



# Problem-Based Learning Approach for Elementary Schools: A case study of Five Years Compulsory Education system

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to develop an effective learning model that fosters a conducive learning environment for elementary school students, with a specific focus on enhancing literacy skills through Problem-Based Learning (PBL). The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses with research and development techniques. The study was conducted in two phases: an exploratory phase and an experimental phase. A purposive sample of 50 learners, 13 educational tutors, and six literacy program administrators participated in the study. The findings revealed that the implementation of PBL significantly improved literacy skills within an entrepreneurship literacy program. PBL was effectively integrated into the learning management system, contributing to the development of curriculum strategies, educational resources, media, and assessment methods. The study also highlighted that PBL not only enhanced students' reading and writing abilities but also improved their problem-solving skills. In conclusion, PBL has proven to be an effective approach for enhancing literacy competencies among elementary school students. The study's findings suggest that incorporating PBL into educational programs can create a more engaging and effective learning environment, leading to better educational outcomes. The implications of this research are significant for curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers, as it underscores the importance of adopting innovative teaching strategies like PBL to improve literacy education and overall student performance.

**Keywords:** Problem-Based Learning, Elementary Schools, Compulsory Education, Literacy Rate, Pakistan

## 1. Introduction

Education provides individuals with access to new knowledge, attitudes, and skills, enabling them to make significant changes in their lives (Bandy, 2016). Efforts to improve education can lead to better life opportunities, offering hope and potential for personal growth (Collins, Bekenova, & Kagarmanova, 2018). Tawil and Locatelli (2015) emphasize that education is an endeavor to transform human potential into something useful in response to life's challenges. This perspective aligns with Article 25(A) of the Constitution of the Republic of Pakistan, which asserts that "every citizen has the right to education" and that "every person shall have the right to develop himself/herself through the fulfillment of his/her basic needs, including access to education, science, technology, arts, and culture."

Education is thus a fundamental human right aimed at enhancing learners' abilities (Robinson, Phillips, & Quennerstedt, 2020). While education can significantly improve an individual's quality of life, increased illiteracy rates can have the opposite effect, exacerbating the challenges faced by communities. Illiteracy hinders the development of individual skills, negatively impacting both personal and societal prospects (Khalid & Khan, 2006). Despite the recognition that low literacy levels limit life chances (Ahmad, 2014), illiteracy remains a major issue in Pakistan, with many regions still struggling with inadequate reading skills. Educational inequality is a primary cause of low reading abilities (Khalid & Khan, 2006), as evidenced by Pakistan's Human Development Index (HDI). With an HDI value of 0.557 in 2019, Pakistan ranks 154th out of 189 countries and territories, indicating significant room for improvement (Ahmad, 2014). Given that access to knowledge is directly linked to education, factors such as illiteracy play a crucial role in determining a country's human resource potential.

This study focuses on the "Problem-Based Learning (PBL) Approach for Primary Schools" as a strategy to achieve the country's required reading competencies. The objective is to describe the efforts made in promoting a knowledgeable citizenry through compulsory education. An intensive campaign to eradicate illiteracy was launched as part of a national movement, aiming to increase adult literacy by 50%, with a particular focus on individuals aged 15 and older, especially women. This movement also seeks to provide equal access to education for everyone (Khalid & Khan, 2006).

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Consequently, literacy education programs have been developed and continue to serve illiterate populations as part of their fundamental human right to education. Many entrepreneurship literacy initiatives have been designed to empower grassroots communities, enhancing their knowledge, attitudes, and abilities to foster individual competency (Mehboob & Othman, 2020).

However, this article posits that the execution of the entrepreneurship literacy program in Pakistan remains limited due to inadequate strategies and techniques. Challenges such as reliance on traditional methods like lecturing, facilitator-dominated decision-making processes, limited business knowledge and skills among entrepreneurs, a restricted network, and insufficient capital due to poverty, all hinder the program's effectiveness (Afreen, 2021). This research aims to develop a learning model that can improve literacy skills and help individuals adapt their businesses to changing circumstances.

Entrepreneurship, as a component of empowerment programs, emphasizes learners' experiences, making content a crucial element of business empowerment initiatives. Based on the preceding discussion, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is identified as the most effective strategy for literacy learning programs. This research was conducted to analyze and describe how the PBL approach can be utilized to enhance literacy competency and improve reading skills among learners.

## 2. Literature Review

Education in Pakistan, as defined by its Education Law, is a critical instrument for individual and societal development, ensuring that every citizen, irrespective of their circumstances, has access to learning opportunities. The government has established three educational pathways—formal, non-formal, and informal education—to cater to the diverse learning needs of its population. These pathways are designed to converge on a unified national goal: to educate Pakistanis and enhance their quality of life, thereby fostering a society that is advanced, equitable, and prosperous (Aslam, 2011).

The legal framework of Pakistan's education system elaborates on the various dimensions of learning and skill development. Article 26, paragraph 2, for instance, emphasizes education not just as a means of knowledge acquisition but also as a vehicle for developing functional skills, personality, and professional attitudes. This comprehensive approach to education is in line with the global understanding that education is a response to life's challenges, transforming human potential into practical capabilities (Tawil & Locatelli, 2015). Additionally, the law outlines the content of non-formal education, which includes a broad spectrum of programs such as life-skills education, early childhood education, youth education, women's empowerment, vocational training, and more. These programs aim to equip learners with the necessary skills to navigate various aspects of life effectively, contributing to both personal and national development.

Non-formal education is particularly noteworthy for its structured learning process, which shares similarities with formal education. Khalid and Khan (2006) describe learning as a process that results in behavioral changes, which are outcomes of education. Saeed (2007) further elaborates on this, describing learning as a continuous evolution in human performance and potential. In support of this, Davis and Luthans (2007) argue that learning induces a generally permanent change through experience, which encompasses an individual's efforts to learn independently by experiencing, investigating, and accumulating knowledge (Khan et al., 2017).

Given the focus of this study on enhancing literacy skills through problem-based learning, it is essential to delve deeper into the concept of andragogy—the method and practice of teaching adult learners. Andragogy, a term derived from Greek, meaning "to lead or guide adults," emphasizes the role of learners as active participants in their educational journey, making it an appropriate framework for adult literacy programs. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of Pakistan, where non-formal education plays a significant role in reaching populations that formal education systems may not effectively serve.

The importance of literacy in socio-economic development cannot be overstated. The ability to read and comprehend is crucial not only for individual advancement but also for the broader socio-economic progress of a country. Literacy, as described by Khan et al. (2017), encompasses the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world and is recognized as a fundamental human right. It serves as both a tool for lifelong learning and a catalyst for broader social, cultural, political, and economic engagement (Khalid & Khan, 2006).

Comparative studies have shown that countries with higher literacy rates tend to have more robust economic growth and lower levels of poverty and social inequality. For instance, literacy programs in countries like Bangladesh and India have demonstrated significant improvements in community health, economic stability, and gender equality (World Bank, 2020). However, illiteracy remains a pervasive issue in Pakistan, acting as a barrier to individual empowerment and national development. Illiteracy not only limits personal growth but also hinders the country's progress by perpetuating cycles of poverty, unemployment, and social stratification (Ahmad & Ahmad, 2018; Ahmad & Ahmad, 2019, 2021).

The literacy program in Pakistan is designed to enhance individuals' capabilities, improve their comprehension, and aid in their self-adjustment to overcome life's challenges. This approach aligns with the global understanding of literacy as a means of empowerment and social justice (Robinson et al., 2020). Literacy programs in Pakistan are integral to the primary education framework, which aims to educate all members of society, regardless of their initial literacy levels. There is a growing shift from traditional literacy education to functional literacy, which Kazmi and

Quran (2005) define as the ability to apply literacy skills effectively in everyday situations (Mulyani et al., 2021). This shift reflects an understanding that literacy must be practical and applicable, empowering individuals to improve their life circumstances.

Despite these efforts, there remain significant gaps in the implementation and effectiveness of literacy programs in Pakistan. The use of traditional teaching methods, lack of resources, and insufficient training for educators are among the key challenges that hinder the success of these programs (Afreen, 2021). Moreover, there is a need for a more comprehensive approach that integrates problem-based learning with other educational strategies to enhance literacy outcomes.

## 2.1. Theoretical Frameworks and Gaps in the Literature

While andragogy provides a solid foundation for adult literacy programs, it is also essential to consider other relevant educational theories. Constructivist theories, for example, emphasize the importance of learners actively constructing their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Piaget, 1970). This aligns well with problem-based learning, which encourages learners to engage with real-world problems and develop solutions through critical thinking and collaboration.

However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific application of problem-based learning in adult literacy programs, particularly in the context of developing countries like Pakistan. While studies have explored the use of problem-based learning in various educational settings, there is limited research on its impact on literacy and skill development among adult learners in non-formal education systems. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how problem-based learning can be effectively integrated into literacy programs to enhance the reading skills and overall competencies of adult learners in Pakistan.

In conclusion, while Pakistan has made significant strides in improving literacy rates through various educational initiatives, there is still much work to be done. This study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into the effectiveness of problem-based learning in enhancing literacy skills among adult learners. By addressing the gaps identified in the literature, this research will offer practical recommendations for improving literacy programs in Pakistan and other similar contexts.

## 3. Research Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, focusing on the development of learners' entrepreneurship literacy skills through problem-solving, which is considered a key strategy for enhancing competencies. The research integrated elements from the Research and Development (R&D) method, as outlined by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), which is typically used for designing or improving educational products. Specifically, the study borrowed elements from two critical stages of the R&D process: the exploratory study stage (preliminary study) and the model creation stage.

The first phase, the exploratory stage, aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and resources associated with the literacy program. This phase involved collecting data to identify the existing gaps in the literacy education program and understanding the needs of the learners. The second phase involved the development of a conceptual design for a problem-based learning approach intended to address these competency gaps.

The research was conducted in South Kalimantan, specifically targeting selected areas within Banjarmasin. The study participants included 50 individuals aged between 14 and 60, along with 14 tutors and six participants involved in the literacy education program. The sampling method used was purposive sampling, ensuring that the participants selected were representative of the broader population engaged in literacy education in the region.

Data collection involved both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was gathered directly from participants through interviews and direct observations, allowing for a rich, qualitative understanding of the participants' experiences and challenges. Secondary data was used to supplement the primary data, drawing on formal and non-formal institutional records and reports to provide a comprehensive view of the literacy program's context.

The goal of this research was to create a learning design that effectively enhances literacy skills. The design was rigorously tested through a series of trials before being finalized and recommended for broader use. The quasi-experimental method was employed during the testing phase, utilizing a pre-test and post-test design to assess the effectiveness of the problem-based learning approach in the trial group.

The preliminary study was conducted qualitatively, involving exploratory research, conceptual modeling, conceptual design verification, limited trials, field testing of the design, and an evaluation of its implementation. In the second phase of the trial, a revised design was implemented using a single-group Pretest-Posttest design, which allowed for the measurement of literacy skill improvements before and after the intervention without the need for a control group.

The findings from the study indicated a significant improvement in the literacy skills of the participants, demonstrating the effectiveness of the problem-based learning approach in enhancing entrepreneurship literacy among learners in the region.

## 4. Results Of The Study

### a. The Description of the Learning Environment

Non-formal schools, much like formal institutions, provide a learning environment that is conducive to fostering students' engagement and active participation. The system prioritizes knowledge construction, emphasizing that each learner is responsible for their own learning journey. While individual knowledge construction is valued, group discussions were also found to be effective in addressing the presented trial issues in a relaxed and collaborative manner. The role of the facilitator in this environment is crucial; they are expected to observe diverse mindsets during performances, know when to intervene in activities, and position themselves as learners, providing guidance without dominating the process.

To support the implementation of the learning design, several tools were developed, including an open-ended bank of problems, lesson plans based on Problem-Based Learning (PBL) principles integrated with cooperative learning strategies, contextually relevant learning materials, and assessments designed to align with the literacy skills needed by the learners.

### b. The Planning Step

The planning phase involved several key steps to prepare for the entrepreneurship literacy program using the PBL design. These steps included coordinating with the managerial partner, conducting tutor training, preparing the learning program, observing learner requirements, and developing the syllabus along with teaching materials and tools. The initial coordination with the literacy program sponsor was essential for setting up the schedule, curriculum, media, and learning methods, ensuring that all components were aligned with the program's objectives.

### c. The Implementation Step

The implementation phase followed the planning stage closely, with the research team working alongside the literacy program coordinators to execute the learning activities. This involved the actual delivery of the program using the PBL approach, where learners engaged in problem-solving tasks that were relevant to their everyday experiences. The tutors facilitated these sessions, guiding the learners through the process of applying their knowledge to real-world scenarios.

### d. The Evaluation Process

The evaluation process adhered primarily to the Technical Guidance of Literacy Education as established by the Pakistan Ministry of Education. However, in this program, the assessment was conducted not only by tutors but also by program practitioners at various stages. The evaluation covered several components, including learning outcomes, program objectives, principles, and the overall effectiveness of the learning design. The process also included assessments of learner progress, the appropriateness of the instructional materials, and the impact of the mentorship provided during the program.

### e. The Effectiveness of the Learning Design

The effectiveness of the PBL design was measured using pre-test and post-test evaluations. The average pre-test score for the 50 participants was 11.05, with a standard deviation of 3.942. After implementing the PBL approach, the average post-test score increased to 14.58, with a standard deviation of 3.500. The findings indicate a significant improvement in literacy skills, demonstrating that the PBL model was successful in enhancing the learners' competencies. The correlation coefficient between the pre-test and post-test scores was 0.890, with a significance level of 0.000 ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating a strong positive relationship and a significant impact at the 95% confidence level. These results underscore the need for enhanced competencies in entrepreneurship literacy skills, confirming the effectiveness of the PBL approach in this context.

## 5. Discussion

The entrepreneurship literacy education program was designed to enhance individual and group productivity by ensuring that participants acquire essential literacy skills. Unlike programs targeted at children, this initiative focused on adults who had completed and attained these fundamental skills. The program's learning methodologies were grounded in four key principles: local design, local context, partnership, and functionalization. These principles ensured that literacy education was intricately linked to the daily lives of adults, making the learning materials functional and relevant to each learner. Consequently, an effective learning approach is one that can effectively shape learners' personalities, fostering self-expression, high motivation, and active participation in completing tasks, whether individually or in groups.

Nugmanova, Mikkola, Rozanov, and Komleva (2020) describe the learning approach as a structured procedure for guiding people to achieve specific learning objectives. In the context of literacy education, this approach was employed to streamline the learning process. This aligns with Ignoffo et al.'s (2017) assertion regarding the andragogy methodology and curriculum. While all strategies and procedures can be fundamentally sound and adaptable by tutors during instruction, none are perfect, as each has its advantages and limitations. Over time, literacy education has increasingly shifted towards being learner-centered, with a focus on addressing individual needs (Brookfield, 1984). Therefore, literacy education must equip students with a broad spectrum of life skills and knowledge.



To meet the specific expectations of citizens towards literacy education, it was essential to use a model grounded in literacy learning principles, such as problem-based learning (PBL). Aslam (2011) notes that PBL has several characteristics, including being problem-oriented and utilizing a tutor as a facilitator rather than a traditional teacher. Although problem-based solutions are not new, they are rapidly gaining traction, particularly in democratic societies and grassroots communities (Alam & Shakir, 2019). The PBL design is rooted in the educational paradigms of Piaget and Vygotsky, based on the principle of constructive learning. This theory posits that knowledge is a product of social construction, where humans build their understanding through interactions with objects, phenomena, experiences, and contexts (HDR, 2019). According to this theory, citizens acquire knowledge through social interaction, resulting from problem-solving designs. Knowledge is viewed from two perspectives: spontaneous understanding from everyday life and scientific understanding from formal learning systems that are logically defined on a larger scale.

In this study, the effectiveness of the problem-solving design was assessed based on the learning outcomes. The results of this assessment reveal whether the learning design was successful—specifically, in terms of competency development as measured by learning outcomes, which are widely valued by employers. Akhtar Malik (2019) describes learning as a process that changes behavior, formed based on learning outcomes. Ahmad (2014) argues that problem-solving extends beyond mere instruction; it also involves critical thinking, which is crucial for job performance. This has a direct impact on one's efficacy, defined as the ability to complete a task effectively. Ideally, efficacy levels should be measured using precise criteria. The concept of effectiveness encompasses the capacity to achieve established goals, considering the benefits of the results obtained, the level of effort required, and client satisfaction.

According to the statistical analysis, the problem-based learning approach significantly enhances entrepreneurship literacy skills. The competencies were evaluated based on participants' knowledge and skills, rather than their ability to change attitudes. Bloom's taxonomy of learning outcomes identifies three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Compared to traditional learning methods, the results of this study indicated that entrepreneurship literacy skills developed through problem-based learning were of higher value. The outcomes of the analyses also demonstrated specialized expertise. Alam and Shakir (2019) differentiate between threshold competencies and distinguishing competencies. Threshold competencies are the basic attributes required to be competent in a career, while distinguishing competencies set apart learners with advanced skills from the average population.

## 6. Conclusion

The study aimed to develop a learning design that would enhance learners' literacy skills, defined as the ability to read, write, perform arithmetic, and comprehend information and symbols. The research involved several key stages, including planning, implementation, and evaluation, each of which contributed to the overall effectiveness of the problem-based learning (PBL) approach. The planning stages encompassed research collaboration with the management team, literacy tutoring, preparation of the learning program, observation of requirements, development of syllabi (or lesson plans), and preparation of teaching materials and facilities. The implementation of learning in the classroom mirrored formal education processes but was tailored to accommodate the principles of PBL. This included a focus on learning methodologies, materials, media, and evaluation, where the competencies of tutors, practitioners, and adult learners played a critical role in managing the learning process. The evaluation phase involved a thorough assessment of all learning outcomes, ensuring that the objectives of the PBL approach were met.

## 7. Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications:

1. **Educational Policy and Curriculum Development:** The successful implementation of PBL in enhancing literacy skills suggests that educational policymakers should consider integrating PBL into the broader curriculum, particularly in adult education and literacy programs. This approach can be adapted to various contexts to foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
2. **Professional Development for Educators:** The effectiveness of PBL largely depends on the competencies of tutors and practitioners. Therefore, ongoing professional development programs that equip educators with the necessary skills to facilitate PBL should be prioritized. This will help educators manage and deliver PBL more effectively, leading to better learning outcomes.
3. **Learner-Centered Approaches:** The study underscores the importance of learner-centered approaches in education, where the focus is on addressing the specific needs and contexts of learners. Educational institutions should consider adopting more flexible and personalized learning models that cater to the diverse needs of learners, particularly in non-formal education settings.
4. **Enhancing Literacy Programs:** Literacy programs should go beyond traditional methods and incorporate innovative approaches like PBL that encourage active learning and engagement. This will not only improve literacy rates but also empower learners with the skills necessary for personal and professional development.

5. **Further Research:** The study opens avenues for further research into the application of PBL in various educational settings, particularly in developing countries where literacy rates are low. Future studies could explore the long-term impact of PBL on learners' cognitive and non-cognitive skills, as well as its applicability in different cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

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