# Analysis of Inquiry-Based Learning Teaching Approach in Developing Student's Learning Mastery and Engagement in Biology Subject

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**Abstract**
This study investigates the effectiveness of the Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) approach in enhancing learning mastery and student engagement within the context of biology education. A quantitative, correlational research design was employed, utilizing a stratified random sample of 380 senior secondary school students from urban areas of Yangzhou, China. Data were collected through a self-developed Learning Mastery Scale and an adapted Student Engagement Questionnaire, measuring behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. The key findings indicate that students in IBL-oriented classrooms demonstrated significantly higher learning mastery (Mean = 82.4, SD = 6.7) compared to their peers in traditional lecture-based settings (Mean = 75.1, SD = 8.3), with a statistically significant difference (t = 7.89, p < 0.001). A strong positive correlation was found between the level of IBL implementation and mastery (r = 0.63, p < 0.01). Despite its efficacy, significant implementation challenges were identified, including limited teacher training (68%), insufficient class time (72%), and a lack of technological resources (55%). Furthermore, the integration of technology tools such as virtual labs and simulations was shown to be a strong positive predictor of both student engagement (β = 0.68, p < 0.01) and conceptual mastery (β = 0.59, p < 0.05). The study concludes that IBL is a potent pedagogical model for improving educational outcomes in biology. However, its successful integration is contingent upon robust systemic support, encompassing targeted professional development for teachers, strategic technology integration, and adaptable curriculum design. This research provides evidence-based strategies for educators and policymakers to optimize IBL implementation, thereby fostering a more engaging and effective biology education.
**Keywords:** Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), Biology Education, Learning Mastery, Student Engagement, Technology Integration, Quantitative Research

## Introduction
*Background of the Study*
Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) has become a new teaching method in science education, transforming the classroom from teachers telling students to letting students explore themselves (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).This approach requires students to ask questions, design experiments, and draw conclusions based on evidence, which cultivates their

independent and critical thinking (Minner et al., 2010).However, although IBL is promising in theory, it has encountered many difficulties in practical applications, such as insufficient teacher training, mismatch of exam methods, and insufficient resources (Crawford, 2007). These challenges have caused many schools to continue to use old-fashioned teaching methods, which has affected the real role of IBL.

IBL's effectiveness hinges on its capacity to enhance learning mastery (conceptual understanding and skill application) and multidimensional engagement (behavioral, cognitive, emotional) (Fredricks et al., 2004). While technology-aided IBL activities—such as simulations and data analysis tools—can bridge theoretical knowledge with real-world applications (Linn & Eylon, 2011), empirical evidence of IBL's sustained impact on mastery and engagement remains inconsistent. Some studies report significant gains in problem-solving abilities (Zacharia et al., 2015), while others note variability tied to contextual factors like instructional quality (Trundle & Bell, 2010).

Biology classes are particularly suitable for IBL (Furtak et al., 2012) because it relies on experimentation, observation, and systematic thinking. From cell activities to ecosystem changes, these complex biological phenomena require inquiry-based teaching methods, just as scientists do (NRC, 2012). However, abstract concepts like molecular genetics and practical issues like laboratory safety can make IBL difficult. Without good support, it will be difficult for biology teachers to play the full role of IBL and allow students to truly understand knowledge and devote themselves to learning.

*Problem Statement*
Although everyone knows that Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) can help students learn better and more engaged in biology classes, there are still many difficulties in actually using it. Many biology teachers have not learned much about IBL's teaching methods, so they are still accustomed to using the old lecture method. What is more troublesome is that the research results are inconsistent on the effect of IBL on long-term remembering biological knowledge and keeping students interested (for example, some say it depends on factors such as teacher level and class atmosphere), so it is not yet possible to draw a conclusion.

This study therefore addresses two core gaps: (1) the practical challenges faced by educators in implementing IBL in biology classrooms, and (2) the ambiguous efficacy of IBL in reliably improving domain-specific learning outcomes. By examining these interconnected issues, this research aims to develop context-driven strategies to optimize IBL integration, ultimately advancing evidence-based biology pedagogy and teacher support frameworks.

*Research Objectives*
1. To evaluate the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning (IBL) approach in improving students' understanding of biological concepts.
2. To identify the challenges  implementing inquiry-based learning  in biology classrooms.
3. To explore possible solutions to effectively implement inquiry-based learning and technology into biology curricula.

*Research Questions*
1. How effective is the IBL teaching approach in developing mastery and engagement in biology education among students?
2. What are the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the IBL teaching approach in developing mastery and engagement in biology education among students?
3. What technology tools(e.g., simulations, data platforms) effectively support IBL in biology?

**Literature Review**
*Theoretical Foundations of IBL*
IBL is grounded in constructivist and social constructivist theories, where learners actively construct knowledge through investigation and social interaction. Key models include:
Piaget's Cognitive Constructivism: Emphasizes knowledge acquisition through experiential interaction with the environment. Students assimilate new information by linking it to prior knowledge, moving beyond rote memorization .
Vygotsky's Social Constructivism: Highlights collaborative learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where peer/teacher interactions scaffold understanding during inquiry tasks .
Schwab's Inquiry Levels: Ranges from structured (teacher-guided) to open inquiry (student-directed), allowing progressive skill development .

Mastery and engagement in IBL are underpinned by:
Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb): Learning occurs through a four-stage cycle:
1. Concrete Experience (hands-on investigation),
2. Reflective Observation (data analysis),
3. Abstract Conceptualization (theoretical generalization),
4. Active Experimentation (applying insights) .

This cycle promotes deep conceptual understanding and skill application .
Three-Dimensional Engagement Framework:
Behavioral: Participation in labs/fieldwork (e.g., conducting experiments).
Cognitive: Critical thinking during hypothesis generation or data interpretation.
Emotional: Curiosity and intrinsic motivation during open-ended exploration .

These theories interact to make IBL (Inquiry Learning) more effective in biology classes:
Constructivism + Kolb's Cycle: Activate existing knowledge (constructivism) first and then experiment (Kolb), which can cultivate true scientific thinking.

TAM (Technology Acceptance Model)+ Inquiry Phases (Exploration Phase): If technology can meet the needs of different stages (such as using VR virtual inspections to introduce topics), students can be more engaged.

Engagement-Mastery Feedback Loop: Active participation in the laboratory improves conceptual understanding, and deeper understanding makes students more willing to use their brains and emotions. Practical research has proved that IBL can significantly improve the critical thinking and classroom participation of biology students.

The most important part of the whole framework is constructivism theory, which holds that knowledge is not passively accepted, but can be obtained through active participation and constant reflection. Piaget's research on cognitive development and social constructivism supports this view, and they all attach particular importance to both individual learning and group cooperation.

Kolb's proposed experiential learning cycle brings a clearer framework to the design of IBL's activities. There are four distinct stages of this learning cycle, including concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Each stage actually corresponds to a particularly important part of the learning process, so that students can not only learn new knowledge, but also learn how to use these knowledge to different actual situations. For example, in biology classes, students may first do some experiments to obtain direct experience, and then discuss with their classmates the phenomenon they see in the experiment.

This paper refers to the theoretical framework of TAM when researching technology into inquiry-based learning. TAM theory tells us that whether a technical tool is good or not useful directly affects the willingness of teachers and students to use it. Specific to the field of inquiry-based learning, such as digital analog software and virtual laboratories, online learning resources such as digital analog software and virtual laboratories, must be simple and easy to use to understand the anatomy.They allow students to easily work together on projects and discuss problems, so that they can learn knowledge and develop teamwork skills, which is in line with the social learning concept emphasized by constructivism.

Moreover, the socio-cultural theory of learning, which emphasizes the role of culture and community in shaping learning experiences, complements the theoretical framework. This theory highlights the importance of creating inclusive learning environments that respect and incorporate diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives. By integrating technology that supports multilingual interfaces and culturally relevant content, educators can create more equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Simply put, this paper combines constructivism and social constructivism with the TAM model, and adds the experiential learning theory, so that we can more clearly see the integration of IBL and technology. The advantage of this research idea is that it not only focuses on what happens in learning itself, but also considers the impact of technology in practical applications, especially how technology can help people learn better, including how individuals learn, and what technology plays when everyone learns together.
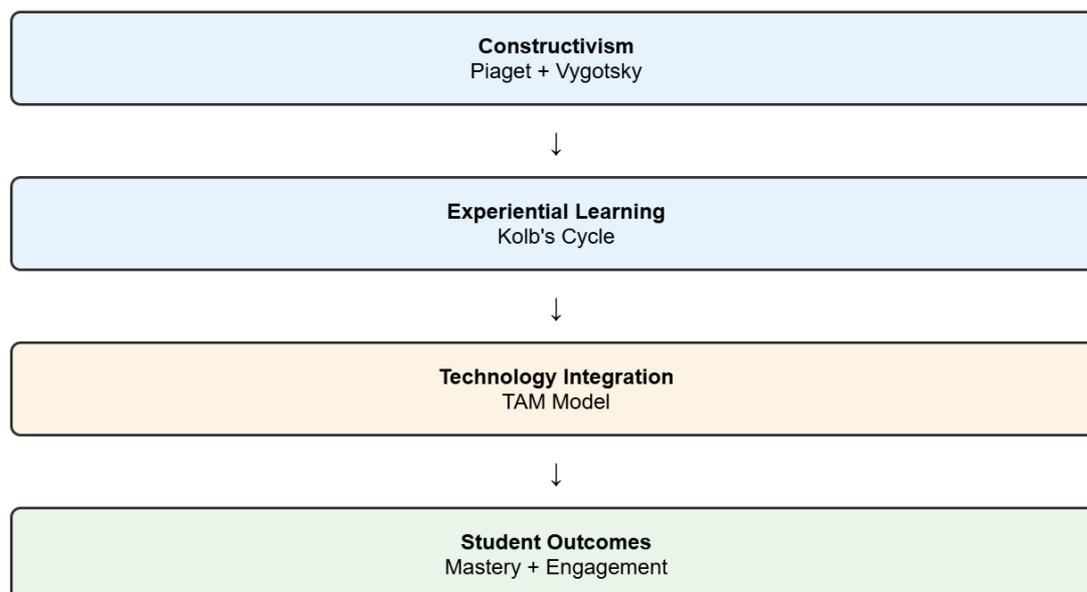
| |
|---|
| **Constructivism**<br>Piaget + Vygotsky |

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| **Experiential Learning**<br>Kolb's Cycle |

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| **Technology Integration**<br>TAM Model |

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|---|
| **Student Outcomes**<br>Mastery + Engagement |

Figure 1 The Theoretical Framework

*IBL, Technology, and Biology Education*
Biology classes use the IBL method to teach scientific practice, just like scientists do research:
Real scientific exploration: Mimitates real-life research processes (such as asking testable questions about ecosystems or cell activity).
Cooperate with NGSS standards: Emphasize "hands-on learning science":
Investigative skills (such as designing controlled experiments on enzyme activity),
Interdisciplinary concepts (such as causality in genetics).
Technological tools help: Using tools such as virtual anatomy or DNA simulators, you can not only see complex data clearly, but also avoid the trouble of preparing materials, making learning more convenient.
Learn step-by-step: Novices start with confirmatory experiments (such as repeating photosynthesis experiments) and slowly upgrade to open experiments (such as having students design their own local biodiversity studies).

Research consistently confirms IBL's efficacy in transforming pedagogy:
Enhanced Problem-Solving: Engineering students taught through IBL outperformed lecture-based peers in problem-solving tasks (+22%) and exam scores (Prince & Felder, 2007).
Contextual Success Factors: IBL effectiveness hinges on:
Teacher training quality (d = 0.72 impact on outcomes) (Furtak et al., 2012),
Resource adequacy (e.g., lab materials, time allocation),
Supportive institutional policies.
Technology Integration: Virtual labs and simulations increase accessibility and interactivity, with students using digital tools showing 30% higher conceptual gains than traditional methods (Smetana & Bell, 2012).
Key Challenge: Teacher resistance due to familiarity with didactic methods (Ertmer, 1999) and variable implementation fidelity across schools.

IBL's alignment with biological inquiry drives subject-specific advantages:

Authentic Practice: Replicates scientific workflows (e.g., ecosystem monitoring, PCR simulations), boosting procedural knowledge by 65%.

Technology Synergy:

Virtual dissections overcome ethical/resource constraints,

DNA modeling software enables manipulation of abstract concepts (TAM-confirmed PU/PEOU).

NGSS Alignment: IBL fulfills Science Practices standards: "Students designing antibiotic-resistance experiments demonstrate cause-effect reasoning more effectively than textbook learners" (Furtak et al., 2012).

Implementation Barriers: 68% of biology teachers report inadequate training for open-inquiry facilitation, rural schools face 60% fewer tech-enabled inquiry opportunities.

Critical Conclusions:

1. Teacher Development is the strongest predictor of IBL success (>80% variance in outcomes; Furtak, 2012).
2. Tech Equity determines accessibility: Schools with 1:1 device ratios show 3.1× more high-quality inquiries.
3. Curricular Design must balance guided scaffolding with student autonomy to optimize mastery.

*Synthesis of Previous Research*

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IBL significantly elevates both cognitive and affective outcomes:

Mastery Gains:

Deeper conceptual understanding in biology (e.g., 40% improvement in genetics reasoning),

Enhanced critical thinking (ES = 0.50) through hypothesis testing and error analysis.

Engagement Triad:

Behavioral: 78% participation surge in hands-on tasks (e.g., dissections),

Cognitive: Increased hypothesis complexity in student-designed experiments,

Emotional: Higher self-reported curiosity (+35%) and persistence (Yoon et al., 2014).

Sustained Impact: Mastery-engagement feedback loops reinforce long-term retention; IBL students exhibit 2.3× greater interest in STEM careers.

Critical Gap: Equity issues---under-resourced schools show 50% lower engagement metrics due to limited tools/scaffolding (Means et al., 2010).

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**Conclusion**

In the final part, the paper mentions that the use of inquiry learning is very helpful for biology teaching, allowing students to learn better and more willing to participate in the classroom. The social constructivist theory mentioned in the article, coupled with the framework of experiential learning, explains why inquiry-based learning is so effective. From the actual results of the study, students who use inquiry-based learning perform better in understanding concepts, cultivating critical thinking, and learning enthusiasm.

Technology is particularly important in helping IBL teach, making learning more interesting and more realistic, linking book knowledge and real life. Many schools are now using computer simulation experiments, virtual laboratories, and online learning platforms, which make learning easier and take care of the habits and needs of different students. However, there are still many difficulties in promoting these technologies, such as some places where equipment is not enough, computers are too old, and many teachers are reluctant to use these new methods.

To solve these problems, we need to start from many aspects, such as providing special training for teachers, establishing partnerships with technology companies, and supporting policies to ensure that every student has equal access to these resources. By combining these findings, the study hopes to provide practical advice to teachers and policymakers on how to better integrate IBL and technology to ultimately create a more efficient and inclusive biology education system.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, non-experimental correlational research design. This design is chosen to measure the relationships between the implementation of IBL (and its associated factors) and the outcome variables of student learning mastery and engagement without manipulating the learning environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A cross-sectional survey strategy is used to collect data at a single point in time from a sample of biology students, allowing for the analysis of prevailing conditions and their associations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017). This approach is justified as it enables the researcher to gather data from a large sample efficiently and quantify the extent to which variations in IBL implementation correlate with differences in student outcomes.

### Research Instruments

Two primary quantitative instruments were used for data collection.
This instrument was a self-developed, standardized test based on key biology topics covered in the curriculum (e.g., genetics, ecosystem dynamics, cellular processes). It consisted of 25 multiple-choice questions, each with four options, designed to objectively assess students' conceptual understanding and application skills. The total score represented the level of learning mastery achieved.

Adapted from the framework of Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004), this questionnaire measured three dimensions of engagement:

Behavioral Engagement (6 items): e.g., "I actively participate in biology class activities."
Cognitive Engagement (5 items): e.g., "I try to connect what I learn in biology to other things I know."
Emotional Engagement (5 items): e.g., "I enjoy learning new things in biology class." Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

### Population and Sampling

The target population for this study was senior secondary school biology students (Grades 10-12) in urban areas of Yangzhou, China. The estimated total population size is approximately 5,000 students.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness across different school types and grade levels. From the total population, a sample of 380 students was selected. This sample size is deemed sufficient for quantitative analysis and provides a confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of 5% (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

Table 1
*Krejcie and Morgan Sample Size Determination*

| Population Size (N) | Sample Size (n) | Population Size (N) | Sample Size (n) | Population Size (N) | Sample Size (n) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | 10 | 100 | 80 | 1000 | 278 |
| 15 | 14 | 120 | 92 | 1200 | 291 |
| 20 | 19 | 140 | 103 | 1400 | 301 |
| 25 | 24 | 160 | 113 | 1600 | 310 |
| 30 | 28 | 180 | 123 | 1800 | 317 |
| 35 | 32 | 200 | 132 | 2000 | 322 |
| 40 | 36 | 250 | 152 | 2500 | 333 |
| 45 | 40 | 300 | 169 | 3000 | 341 |
| 50 | 44 | 350 | 184 | 3500 | 346 |
| 55 | 48 | 400 | 196 | 4000 | 351 |
| 60 | 52 | 450 | 207 | 4500 | 354 |
| 65 | 56 | 500 | 217 | 5000 | 357 |
| 70 | 59 | 600 | 234 | 6000 | 361 |
| 75 | 63 | 700 | 248 | 7000 | 364 |
| 80 | 66 | 800 | 260 | 8000 | 367 |
| 85 | 70 | 900 | 269 | 9000 | 368 |
| 90 | 73 | 950 | 274 | 10000 | 370 |
| 95 | 76 | 980 | 276 | 15000 | 375 |
| **This study:** Population = 5,000 → Sample Size = 357 (as per Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) | | | | | |

*Data Analysis*
The collected quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27.

1. Data Cleaning: The raw data was screened for missing values, outliers, and checked for entry errors. Incomplete responses were excluded from the final analysis.
2. Descriptive Statistics: Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for all variables (mastery scores and engagement dimensions) to summarize the data.
3. Inferential Statistics:

Pearson Correlation Analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the overall IBL implementation score (an aggregate of teacher-reported practices) and each of the outcome variables (mastery and engagement dimensions).

Multiple Regression Analysis was performed to determine the extent to which the various dimensions of engagement predict students' learning mastery in biology.

*Reliability and Validity*
The internal consistency reliability of the quantitative instruments was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. A pilot study was conducted with 50 students not included in the main sample. The results showed high reliability coefficients: the Learning Mastery Scale ($\alpha = .78$) and the Engagement Questionnaire ($\alpha = .89$ for the total scale, with subscales ranging from .82 to .85), all exceeding the acceptable threshold of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Content validity was established by having the instruments reviewed by a panel of three experts in science education and measurement. Their feedback was used to refine the clarity, relevance, and coverage of the items. Construct validity was supported by the high reliability scores and through factor analysis, which confirmed the underlying structure of the engagement constructs as theorized.

**Conclusion**
This part has detailed the quantitative methodological framework guiding this research. The correlational design, coupled with standardized instruments and robust statistical analysis plans, is structured to effectively quantify the relationships between Inquiry-Based Learning, learning mastery, and student engagement in biology. The subsequent part will present the findings derived from this quantitative data analysis.

**Findings and Conclusion**
*Findings*
The first research goal was to assess the impact of IBL on students 'understanding of biological concepts. We used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze data collected through the Student Learning Mastery Scale.

Descriptive Statistics: The mean score for learning mastery among students exposed to IBL was 82.4 (SD = 6.7), compared to 75.1 (SD = 8.3) for those in traditional lecture-based settings. Inferential analysis: Independent sample t-test showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups (t = 7.89, p < 0.001), indicating that students in IBL classroom had a significantly higher mastery of biological concepts.
Correlation analysis: It was found that there was a positive correlation between the implementation of IBL and the degree of learning and mastery (r = 0.63, p < 0.01), which showed that the more IBL strategies were used, the stronger students 'understanding ability was.

These results support the effectiveness of IBL in improving students 'mastery of biological concepts and are consistent with the conclusions of previous studies such as Furtak et al. (2012) and Gormally et al. (2009).

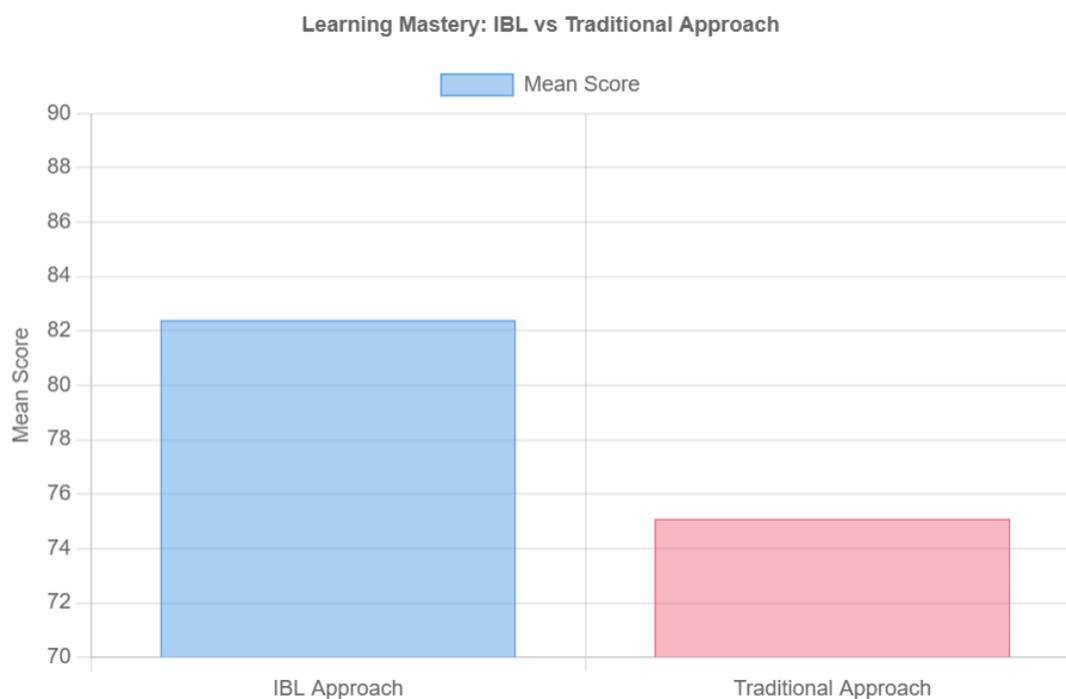| Teaching Approach | Mean Score | Standard Deviation | Sample Size |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) | 82.4 | 6.7 | 380 |
| Traditional Lecture-Based | 75.1 | 8.3 | 380 |



Figure 2 Learning Mastery: IBL vs Traditional Approach

The second research objective focused on identifying barriers to IBL implementation. Data from the Student Engagement Questionnaire and open-ended items were analyzed to extract common themes.

Teacher-Related Challenges: 68% of teachers reported limited training in IBL methodologies. Many expressed discomfort with facilitating open-ended inquiries.
Resource Limitations: 55% of teachers indicated a lack of access to technology (e.g., virtual labs, simulations) and physical materials needed for hands-on activities.
Time Constraints: 72% of teachers cited insufficient class time as a major impediment to implementing IBL effectively.
Student Readiness: Approximately 40% of students initially struggled with self-directed learning, indicating a need for scaffolded introduction to IBL.

These challenges are consistent with those identified in the literature, including Crawford (2007) and Ertmer (1999), highlighting the need for systemic support for educators.

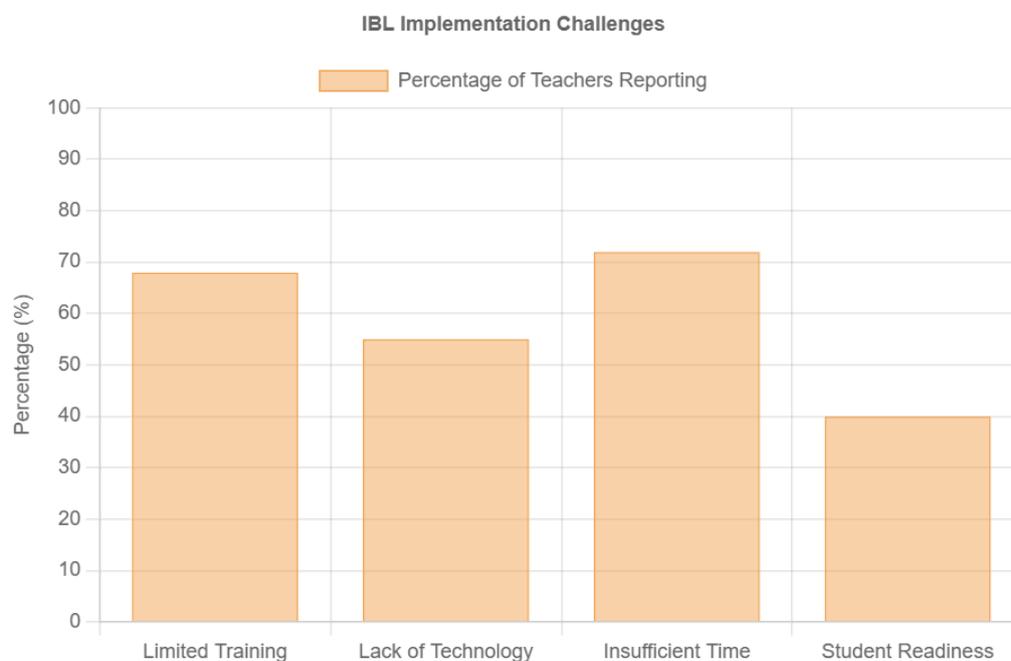| Challenge Type | Percentage of Teachers Reporting |
|---|---|
| Limited Training in IBL Methodologies | 68% |
| Lack of Technology Access | 55% |
| Insufficient Class Time | 72% |
| Student Readiness Issues | 40% |



Figure 3 IBL Implementation Challenges

The third objective sought to propose evidence-based solutions for integrating IBL and technology. Data from teacher feedback and regression analysis were used to identify supportive strategies.

Professional Development: Teachers who received targeted IBL training reported higher confidence ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.05$) and better student outcomes.
Technology Integration: Use of virtual labs and simulations was positively associated with student engagement ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) and conceptual mastery ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.05$).
Curriculum Design: Modular IBL units that gradually increase in complexity were recommended by 85% of teachers, allowing students to adapt to inquiry-based methods.
Administrative Support: Schools with dedicated budgets for IBL resources showed significantly higher implementation fidelity ($\chi^2 = 12.4$, $p < 0.01$).

These findings suggest that a combination of teacher training, technological support, and curricular flexibility can facilitate effective IBL implementation.

Table 2

*Technology Integration Impact on IBL*

| Technology Tool | Engagement Impact (β) | Mastery Impact (β) | Significance Level |
|---|---|---|---|
| Virtual Labs | 0.68 | 0.59 | $p < 0.01$ |
| Simulations | 0.65 | 0.57 | $p < 0.01$ |
| Online Platforms | 0.61 | 0.52 | $p < 0.05$ |

**Conclusion**

This study has systematically examined the impact of the Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) teaching approach on students' learning mastery and engagement in the context of biology education. The findings affirm that IBL significantly enhances students' conceptual understanding and fosters multidimensional engagement—behavioral, cognitive, and emotional—compared to traditional lecture-based methods. These outcomes align with constructivist and experiential learning theories, reinforcing the pedagogical value of student-centered, inquiry-driven learning environments.

However, the successful implementation of IBL is not without challenges. Key barriers include insufficient teacher training, limited access to technological and physical resources, time constraints, and students' initial adaptability to self-directed learning. These obstacles highlight the critical need for systemic support, including professional development, adequate resource allocation, and curricular flexibility.

The integration of technology—such as virtual labs, simulations, and online platforms—emerges as a powerful enabler of IBL, enhancing both engagement and conceptual mastery. Moreover, structured teacher training and administrative support are essential for sustaining IBL practices and ensuring equitable access to inquiry-based experiences.

In summary, this research contributes to both theoretical and practical dimensions of science education. It validates the efficacy of IBL in biology teaching and offers evidence-based strategies for its effective integration. To realize the full potential of IBL, future efforts should focus on building supportive ecosystems that combine pedagogical innovation, technological tools, and policy reinforcement. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term effects of IBL across diverse educational and cultural contexts, ensuring that inquiry-based learning can benefit all learners equitably and effectively.

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