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“L'homme est condamné à être libre!”: Freedom as a Rhizomatic Affordance Ecology in Project-Based Language Learning



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Abstract

Project-based language learning is frequently praised for giving learners choice, voice, collaboration, and authentic language use. While this commendation is not without merit, it remains epistemologically incomplete. A project can decentralize classroom activity while leaving deeper conditions of freedom untouched: who is allowed to define relevance, which language practices become legitimate, which resources can be combined, whose purposes survive assessment, and when a communicative product is ready to be released. This article, therefore, argues that freedom in project-based language learning cannot be reduced to learner autonomy, self-regulated learning, co-regulation, socially shared regulation, or reduced teacher control. These concepts remain necessary, but they do not by themselves explain how learners gain authority over the conditions of meaningful language action. Drawing on ecological affordance theory, critical applied linguistics, rhizomatic learning, research on self-regulated and socially regulated learning, and the five-dimensional affordance framework, the article develops freedom as a rhizomatic affordance ecology organized through five interacting regions: perceptibility, learning valence, compositionality, normativity, and intentionality. The argument is also extended to AI-mediated language learning, where generative tools can expand opportunity while relocating judgment, standardizing voice, and weakening responsibility for purpose. The article contributes a critical account of project freedom that is language-specific, power-sensitive, and empirically traceable.

Keywords: Project-based language learning, freedom, affordance theory, rhizomatic learning, self-regulated learning, artificial intelligence

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The Question of Freedom in Project-Based Language Learning

Project-based language learning has often been treated as a naturally liberating pedagogy. The vocabulary is familiar: authenticity, public products, collaboration, project management, reflection, and intellectual challenge in high-quality project work (Jaleniauskiene & Venckiene, 2025), alongside broader commitments to learner autonomy, agency, and taking charge of learning in language education (Benson, 2011; Littlewood, 1999; Stoller, 2006). The inference usually follows quickly: once the teacher moves away from knowledge transmission and students work through projects, learners become freer because they decide more, speak more, and produce something that appears to belong to them. This inference is attractive because it captures a real dissatisfaction with narrow forms of language instruction, but it is also too quick. Project work can multiply seemingly autonomous activity without deepening freedom, making classrooms busier while leaving the authority to define value, legitimacy, language quality, and completion almost entirely elsewhere.

Existing accounts of autonomy and regulation remain indispensable for understanding project-based language learning. Autonomy research has clarified that learners must take charge of important dimensions of their learning rather than merely work alone (Benson, 2011; Littlewood, 1999). Self-regulated learning research has explained how learners set goals, monitor progress, control strategies, and evaluate outcomes (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2000). Work on co-regulation and socially shared regulation has shown that regulation in collaborative learning is supported, negotiated, and sometimes collectively enacted (Hadwin et al., 2018; Järvelä & Hadwin, 2013; Volet et al., 2009). Self-determination theory has also shown that autonomy is strengthened by environments that support competence and relatedness as well as volition (Jang et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Thus, the present article does not reject these accounts but argues that they do not fully address the problem of freedom in project-based language learning.

Against this background, freedom names the question of project authority as to who can shape the possible directions of project action. The article treats this question not as a settled PBL construct, but as the conceptual problem to be developed. The claim is grounded, however, in recent project-based learning research showing that agency becomes educationally consequential when learners make decisions that shape ill-structured problem framing, rather than merely complete tasks within structures whose terms have already been defined (Svihla et al., 2023).

In project-based language learning, scoping review evidence identifies key project features such as authenticity, public products, collaboration, project management, reflection, and intellectual challenge (Jaleniauskiene & Venckiene, 2025). The freedom question asks how these features are governed: who can shape the topics, questions, or problems of the project; who can determine which resources become relevant; who can participate in critique and revision; who can influence criteria; and who can decide whether a communicative product is ready for an authentic public purpose. The core claim of this article, therefore, is not that PBL increases autonomy. The claim is that PBL becomes valid only when it gives learners growing authority over the conditions of meaningful language action.

The opening reference to Sartre is useful only if it is not domesticated into a slogan. Sartre's claim that human beings are condemned to be free points to responsibility under conditions not chosen by the actor (Sartre, 1956). One may argue that a classroom project is not existential freedom in Sartre's full sense, and this article does not pretend that it is. Yet the provocation matters. Learners in project work are asked to choose, justify, revise, and answer for a product within a world of rubrics, institutional expectations, peer relations, linguistic hierarchies, and technological mediators that they did not create. Project freedom is therefore not the absence of facticity. It is the learner's struggle to become an author within facticity. If a project ecology simply tells learners that they are free while silently fixing the terms of acceptable action, it does not produce freedom but a more sophisticated form of compliance.

This distinction is particularly important in language education. Language projects are not merely pedagogical projects. They are acts of voice, genre, register, accent, audience, identity, and social recognition. A learner who writes a podcast script, designs an interview, prepares a public presentation, or builds an AI-supported speaking portfolio is not simply completing a task. The learner is entering a field in which some Englishes are heard as legitimate, some topics are treated as safe, some identities are easier to perform, and some forms of multilingual competence are made invisible. Critical applied linguistics has long insisted that language education is entangled with power, ideology, and unequal recognition (Canagarajah, 2012; Kubota, 2016; Pennycook, 2001). A theory of freedom in PBL must therefore be more than a theory of choice. It must be a theory of how language learning action becomes possible, valuable, acceptable, and responsible in a contested ecology.

The argument developed here builds from several lines of prior work rather than from a single gap. Prior work on postlesson affordance-based reflection and the later multidimensional affordance framework shows how affordances can be traced in learners' reflection and language action; the latter names perceptibility, learning valence, compositionality, normativity, and intentionality as key dimensions of language-learning affordances (Nguyen, 2022b, 2025a). Related work on AI-mediated autonomy, idiographic affordance uptake, ecological assessment, and social injustice extends that framework into empirical, methodological, and critical problems in language education (Nguyen & Doan, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2026). Lian and Sangarun's account of rhizomatic learning and precision language education aligns with this direction by rejecting fixed, pre-sequenced pathways and treating learning systems as responsive to individual trajectories (Lian & Sangarun, 2023). The present article brings these threads into a single argument about freedom in PBL.

The article proceeds in six movements. First, it argues that project freedom has been weakened by a collapse of freedom into low teacher control, autonomy, or self-regulation. Second, it re-reads existing PBL and PBL evidence to show what it establishes and what it leaves unresolved. Third, it develops freedom as a rhizomatic affordance ecology rather than a five-step sequence. Fourth, it specifies the five regions of that ecology in language-specific terms. Fifth, it analyzes generative AI as a force that changes freedom by relocating judgment, not simply by adding support. Sixth, it proposes research and pedagogical indicators that make the framework open to empirical scrutiny.

Freedom is not a Softer Name for Autonomy

A recurrent weakness in project-based language learning discourse is not that it values autonomy too much, but that it frequently conflates nominal self-directed participation with genuine structural freedom. Recent PBL scoping evidence identifies intellectual challenge, authenticity, public products, collaboration, project management, and reflection as features of high-quality language projects (Jaleniauskiene & Venckiene, 2025). Yet the presence of such features does not by itself prove that learners have authority over the conditions that make project action meaningful. This matters because recent PBL review evidence shows that research has examined cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes through diverse measures, while the relation between project processes, products, and learner authority still requires closer theoretical attention (Guo et al., 2020). Recent EFL evidence suggests that PBL may improve motivation and contextual writing while also aligning with standardized assessment demands (Yang, 2025). Such alignment is pedagogically valuable, but it should not be mistaken for evidence that learners have gained freedom over the conditions of language action. In this sense, a learner may plan, monitor, revise, collaborate, and complete a project while still working inside a field whose serious terms have already been settled elsewhere: the problem has been preselected, the genre has been fixed, the audience is artificial, the rubric is non-negotiable, the acceptable language norm is silently standardized, and the teacher or platform decides when the product is good enough. Such a learner is not passive. In fact, the learner may even be highly autonomous in the procedural

sense. Yet this is not project freedom, because the learner's responsibility operates only after the decisive conditions of action have been arranged. If PBL claims to cultivate authentic learning, public products, collaboration, reflection, and meaningful participation, then it must ask who has authority over the conditions that make these practices real rather than decorative. Without that question, PBL can preserve the appearance of authenticity while reproducing the logics it claims to move beyond, a danger already identified in recent critical PBL scholarship (Fine, 2025). Project-based language learning becomes educationally powerful when learners gain growing authority over what can be seen as possible, what can matter, what resources can be assembled, what standards can be questioned, and when a communicative product can be responsibly released to a real or meaningful audience.

Freedom is not introduced here as a new educational phenomenon. It is a long-standing pillar in educational, philosophical, and political thought, where it has been tied to intellectual independence, public reasoning, democratic participation, emancipation, and non-domination. In Japanese intellectual history, Fukuzawa's account of learning connected education with independence of judgment and civic self-strengthening (Fukuzawa, 1872–1876/2012). In Western educational and political traditions, freedom has similarly been treated as central to democratic life, critical consciousness, and the conditions under which persons can think, speak, and act responsibly (Berlin, 1969; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970/2000). The present article does not attempt to write a general history of freedom. Its more limited claim is that PBL needs to recover freedom as an educational question because these foundational constructs of learner control and psychological regulation do not fully address who governs the conditions under which language action becomes possible, valuable, legitimate, and complete.

This distinction also protects the article from the opposite mistake: treating freedom as a withdrawal of guidance. The critique of minimally guided instruction rightly warns that open inquiry can overload learners when expert support is weak (Kirschner et al., 2006). The response from problem-based and inquiry learning research is equally important: the issue is not whether guidance exists, but whether the ecology is designed so that learners can take on increasingly complex forms of judgment (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). Project freedom is therefore not anti-structure. It is a way of asking whether structure enlarges the learner's authority or quietly substitutes for it.

Political theories of freedom sharpen this point. Negative liberty concerns the absence of interference, but absence of interference alone does not remove domination or dependency (Berlin, 1969; Pettit, 1997). A learner may be interfered with less and still remain dominated by hidden criteria, standard-language ideology, group hierarchy, AI-generated fluency, or institutional expectations that cannot be named or challenged. This is the problem of hidden jurisdiction in PBL: learners are invited to choose, but the terms under which their choices become acceptable have already been arranged. Freedom is not simply having options. It is having some rightful power over the conditions under which options count.

For this reason, freedom in PBL is defined here as learners' growing authority to perceive possible directions for language action, value and inhabit some of them, compose routes across resources, contest the standards that govern legitimacy, and justify responsible completion within a project ecology. This definition does not erase established socio-cognitive and regulatory frameworks; rather, it treats autonomy, self-regulation, co-regulation, and socially shared regulation as processes through which learners may assume, support, or negotiate such authority, not as equivalents of freedom itself.

What Existing Research Explains and Where Freedom Remains Unsettled

The PBL literature already provides strong reasons to avoid romantic claims. Beckett's early work showed that students do not always immediately understand the value of project-based instruction, which means that project work requires explicit mediation if it is to be experienced as language learning

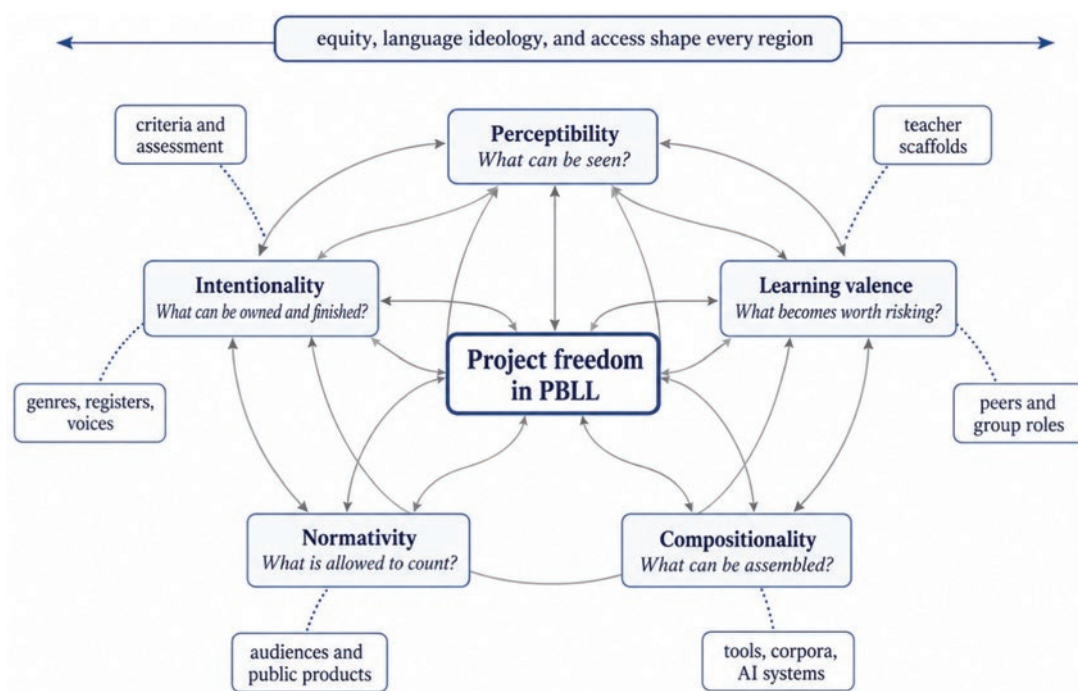
rather than as loosely connected activity (Beckett, 2002). Beckett and Slater's Project Framework made the integration of language, content, and skills more visible to learners, indicating that freedom in PBL depends partly on whether learners can see what they are learning and why it matters (Beckett & Slater, 2005). Stoller likewise grounded project work in second- and foreign-language contexts through links among content, process, skill development, and authentic communication (Stoller, 2006). These studies support the value of PBL, but they do not prove that PBL automatically deepens freedom.

The wider project-based learning literature reinforces this caution, although it does not by itself theorize freedom. Blumenfeld et al. (1991) argued that projects have only the potential to support learning and that this potential depends on design factors that sustain both doing and understanding. Kokotsaki et al. (2016) similarly reviewed evidence showing that successful PBL depends on high-quality group processes, teachers' scaffolding and guidance, a balance between direct instruction and inquiry, and well-aligned assessment. English and Kitsantas (2013) made the same point from the perspective of self-regulated learning: students must take responsibility for goals, monitoring, reflection, and motivation in PBL, but these processes do not occur naturally or easily and therefore require intentional learning-environment design. Stefanou et al. (2013) likewise showed that students' self-regulation outcomes differ depending on instructional design in problem- and project-based learning environments. Together, these studies do not prove freedom in PBL. Their contribution is more precise when they show that project work has no automatic pedagogical virtue. Even doing, learning, autonomy, and self-regulation depend on how the project is structured, supported, and assessed. The freedom claim begins from this design-dependence. If PBL cannot guarantee learning or autonomy merely by organizing activity as a project, then PBL also cannot claim freedom merely because learners are active, collaborative, or product-oriented. A similar caution applies to evidence about AI. Generative AI can expand rehearsal, feedback, translation support, revision, and ideation in language education (Chang & Sun, 2024; Godwin-Jones, 2024; Hockly, 2023). Nguyen and Doan (2025a) found that ChatGPT-facilitated project work could increase learner autonomy, while Nguyen and Doan (2025b) showed that learners' uptake of AI-mediated affordances varies idiographically rather than following a uniform path. These findings show real possibilities, but they do not license a simple conclusion that AI increases freedom. Selwyn (2024) warns that AI in education must be examined for its limits, reductions, and social consequences, while Risko and Gilbert's (2016) work on cognitive offloading helps explain how external aids can redistribute what learners continue to do themselves. AI support becomes educationally serious only when we ask what forms of judgment it transfers, masks, standardizes, or strengthens.

The literature, therefore, establishes necessary but incomplete premises. Project work requires guidance. Autonomy and regulation are socially supported. Language learning is shaped by norms of legitimacy. Affordances are relational. The ecological premise is that affordances are not properties of tasks alone, but relations among agents, environments, practices, and fields of action (Chemero, 2003; Costall, 1995; Gibson, 1979; Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014; van Lier, 2004). AI can redistribute action. Yet none of these points alone explains freedom as authority over project action. The article's central move is to theorize freedom as a contested ecology in which learners gain, lose, or negotiate authority across perceptibility, valence, composition, normativity, and intentionality.

Freedom as a Rhizomatic Affordance Ecology

The five dimensions of the multidimensional affordance framework must not be conceptualized as a linear hierarchy or a rigid ladder. If operationalized as sequential stages, the framework risks becoming overly reductionist, thereby attenuating the profound non-linear implications of an ecological perspective. In actual project work, learners do not first perceive, then value, then compose, then negotiate norms, then become intentional in a clean sequence. A new audience may change what learners notice. A conflict over criteria may alter what they value. An AI suggestion may open a route, close a route, or



The five regions are not stages. They are interacting conditions of consequential language action.

Figure 1. *Rhizomatic affordance ecology of freedom in PBL.*

normalize a route before learners recognize what has happened. Peer disagreement may change the project's direction. A failed rehearsal may reorganize the whole ecology. The structure is rhizomatic because its pathways multiply, reconnect, and redirect rather than develop from a single trunk (Lian & Pineda, 2014; Lian & Sangarun, 2023).

The five dimensions are better understood as interacting regions of pressure in a project ecology (Figure 1). A project cannot become free unless learners can see more than one meaningful route. That is perceptibility. A route cannot become educationally alive unless it matters enough to be taken up. That is learning valence. A valued route cannot be enacted unless learners can assemble tools, peers, language resources, feedback, time, and genres into a workable path. That is compositionality. An assembled path cannot become fully consequential unless learners can negotiate what counts as legitimate. That is normativity. A legitimate path still does not become free unless learners can claim purpose, responsibility, and sufficiency. That is intentionality. These five regions are not arbitrary. They arise from the basic conditions of project action: possibility, value, means, legitimacy, and authorship.

The figure represents the five dimensions as interacting regions rather than stages. Project freedom emerges through movement across language resources, audiences, criteria, tools, social relations, and institutional norms. Equity cuts across the whole ecology because unequal access, recognition, and legitimacy shape every region. This figure is not expected to be exhaustive or interpreted as linear and hierarchical, since project-based learning is complex and unpredictable.

The Five Regions of Project Freedom in Language Education

Perceptibility: Freedom Begins Where Pathways Become Visible

Perceptibility concerns what learners can actually recognize as possible language action within a project ecology. In PBL, this includes more than seeing a list of topics. Learners must notice possible

genres, registers, interactional moves, repair strategies, audience relations, translinguaging routes, assessment pathways, and forms of evidence. An apparently open project can still be perceptually narrow if learners see only the safest topic, the teacher-approved genre, or the most standardized form of English. Anderson's early work on affordance-based lesson planning is important here because it criticized conventional lesson plan pro formas for being too strongly premised on outcomes-based planning and proposed planning around emergent learning opportunities instead (Anderson, 2015). Nguyen's affordance-based work extended this concern from lesson planning to learner trajectories. Nguyen (2022a) criticized the good teachers-should-know-all model for tying learners to prescribed routes and argued that affordance-based language education should allow learners to steer their own learning paths through the perception of hidden, perceivable, positive, and negative affordances. Nguyen (2022b) then developed postlesson affordance-based reflective discussion as a way to identify learning opportunities and inhibiting factors in classroom activity, so that teachers and learners can better understand how language emergence is supported or blocked after a lesson. This line of argument is further reinforced by Ončevska Ager and Anderson's later work on affordance-based lesson planning in pre-service teacher education, which develops narrative planning and narrative self-observation as alternative reflective formats through which teachers can make pedagogical choices and emergent affordances more explicit (Ončevska Ager & Anderson, 2025). Nguyen's later multidimensional affordance framework formalizes these earlier concerns as perceptibility, the dimension through which affordances become visible, noticeable, discoverable, and therefore actionable for learners in language education (Nguyen, 2025a). van Lier's ecological account remains important as the wider foundation because it treats affordances as central to language learning in situated activity (van Lier, 2004). However, the specific contribution of the present framework is to place perceptibility inside PBL as a condition of freedom: learners cannot gain authority over project action if the available routes, genres, voices, audiences, and standards remain invisible to them.

Learning Valence: Freedom Requires Possibilities that Matter

A visible possibility is not yet a living possibility. Learning valence names the force through which a project route becomes worth taking up. In language education, valence is not simply motivation. Valence includes identity, risk, shame, desire, relevance, face, audience pressure, and the felt value of speaking or writing in a language that may expose one's competence. Self-determination theory is useful here because autonomy is strengthened when learners experience volition, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Yet freedom proposes a much sharper question: what makes a route worth inhabiting when language action carries social risk?

This is where many versions of student choice remain superficial. A learner may be allowed to choose a topic, but if all legitimate topics feel detached from the learner's history, community, body, accent, or communicative hopes, the choice has low valence. Conversely, a challenging route can have high valence when learners can see why it matters and can risk themselves within it. Beckett and Slater's Project Framework is important precisely because it helps students see the value of language, content, and skills in project work rather than treating projects as unfocused activity (Beckett & Slater, 2005). Freedom requires this felt seriousness. Without it, choice is only a menu without commitment.

Valence, therefore, differs from familiar accounts of motivation in one decisive respect. Motivation often determines whether learners are energized to act. Learning valence, as a region of freedom, questions whether the project ecology lets learners recognize a possible route as worth risking, inhabiting, and defending as their own. A learner may be highly motivated to obtain a grade while feeling no authority over what is worth saying. Another learner may take on a more difficult route because it connects language learning to a community, audience, identity, or problem that matters. In the second case, the route is not merely attractive. It becomes answerable to purpose.

Compositionality: Freedom is the Right to Govern Resource use Without Arbitrary Constraint

Compositionality concerns how learners assemble resources into a defensible route for meaningful language action. In PBL, this dimension is not simply a matter of having many resources, using tools efficiently, or combining materials creatively. The deeper question is jurisdiction over resource use: who decides which resources may be used, which resources are treated as cheating, which resources are treated as compulsory, which combinations are legitimate, and which routes are dismissed because they do not match the teacher's, rubric's, platform's, or institution's preferred pathway? A learner may be highly self-regulated in managing sources, AI feedback, peer comments, corpora, translation tools, and drafts, yet still lack compositional freedom if the project ecology has already decided which resources are legitimate and how they must be used. Conversely, a learner may refuse a tool, reject an AI suggestion, preserve a local expression, or take a shorter route through a familiar resource and still be acting responsibly. Freedom in compositionality should not equate with unlimited resource use. It is accountable authority over resource judgment.

This issue is especially thought-provoking in language projects because resources are hardly neutral. A corpus can authorize certain collocations. A teacher model can make one genre appear academically desirable. A rubric can preselect what counts as evidence. A peer leader can impose a safe group voice. A translation tool can protect meaning or flatten it. AI can widen options, but it can also produce fluent language before the learner has formed a communicative purpose, which risks turning composition into offloading rather than judgment (Risko & Gilbert, 2016). In language learning specifically, generative AI can distribute agency and expand rehearsal, feedback, and experimentation, but it can also standardize voice, obscure authorship, and shift judgment from the learner to the system (Godwin-Jones, 2024; Selwyn, 2024). A theory of compositional freedom must then consider not merely whether learners use resources, but whether they are allowed to decide, explain, and defend how resources enter the language action.

A concrete PBL example clarifies the distinction. Imagine a group producing an English documentary about food waste on campus. In a self-regulated but compositionally unfree version, learners collect sources, divide roles, use AI to polish narration, follow the teacher's model, match the rubric, and submit a fluent video. The group is not passive. It may be organized, autonomous, and successful by conventional criteria. Yet its route may be pre-composed by external authority: the rubric decides what evidence counts, the teacher's sample decides the genre, AI decides the polished English, the peer leader decides the voice, and the imagined audience remains the teacher. The learners manage the project, but they do not govern its composition.

A freedom-oriented version would not give learners total permission to use anything without accountability. It would give them the right and responsibility to justify resource use. They could decide to combine campus interviews, Vietnamese field notes, English narration, subtitles, local terms with English framing, statistics, peer feedback, corpus checks, AI alternatives, and teacher consultation. They could also decide not to use AI if it weakens their intended voice, or to use AI only for generating alternative phrasings rather than producing final text. They could keep a less polished interview excerpt because the accent indexes local participation. They could reject a more native-like AI sentence because it changes stance. They could take a faster route through bilingual planning if that route helps them produce a stronger English-mediated message. The point is not that every resource must be allowed in every way. The point is that constraints must be pedagogically and ethically justifiable with learners' full responsibility, not arbitrary expressions of institutional suspicion, teacher preference, platform ideology, or compulsory tool adoption.

This example is where compositionality becomes specific to language learning. The learner is not merely assembling materials for a project. The learner is assembling an English-mediated communicative act

through genre, register, stance, audience relation, evidence, intelligibility, repair, translanguaging, multimodality, citation, and release-readiness. Self-regulation demonstrates whether the learner can manage resources efficiently. Autonomy determines whether the learner can take responsibility for learning choices. Compositional freedom asks whether the learner has the rightful authority to determine responsibly how language resources, technological tools, social relations, and evaluative standards are brought together to produce meaningful communication. Its liberating force lies in freeing learners from both irrational prohibition and compulsory tool use. They are not treated as cheaters whenever they use powerful resources, nor as lazy or deficient whenever they refuse them. They are treated as responsible authors who must explain what each resource did, what it made possible, what it distorted, what they accepted, what they rejected, and why the final composition remains theirs.

Normativity: Freedom Must not Collapse into Normality

Normativity is the region in which project freedom confronts the standards that make language action recognizable, legitimate, assessable, and complete. It should not be confused with freedom itself. Normativity is one region of freedom, not its whole structure. Freedom concerns the broader ecology in which learners perceive possibilities, value them, assemble resources, question standards, and claim responsibility for completion. Normativity concerns a more specific struggle: who has the authority to decide what counts as appropriate English, credible evidence, valid genre, acceptable voice, responsible audience relation, and assessable product. A project can therefore be highly normative without being free. It may have explicit criteria, polished models, clear rubrics, and stable expectations while still denying learners any meaningful authority to ask why those standards matter, whom they serve, what they exclude, or whether they fit the communicative purpose. Conversely, a project cannot be free without normativity, because freedom without standards collapses into arbitrary expression. The problem is not the existence of norms. The problem is whether norms remain hidden, naturalized, and monopolized by the teacher, rubric, institution, platform, or dominant language ideology.

This distinction is necessary because freedom can easily collapse into normality. Normality is not the same as normativity. Normativity makes standards available for examination. Normality makes one standard appear natural, neutral, and inevitable. In PBL, learners may be invited to choose a topic, design a product, use their own voice, or address an audience, while the project ecology silently rewards only safe topics, standardized English, teacher-approved genres, neutral affect, institutionally acceptable evidence, and audience relations that do not disturb assessment. In that case, freedom does not vanish openly. It is domesticated. Learners are free only insofar as they choose what already appears normal. Foucault's account of normalization is useful here because modern power does not operate only by prohibition; it also produces standards through which conduct is observed, judged, corrected, and made normal (Foucault, 1995). His account of governmentality further clarifies how freedom can be organized through practices that guide conduct without appearing coercive (Foucault, 1991). In a PBL classroom, this means that learners may seem free while their choices are quietly guided toward the normalized project: the acceptable topic, the expected genre, the standard accent, the polite critique, the native-like sentence, the safe conclusion, and the rubric-friendly product.

This problem is language-specific because language norms do not merely evaluate products; they evaluate speakers. A public presentation, documentary, interview, poster, website, podcast, debate, or AI-supported portfolio always raises questions about acceptable voice, evidence, genre, accent, register, multilingual practice, stance, and audience relation. These are not merely technical questions of clarity or correctness. They are questions about whose English can sound intelligent, credible, polished, academic, public, or responsible. Bourdieu's account of symbolic power is central here because legitimate language appears legitimate only when the social conditions that authorize it have been forgotten (Bourdieu, 1991). Standard language ideology works in a similar way: it presents one historically

privileged language form as if it were neutral, correct, and socially unmarked (Lippi-Green, 2012). Critical applied linguistics has long challenged the idea that language education can be separated from ideology, inequality, and unequal recognition (Pennycook, 2001). Translingual scholarship likewise challenges the assumption that multilingual learners should simply approximate a stable standard; instead, language use often involves negotiation across repertoires, histories, purposes, and audiences (Canagarajah, 2012).

To illustrate, the assessment moment is where normality often reveals itself most clearly. During brainstorming, learners may be encouraged to be creative, local, multilingual, humorous, affective, or critical. Yet once grading begins, the project may reward only standardized grammar, teacher-approved evidence, predictable genre structure, safe critique, and polished fluency. This is why normativity cannot be treated as an optional political concern added to PBL after the language work is done. It is inside the language task from the beginning. Shohamy's work on the power of tests is useful here because language tests and assessment practices are not neutral measurement devices, but they are embedded in social, educational, and political contexts and can function as policy tools that shape what counts as valued language (Shohamy, 2001). Recent washback scholarship similarly shows that language assessment has long been studied not only as measurement, but also through its effects on teaching, learning, and educational practice (Xie & Jia, 2025). Flores and Rosa's critique of appropriateness-based approaches sharpens the point further: standardized language is often presented as an objective academic requirement, while racialized or socially marked speakers may still be heard as inappropriate even when they approximate expected forms (Flores & Rosa, 2015). In PBL, a rubric can do more than assess a product as it can define the normal learner, the normal voice, the normal genre, and the normal route to success.

A concrete example at this point clarifies the difference between normativity, normality, autonomy, and freedom. Imagine a student group producing an English podcast about student mental health. At the level of autonomy, the students may choose the topic, assign roles, draft the script, rehearse pronunciation, and submit the final recording. At the level of self-regulation, they may manage time, revise grammar, respond to feedback, monitor fluency, and complete a polished product. Yet normativity gives them a harder question: what forms of English, emotion, evidence, humor, accent, and voice are allowed to count as legitimate in this podcast? If students avoid local experiences because they seem too personal, remove Vietnamese expressions because they seem unacademic, flatten humor because it seems risky, replace their accents with AI-polished narration, and turn a lived issue into a neutral informational speech for the teacher, then the project has not liberated voice. It has normalized it. The product may sound fluent, but its freedom has been reduced to conformity with the safest recognizable form.

A freedom-oriented PBL design would not abolish standards. It would make standards visible, answerable, and open to justified negotiation. Learners would ask why a podcast for first-year students might allow conversational register, local examples, repair, bilingual framing, humor, or affective voice, while a podcast for a university policy audience might require more formal evidence, explicit definitions, and institutional tone. They would discuss whether code-meshing clarifies or obscures meaning, whether an accent affects intelligibility or only violates prejudice, whether AI-polished fluency strengthens communication or erases stance, and whether the rubric rewards communicative responsibility or merely normalized English. This is where freedom differs from self-regulation and autonomy. Self-regulation helps learners meet standards. Autonomy lets learners take responsibility for choices. Normative freedom asks whether learners can examine the standards themselves and decide which ones are justified for a particular audience, purpose, genre, and ethical situation.

Normativity therefore protects project freedom from two opposite failures. The first failure is normlessness, where anything is treated as acceptable simply because the learner chose it. That is not

freedom but a refusal of responsibility. The second failure is normality, where only the already normal is allowed to count as legitimate. That is not freedom either; it is managed compliance. The liberating force of normativity lies between these failures. Learners become freer when they can ask why a standard matters, what communicative work it performs, whose language it privileges, what it excludes, and how it should be applied to a specific language action. In PBLL, freedom must therefore include the right to question what counts as good English, appropriate evidence, credible voice, responsible audience relation, and sufficient completion. Without this normative struggle, PBLL may produce fluent products and visible participation while quietly training learners to become normal.

The key distinction can be stated directly: normativity is not freedom, but freedom cannot exist without normativity. Normativity is the region where project action is judged as legitimate or illegitimate. Freedom is the larger ecology through which learners gain authority to perceive routes, value them, compose them, contest their standards, and complete them responsibly. If normativity is absent, freedom becomes arbitrary choice. If normativity becomes normality, freedom becomes compliance. Project freedom emerges only when standards remain strong enough to sustain responsibility and open enough to be questioned, revised, and justified.

Intentionality: Freedom Includes the Right to Define Need and Completion

Intentionality in language learning concerns learners' authority to organize project action around a communicative purpose that becomes clearer as the project develops. It appears when learners can explain why a route should continue, why a linguistic feature has become necessary, why a source should be trusted, why an AI suggestion should be rejected, or why a product is ready for a particular audience. Self-regulated learning explains many of these processes through goal setting, monitoring, strategy use, and reflection (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2000). The freedom argument, however, focuses on whether the learner has authority over the definition of learning need itself, or whether that need has already been assigned by a syllabus, rubric, platform, institution, expert discourse, or market logic.

This distinction exposes the limits of just-in-case language education. Some future-oriented preparation is necessary because learners often need linguistic and generic resources before they can participate meaningfully in complex project work. The problem begins when just-in-case logic becomes sovereign, deciding in advance what learners must need before they encounter a communicative problem that makes the need real. Mitra's work on minimally invasive education and the School in the Cloud is useful here not because it removes teachers, but because it challenges the assumption that all important learning must begin from externally sequenced instruction (Mitra, 2003, 2019; Mitra & Rana, 2001). Dogme ELT gives the same argument a language-pedagogical form by insisting that teaching should grow from learner language, classroom interaction, and emergent communicative need rather than only from pre-packaged materials (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009; Thornbury, 2000).

In PBLL, intentional freedom means that learners can identify what must be learned here and now because the project has made that language necessary. A group producing an English documentary may discover that it needs follow-up questions during interviews, hedging when claims sound too strong, affective stance when narration sounds too clinical, contrastive language when comparing responses, subtitles when addressing a wider audience, or repair strategies when rehearsal reveals a breakdown. Such learning is not less rigorous than preselected instruction; it is more tightly bound to communicative purpose because each linguistic demand emerges from the project's actual movement. This logic is consistent with focus-on-form research, where attention to language becomes pedagogically meaningful when it arises within meaning-focused communication rather than as a detached sequence of forms (Loewen, 2005; Long, 1991).

Rhizomatic and affordance-based perspectives sharpen this point because they reject the fantasy of a fully pre-authored learning route. Project purposes change when learners meet unexpected interview answers, audience misunderstandings, peer disagreement, weak evidence, AI distortion, or genre limitations. Rhizomatic learning treats such redirection as intrinsic to learning rather than as deviation from the plan (Lian & Pineda, 2014; Lian & Sangarun, 2023). Affordance-based work gives this argument its language-education grounding by challenging the teachers-should-know-all model, showing how learning opportunities and inhibiting factors become visible through classroom action, and formalizing intentionality as one dimension of affordance-based language education (Nguyen, 2022a, 2022b, 2025a). Nguyen and Doan's idiographic work further shows that learners in the same AI-mediated environment do not perceive, value, combine, or act on affordances uniformly, which means that learning needs cannot be assumed to be identical across learners or moments (Nguyen & Doan, 2025b).

Intentionality also includes the right to finish. Language education can trap learners in permanent deficit: another grammar error, another pronunciation issue, another more native-like phrase, another correction, another round of polishing. Project work reproduces this deficit when completion is defined only by teacher approval, rubric compliance, or machine-polished fluency. The right to finish does not mean permission to submit weak work; it means the right to justify sufficiency in relation to genre, purpose, audience, evidence, intelligibility, time, and ethical responsibility. Since genres are socially recognized forms of action rather than containers for abstract correctness, a project product is finished when learners can explain why this communicative form is adequate for this audience, purpose, and moment (Hyland, 2007).

Thus, intentionality gives project freedom its temporal force. Self-regulation manages learning processes, while autonomy supports responsibility for learning decisions. Intentional freedom emphasizes who has the authority to define necessity itself, as to what must be learned now, what can wait, what should be refused, what should be revised, whose future the learning serves, and when communicative work is sufficiently complete. Without that authority, PBL may produce motivated, autonomous, and well-regulated learners who remain trapped inside somebody else's prediction of what their language should become.

AI: A Horizon Beyond the Panopticon?

Generative AI makes the theory of project freedom more urgent because it changes not only what learners can do, but also who or what exercises judgment within the project ecology. AI can expand perceptibility by generating examples, suggesting genres, simulating audiences, translating drafts, and offering feedback. It can also strengthen valence when learners feel supported enough to attempt more ambitious communication. It can support compositionality when it becomes one resource among peers, teacher conferences, corpora, recordings, rubrics, and audience feedback. Nguyen and Doan's study of ChatGPT-facilitated PBL showed that AI-supported project work generated significantly greater gains in learner autonomy than the human-facilitated condition, while self-efficacy improved at comparable levels across AI- and human-facilitated conditions (Nguyen & Doan, 2025a). Godwin-Jones (2024) likewise describes generative AI as part of distributed agency in language learning. These gains matter, but they do not settle the question of freedom. A tool can increase capability while relocating judgment away from the learner.

The critical question is therefore not whether AI helps, but what kind of freedom its help makes possible. AI can make fluency appear before purpose has formed. It can make a draft seem complete because it reads smoothly. It can standardize voice, reduce local or translingual expression, and make unconventional routes appear less polished. It can also turn compositionality into one-stop dependence and

intentionality into prompt management. Selwyn's critique of AI in education is important because it warns against treating technical capacity as educational meaning and asks educators to attend more closely to power, reduction, and social consequence (Selwyn, 2024). Risko and Gilbert's work on cognitive offloading is also relevant because external aids can support cognition while changing what learners continue to practise or judge for themselves (Risko & Gilbert, 2016). In PBL, the ethical problem is not simply whether AI is allowed. It is whether AI strengthens or weakens learners' authority over purpose, criteria, voice, evidence, and completion.

The panoptic danger is that AI may make learners more visible to systems while making the system's judgments less visible to learners. A panoptic AI ecology observes, predicts, corrects, compares, and normalizes learners through continuous data capture. It does not merely tell learners what they have done; it recommends what they should do next, identifies what they lack, and steers them toward institutionally preferred forms of improvement. Foucault's account of the panopticon remains relevant here because disciplinary power works not only through direct coercion, but through conditions in which subjects internalize observation and regulate themselves accordingly (Foucault, 1995). In an AI-mediated PBL ecology, this danger appears when personalization becomes a more refined form of governance: the learner receives individualized suggestions, but the logic of suggestion remains organized by the platform, the rubric, the institution, or the dominant norm of polished English.

A horizon beyond the panopticon would require a different use of AI. Precision medicine-inspired education is useful here only as an analogy, not as a model to be imported wholesale. Precision medical education uses longitudinal data and analytics to support more precise educational interventions (Triola & Burk-Rafel, 2023). Saqr et al. (2024) extend this direction through idiographic artificial intelligence, arguing that person-specific models can better explain students' self-regulation than aggregate models. For PBL, however, precision should not mean that systems predict learners more efficiently on behalf of institutions. It should mean that learners and teachers can better understand the learner's idiographic pathway. Precision becomes compatible with freedom only when data becomes answerable to learner judgment rather than learner judgment becoming subordinate to data.

This is where Nguyen and Doan's idiographic AI-mediated affordance study is central. Their findings show that learners working in the same AI-supported environment did not perceive, value, combine, and act on affordances uniformly (Nguyen & Doan, 2025b). The same tool did not become the same learning environment for every learner, which matters because it resists the fantasy of one optimal AI pathway. This study suggests that AI should not be used to impose a standardized route under the name of personalization. Instead, AI should help learners trace their own emerging project pathways, including the routes they ignored, the resources they overused, the suggestions they accepted too quickly, the genres they failed to consider, and the voices they allowed the machine to smooth away. Such a use of AI does not remove uncertainty, but it makes the learner's trajectory more visible and more contestable.

This argument also connects with the neuro-ecological critique of comprehensible input. If language learning is understood mainly as the delivery of input slightly beyond a learner's current level, AI can easily become a more efficient input machine: more examples, more simplification, more level-matched texts, more corrective feedback, and more adaptive sequencing. That scenario would be personalization without freedom. Nguyen and Doan (2025d) argue instead that language development is active, embodied, interactive, feedback-rich, and multimodal, and that learners develop by detecting and acting on affordances in rich environments rather than merely processing linear and simplified input. This shifts the question of AI in PBL from whether AI can provide better input to whether AI can help learners perceive, value, compose, contest, and complete meaningful language action.

AI policy in PBLT should therefore move beyond disclosure rules. Disclosure tells us that AI was used, but not what role AI played in the learner's freedom. A stronger approach would ask learners to document how AI entered the project ecology: which suggestions were accepted, rejected, revised, tested, or ignored; what the AI made visible; what it made too easy; what it standardized; what it distorted; and how the learner retained responsibility for audience, evidence, voice, criteria, and release-readiness. Nguyen and Doan's affordance-based approach to language assessment supports this orientation because it shifts assessment from static performance alone toward the histories through which competence emerges in interaction over time (Nguyen & Doan, 2025c). In this view, AI use should not be evaluated only by whether the final text is better. It should be evaluated by whether the learner can explain how AI affected the project's perceptibility, valence, compositionality, normativity, and intentionality.

AI can therefore become part of project freedom only when it remains available to learner judgment rather than becoming a substitute for judgment. It can intensify the older panopticon of schooling through more personalized monitoring, prediction, correction, and normalization, or it can support a more idiographic and affordance-based ecology in which learners gain greater authority over their own language-action trajectories. The promise of AI beyond the panopticon is not that learners become unobserved, unsupported, or unconstrained. It is that observation, support, and constraint become more transparent, negotiable, and answerable to learners' communicative purposes. In this sense, AI does not automatically liberate PBLT. It intensifies the struggle over freedom by redistributing judgment across learners, teachers, tools, platforms, rubrics, and audiences.

Research and Pedagogical Implications

A theory of project freedom must remain open to evidence; otherwise, it risks becoming a vocabulary that explains everything after the fact. The framework proposed here should be studied through traces of project action rather than through static indicators alone. Such traces may include topic movement, genre decisions, resource combinations, peer negotiations, AI-use histories, revision sequences, criteria discussions, audience feedback, reflective accounts, and decisions about completion. Their value does not lie in proving, at a single point, whether a learner has or does not have freedom. Their value lies in showing how freedom is gained, narrowed, redirected, suspended, or lost as learners move through a project ecology.

This paper advocates that project freedom should be studied historically and ecologically. A topic choice, for instance, is not meaningful by itself. It matters whether learners considered several possible routes, whether some routes were avoided because they seemed illegitimate, whether peer or teacher feedback widened or narrowed the route, whether AI standardized the learner's voice, whether criteria were discussed or merely obeyed, and whether learners could justify the product's readiness for a particular audience. Evidence of freedom is therefore distributed across movement, negotiation, revision, and justification. It appears in the operational history of how learners perceived possibilities, attached value to them, assembled resources, negotiated standards, and claimed responsibility for completion.

Pedagogically, the implication is not to make projects less demanding but to make demanding projects more answerable to freedom. Teachers can expand perceptibility by showing contrasting examples rather than one ideal model. They can strengthen learning valence by helping learners negotiate audiences, stakes, identities, and communicative purposes. They can support compositionality by teaching learners how to combine peer work, teacher feedback, corpora, AI, local knowledge, genre models, and rehearsal without surrendering judgment to any single source. They can make normativity visible by inviting discussion of criteria, register, accent, translanguaging, evidence, genre, and audience expectations. They can cultivate intentionality by asking learners to defend not only what they produced, but why the product is ready for release.

This also changes assessment. Proficiency gains matter, but they cannot carry the whole value of PBL. Two learners may end with similar language scores but radically different histories of project freedom. One learner may have followed a safe route through teacher-authored criteria, while another may have negotiated audience, genre, evidence, feedback, AI use, local voice, and release-readiness. An affordance-based approach to assessment is useful here because it asks how competence emerges through interaction over time rather than only how a final product performs against a static score (Nguyen & Doan, 2025c). The point is not to abandon outcomes. It is to interpret outcomes together with the histories through which learners became capable of producing them.

Equity must also move from implication to core design. Each region of project freedom has an equity problem. Perceptibility is shaped by prior access to genres, technologies, academic models, and public language events. Learning valence is shaped by whether learners' identities, histories, accents, communities, and communicative hopes are treated as worthy. Compositionality is shaped by unequal time, peer networks, feedback, devices, AI access, and AI literacy. Normativity is shaped by standard-language ideology, native-speakerism, institutional expectations, and assumptions about what respectable English looks like. Intentionality is shaped by whether learners are permitted to identify here-and-now language needs and claim sufficiency without being trapped in permanent deficit. Nguyen and Doan's social injustice work is important here because it shows that the five dimensions can be used to analyze inequitable affordances rather than merely celebrate opportunities (Nguyen & Doan, 2026).

All in all, a freedom-centered PBL design therefore considers more than whether learners are active, autonomous, or collaborative. It asks whether the project ecology gives them increasing authority over the conditions under which language action becomes possible, valuable, composable, legitimate, and complete. This is also the methodological value of the framework. It does not reduce freedom to a checklist, but it makes freedom empirically traceable through the histories of learner movement across project ecologies.

Conclusion

Project-based language learning does not make learners free simply by giving them projects. It can create the conditions of freedom, but it can also produce a more active and polished form of obedience. The difference between project activity and project freedom lies in whether learners gain growing authority over the conditions under which language action becomes possible, valuable, composable, legitimate, and complete. This is why freedom cannot be reduced to learner autonomy, self-regulation, collaboration, or reduced teacher control. These remain important, but they do not by themselves answer the harder question of who governs the project ecology in which learners are asked to act.

This article has argued that freedom in PBL is best understood as a rhizomatic affordance ecology. The five regions of perceptibility, learning valence, compositionality, normativity, and intentionality are not stages, variables, or checklist categories. They are interacting regions of pressure through which project action becomes available and answerable. The value of this framework is not that it adds a more sophisticated vocabulary to PBL. Its value is diagnostic and critical. It shows where freedom fails even when projects look successful: when options remain invisible, when choice has no living value, when resources compose the learner rather than the learner composing resources, when norms are hidden under the appearance of neutral standards, when AI makes fluency appear before purpose has formed, and when completion belongs to the teacher, rubric, platform, or machine rather than to accountable learner judgment. It also shows why freedom cannot mean the absence of structure. Project freedom requires structure, but only structure that learners can increasingly understand, use, question, and reshape. Without that movement, PBL may remain learner-centered only in the weak sense that learners are busier, more responsible, and more visible while still acting inside routes authored by others.

The argument becomes especially urgent in an age of generative AI, institutional accountability, standard-language pressure, and unequal access to academic and digital resources. AI can widen possibility, but it can also intensify a new panopticon of personalized monitoring, correction, prediction, and normalization. Assessment can support learning, but it can also define which voices become legitimate and which are treated as deficient. Public products can create authentic audiences, but they can also become performances for artificial approval. A freedom-centered PBL design must therefore be studied through histories of learner movement rather than through final products alone: how learners saw routes, attached value to them, assembled resources, negotiated standards, used or resisted AI, revised purposes, and justified release-readiness.

The strongest version of PBL is not learner-centered in the thin sense of letting learners do more. It is freedom-centered in the stronger sense of helping learners become responsible authors of language action in contested worlds. Such freedom is neither a mood nor a slogan. It is a design problem, a research problem, an assessment problem, and an ethical problem. PBL must eventually stop treating freedom as an automatic effect of project work and begin designing, studying, and defending the conditions under which learners can actually practice it.

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