes or no. |
| T:What will you do in your after class time? | S: I will read a lots of books, it is so good. I will play basketball, it makes me happy... |
| It seems that all of you have many activities to do, do you want to know what our old friends like doing after school? Let's go. | |

Table 4. Design of a chain of dialogue questions

| | |
|---|--|
| T:What are they talking about? | S: They are talking about their favourite activities. |
| T:What does Sara reading? | S: Around the World in Eighty Days. |
| T:What kind of book does Sara reading? | S: Science fiction. |
| T:Can you tell the difference between fairy tales and science fiction? | S: Not very good... |
| T&S: Science fiction stories are stories written by people based on some scientific knowledge, mostly taking place in the future with imagination. While fairy tales are a genre of children's literature. The rich imagination and exaggeration in fairy tales can activate your thinking. | |
| T:Can tell me the details about the different kinds of books? | S: Novel, Biography, Autobiography, Comic book, Mystery, Encyclopedia... |
| T:What does Mike like? | S: He likes reading, but he likes drawing better. |

3.4.3. Application-Practice Activity Design

This phase involves text-immersive learning activities encompassing description-interpretation, analysis-judgment, and internalization-application. Building on structured knowledge internalization, it focuses on core concepts related to extracurricular hobbies: understanding their content and societal roles, thereby preparing students for subsequent transfer-innovation tasks.

Language Practice and Internalization: Teachers employ gamified instruction, using a “slot machine” model to provide linguistic frameworks and ample practice opportunities. Students systematically articulate characters’ favorite extracurricular activities from the textbook based on game rules, internalizing both structural language and cultural knowledge. Role-playing activities further deepen textual engagement, enabling practical application of acquired discourse patterns.

3.4.4 Transfer-Innovation Activity Design

This phase transcends textual boundaries through inference-argumentation, critical evaluation, and imaginative creation, aiming to stimulate innovative thinking, expand thematic relevance, and deepen understanding of thematic significance, thereby transforming knowledge into life competencies and skills into core competencies.

Inference and Argumentation: Guided by the dialogue among Sara, Mike, Lingling, and Baobao discussing their hobbies, students conduct questionnaire surveys to investigate peers’ favorite extracurricular activities. Through group discussions, they identify linguistic patterns from the text, organize findings, and present synthesized conclusions class-wide. This bridges textual analysis with real-life applications, fostering skills in logical reasoning and evidence-based articulation.

Critical Evaluation and Creative Imagination: Students evaluate cultural values embedded in hobbies (e.g., teamwork in sports, patience in crafts) and design hypothetical scenarios—such as organizing a school “Hobby Exchange Fair”—to creatively apply language skills while addressing authentic challenges.

3.5. Integrating Knowledge and Presenting Project Outcomes

Building on prior lessons and the recruitment of project promoters and stallholders for the “Hobby Bazaar,” students culminate their Project-based learning journey by showcasing final outcomes. Each student assumes the role of an ambassador for their favorite hobby or extracurricular activity, designing promotional slogans for assigned stalls to lay the groundwork for creating advocacy videos. Guided by in-class exemplars (Figure 2), learners contextualize personal preferences within real-life scenarios, demonstrating how language skills intersect with creative expression and practical application. This phase synthesizes unit knowledge—from vocabulary acquisition to cultural awareness—into tangible artifacts that reflect both linguistic mastery and innovative thinking, ultimately fostering a sense of ownership and purpose in language learning.



Figure 2. An example of a hobby square promotion

3.6. Homework Design

To deepen textual analysis and strengthen the connection between academic knowledge and real-world applications, homework tasks are structured within a three-tiered framework: foundational assignments, consolidation tasks, and extension projects. This design caters to diverse proficiency levels while encouraging students to selectively complete assignments based on personal interests and abilities, thereby fostering autonomy and differentiated learning.

Foundational Assignments: Focus on core vocabulary and grammar (e.g., constructing preference-related sentences using comparative adjectives).

Consolidation Tasks: Reinforce unit content through role-play simulations (e.g., interviewing peers about hobbies).

Extension Projects: Promote creative synthesis (e.g., drafting scripts for the “Hobby Bazaar: I’ m a Little Ambassador” promotional video).

This tiered approach not only scaffolds skill development but also lays a robust foundation for the culminating project activity, ensuring students are equipped to showcase interdisciplinary competencies in authentic contexts. By aligning homework with the PBL-driven “Hobby Bazaar” initiative, learners progressively transition from language acquisition to purposeful application, embodying the curriculum’s emphasis on core competencies integration and learner agency.

Meanwhile, during the review stage, make full preparations for the production of the promotional video for the project activity “Hobby Bazaar-I’m a Little Ambassador”. On the one hand, Competency Enhancement. As a learning method, post-class review effectively helps students consolidate and master knowledge and skills acquired in class, deepening their understanding, retention, and application of content. In this lesson’s post-class review, aligned

with project-based learning tasks and guided by the progress evaluation matrix, students are encouraged to create personalized promotional videos based on their learning styles and habits. This task positions them not only as ambassadors for the “Hobby Bazaar” but also as curators of the school’s “Hai Tang Bazaar (Crabapple Bazaar)”, achieving a genuine transformation from skill development to competency internalization and from tangible evaluation to intrinsic assessment.

On the other hand, Teacher Support. At this stage, teachers should provide assistance and support in three areas: disciplinary knowledge, tool facilitation, and resource integration. Firstly, Disciplinary Knowledge: Teachers should systematically explain core concepts and help students who have not fully grasped key textual knowledge to deepen their understanding, ensuring comprehensive mastery of the content. Secondly, Tool Facilitation: Teachers should offer tailored tools and resources to help students achieve project goals, such as recommending video production websites, learning resources, content creators, or templates, and providing feedback on individual and group work. Thirdly, Resource Integration: Teachers should encourage students to synthesize diverse learning resources, choose styles and modes that suit them, broaden their perspectives, and stimulate creativity and innovative thinking.

This structured support ensures students effectively transition from “learning English” to “applying English,” fostering core competencies in critical thinking, interdisciplinary integration, and collaborative communication.

4. Exploring Effective Implementation of Project-Based Learning in Holistic English Unit Instruction

Effective implementation of Project-based learning in holistic English units requires a paradigm shift from summative evaluations to formative-processual assessment frameworks that diagnose learning trajectories and align with core competencies. Rooted in the principle of “teaching-learning-assessment integration”, this approach prioritizes critical thinking and creative problem-solving while systematically nurturing linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills.

Effective pedagogy requires moving beyond summative assessments to incorporate timely formative evaluations that diagnose learning progress and guide students in utilizing assessment tools to synthesize outcomes. Unlike traditional teaching models, Project-based learning prioritizes cultivating critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills. The integrated teaching-learning-assessment framework emphasizes interconnectedness among instructional components, merging “how to teach” with “how to evaluate” to ignite effective learning outcomes.

4.1. The Project-Based Learning Progress Evaluation Matrix: Aligning Tasks with Competencies

The project-based learning progress evaluation matrix (Table 5) operationalizes competency development by linking learning objectives to observable success criteria and actionable feedback. Designed for the “Hobby Square” project, this tool ensures alignment between thematic tasks and the unit’s core competencies:

Linguistic Proficiency: Criteria such as “Express preferences using comparative structures” assess grammatical accuracy within authentic contexts.

Critical Thinking: Tasks like “Compare fairy tales and science fiction genres” evaluate analytical reasoning and genre awareness.

Creative Innovation: Outcomes such as “Design persuasive promotional videos” measure originality and interdisciplinary synthesis (e.g., language-art-technology integration).

Rationale for Sequence: The matrix progresses from knowledge acquisition (distinguishing hobby categories) to application (articulating preferences) and finally innovation (creating advocacy content), mirroring Bloom’s taxonomy. This scaffolding ensures students build foundational skills before tackling complex challenges.

By leveraging assessment data to inform pedagogical adjustments and real-time feedback to sustain engagement, educators foster a responsive learning ecosystem where students’ evolving competencies — from linguistic mastery to innovative thinking — are systematically nurtured and documented.

Table 5. Project-based Learning Evaluation Matrix

| Learning objective | Success criteria |
|---|--|
| I can distinguish between fairy tales and science fiction novels. | Compare fairy tales and science fiction novels, and respectively point out the benefits of both for learners’ thinking patterns. |
| I can distinguish the contents of different hobbies. | Analyze the characteristics of different hobbies. Use tools to list the contents of each hobby. |
| I can clarify the roles of different hobbies. | Compare the roles of different hobbies and evaluate the significance of different hobbies for study and life. |
| I can express my favorite hobbies. | Based on the content of the discourse and the characteristics of various hobbies, express and explain your own preferences using core knowledge. |
| I can make promotional videos of my hobbies. | Design and produce promotional videos. Highlight personal characteristics, explain the detailed content of the hobby, and attract students to participate in the “hobby square”. |

4.2. Peer Assessment: Fostering Collaborative Competencies

Peer assessment serves as a pivotal strategy to amplify the efficacy of project-based learning and cultivate students’ enthusiasm for self-directed learning. The integrated teaching-learning-assessment framework in project-based learning positions students as active evaluators, ensuring a fair, flexible, and multifaceted evaluation process. Teachers can scaffold this by providing evaluation criteria aligned with instructional objectives, project activities, and learning outcomes. Gradually transferring responsibility to students based on their capabilities and needs encourages the sharing of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and specialized knowledge. Peer evaluation

transcends traditional grading by cultivating collaborative communication and reflective critique. In the “Hobby Square” project, three strategies were implemented:

Structured Peer Conferencing (Table 6): Guided dialogues where students assess peers’ project drafts using criteria like “clarity of hobby descriptions” and “persuasiveness of promotional content”. In this way to develop interpersonal skills (active listening, constructive feedback) and metacognition (comparing approaches to problem-solving).

Gallery Walks with Feedback Stations: Students rotate to review peers’ promotional materials, leaving anonymized comments on sticky notes. In this way to enhances cultural awareness (e.g., interpreting diverse hobby representations) and creative adaptability (integrating peer suggestions).

Fishbowl Technique: This is a subgroup (“fishbowl”) critiques a project publicly while others observe and later summarize evaluation patterns, to strengthens public speaking and critical analysis through live debate and consensus-building.while outer-circle peers document evaluation patterns, collectively constructing a peer assessment system that achieves synergistic outcomes ($1+1>2$).

In group evaluations, teachers should respect individual differences and promote role-specific collaboration. By offering ongoing feedback to both groups and individuals, students learn to fulfill their roles, leverage strengths, and acknowledge peers’ contributions through genuine praise. This process nurtures teamwork, interpersonal skills, and the development of a proper worldview, outlook on life, and value system, aligning assessment practices with holistic educational goals.

Table 6. Meeting Feedback form

| | Learning Objectives | Communication and interaction | Reflection and improvement |
|---------------------|--|--|---|
| Collect information | How does a certain part of the project help you achieve a certain learning goal? | At some point in the project, I heard that your idea was..... Could we have a discussion and exchange? | What kind of difficulties have emerged in a certain project stage and how can they be solved? |
| Provide information | Make preparations: Provide additional help and support for (a certain learning goal). | Make preparations: Problems raised by students (or teachers) during communication that were not immediately resolved. | You can seek help from peers, teachers and parents. |
| Take measures | The specific action measures for the next step. | | |

4.3. Student Self-Assessment: Cultivating Autonomous Learning

Self-assessment tools empower students to monitor progress and set improvement goals, aligning with project-based learning's emphasis on learner agency, which is instrumental in sparking intrinsic motivation for exploratory learning, enabling learners to actively engage in self-regulation, self-instruction, and self-reflection, thereby maximizing their autonomy as primary agents of learning. Teachers should encourage students to employ tools such as mind maps, classroom self-checks, and problem journals at various stages of project-based learning. These tools help students identify gaps in content mastery, instructional methods, and learning outcomes, allowing them to set actionable improvement goals aligned with their needs.

4.4. Assessment as a Catalyst for Holistic Growth

The PBL-integrated evaluation framework systematically addresses the limitations of fragmented and overly summative assessment practices. It achieves this by integrating tasks with capabilities, promoting democratized evaluation through peer and self-assessment, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration among participants, and leveraging data to provide personalized guidance and support continuous growth.

As evidenced by the “Hobby Square” project, students transitioning from “What is a science fiction novel?” (knowledge recall) to “How can I convince peers to join my hobby club?” (applied persuasion) demonstrate the model's efficacy in bridging theory and practice. This approach not only advances English proficiency but also cultivates the adaptability and innovative thinking demanded by 21st-century education.

5. Discussion

This study validates the significant role of integrating Project-based learning with holistic unit instruction in fostering core competencies among upper primary English learners. Findings reveal that students participating in the “Hobby Square” project not only acquired language skills for expressing preferences but also demonstrated marked improvements in critical thinking, interdisciplinary integration, and collaborative communication. These outcomes align with existing research: Shin and Bowers (2021) highlight project-based learning's efficacy in developing logical thinking through authentic problem-solving, evidenced by students' systematic categorization of hobbies in this study; Sasson et al (2018) emphasize project-based learning's impact on problem-solving skills, consistent with students' innovative approaches in designing promotional videos. Furthermore, Shin et al (2022) findings on project-based learning to enhanced engagement resonate with observed increases in student agency and creativity.

From an educational policy perspective, this research aligns with the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition), which advocate for systemic, context-rich designs to integrate core competencies. By transcending fragmented class-hour limitations through structured objectives and authentic tasks, students achieved synchronized development of linguistic proficiency and cognitive skills within cohesive “learning-application” cycles. The adoption of multi-dimensional assessments (self-self, peer-peer, and teacher-evaluations)

addressed the rigidity of traditional unilateral evaluations, enhancing feedback mechanisms and fostering purposeful learning.

The implications of this study extend to broader educational reform: Firstly, paradigm shift. Offers a practical model for transitioning from knowledge transmission to competency-oriented English instruction. Secondly, interdisciplinary potential. Demonstrates project-based learning's compatibility with holistic unit frameworks, providing referential value for other subjects. Thirdly, limitations and future directions. While impactful, this study focused solely on the "Personal Preferences" theme. Future research should explore project-based learning adaptations for diverse units (e.g., "Social Interactions," "Cultural Heritage") to assess generalizability. Additionally, process-oriented evaluation tools require refinement, such as integrating digital platforms for longitudinal competency tracking or employing quantitative metrics to measure sustainability.

Looking ahead, the integration of Project-based learning with holistic English unit instruction is poised to evolve in response to both pedagogical advancements and global educational demands. Current implementations, as evidenced by studies such as this, highlight its efficacy in bridging fragmented knowledge systems and fostering 21st-century competencies. Proposed research avenues include: Firstly, Cross-Disciplinary Projects. Deepening language-arts-stem integration to amplify real-world relevance. Secondly, Differentiated Strategies. Tailoring project-based learning frameworks to accommodate diverse learning styles. Thirdly, Longitudinal Analysis. Establishing mechanisms to evaluate project-based learning's enduring effects on metacognition and creative problem-solving.

By systematizing innovation and iterative practice, the integration of project-based learning with holistic unit instruction holds transformative potential as a catalyst for foundational education reform, bridging pedagogical theory with sustainable competency development in alignment with 21st-century learning imperatives.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the deep integration of Project-based learning with holistic English unit instruction for upper primary grades, centered on the "Personal Preferences" thematic unit. By driving students to complete language tasks through authentic, inquiry-driven scenarios, collaboration, and innovation, the approach achieves a transformative shift from "learning English" to "learning through English." The implementation of the "Hobby Square" project enabled students to master core linguistic skills for expressing preferences while enhancing critical thinking, interdisciplinary integration, and collaborative communication through diverse tasks such as promotional material design, role-playing, and survey questionnaires.

Teaching practice underscores that combining project-based learning with holistic unit instruction effectively addresses the fragmented nature of traditional class-hour segmentation. Structured objectives, contextualized activities, and diversified assessments synergistically ignite student agency and creativity, fostering comprehensive development of core competencies. Students exhibited marked improvements in logical reasoning, problem-solving adaptability, and

cross-disciplinary application, validating the model's efficacy in bridging classroom learning with real-world relevance.

Future research should explore adaptable project-based learning frameworks for diverse thematic units, refine process-oriented assessment tools, and establish longitudinal tracking mechanisms for competency development. Such efforts will advance universal and innovative pathways for deepening primary English education reform under the updated curriculum standards, ensuring sustainable cultivation of 21st-century skills.

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization, H. L.; methodology, H. L.; software, H. L.; validation, H. L.; formal analysis, H. L.; investigation, H. L.; resources, H. L.; data curation, H. L.; writing—original draft preparation, H. L.; writing—review and editing, H. L.; visualization, H. L.; supervision, H. L.; project administration, H. L.; funding acquisition, H. L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Acknowledgments:

Thank you to Beijing Union University and Teacher Meng Zishu for your guidance and support on this research.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Bell, S. (2010). Project-based learning for the 21st century: Skills for the future. *The clearing house*, 83(2), 39-43.
- Dewey, J. (1986). Experience and education. *The educational forum*, 50(3), 241-252.
- Li, Y., & Gao, X. (2024). Exploration on the overall teaching design of primary school English unit based on project-based learning. *Teaching and management*, (35), 38-42.

- Lu, Q. (2024). The practice of overall teaching design of primary school English unit based on project-based learning. *English learning*, (S2), 16-20.
- Markula, A., & Aksela, M. (2022). The key characteristics of project-based learning: how teachers implement projects in K-12 science education. *Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Science Education Research*, 4(1), 2.
- Sasson, I., Yehuda, I., & Malkinson, N. (2018). Fostering the skills of critical thinking and question-posing in a project-based learning environment. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 29, 203-212.
- Shin, N., Bowers, J., Krajcik, J., & Damelin, D. (2021). Promoting computational thinking through project-based learning. *Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Science Education Research*, 3, 1-15.
- Wu, Yi. (2017). Carry out task-based teaching, create a dynamic classroom-Analysis of primary school English task-driven teaching. *Enlightenment and Wisdom (Education)*, (05), 53.