STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON THE USE OF PROJECT BASED LEARNING IN TEACHING AT SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES – THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

A number of studies have indicated that Project Based Learning (PBL) is one of the most effective ways to engage students and develop language skills. Therefore, applying PBL in teaching is necessary to create students' motivation and enhance their learning. There have been a variety of research about this teaching method; however, there is still limited research at School of Foreign Language – Thai Nguyen University (SFL- TNU) about the students' perceptions on the use of PBL. This study; therefore, examines the effectiveness of PBL in learning at SFL- TNU from students' perspectives. 120 third - year English major students who had taken part in a novel project responded to a survey questionnaire intended to analyze students' perceptions about the research inquiries. The research results show that most of the students have positive perceptions of using PBL as a teaching method. In addition, PBL makes great contribution to the development of many skills such as teamwork, project management, communication and interpersonal skills with applications to the workplace. The conclusion is that PBL, in students' view, has a variety of benefits in learning.

Key words*: Project based learning, students' perceptions, students' perspectives, motivation, positive perceptions, effectiveness, skills*

NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN VỀ VIỆC ỨNG DỤNG PHƯƠNG PHÁP DẠY HỌC THEO ĐỀ ÁN TRONG GIẢNG DẠY TẠI KHOA NGOẠI NGỮ - ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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TÓM TẮT

Rất nhiều nghiên cứu đã chỉ ra rằng dạy học theo đề án là một trong những phương pháp hiệu quả trong việc tạo hứng thú học tập và phát triển kỹ năng ngôn ngữ cho người học. Do vậy, việc ứng dụng phương pháp này trong giảng dạy là thực sự cần thiết. Đã có rất nhiều nghiên cứu về phương pháp dạy học này; tuy nhiên, hiện có rất ít nghiên cứu về nhận thức của sinh viên về việc ứng dụng dạy học theo đề án trong giảng dạy tại Khoa Ngoại Ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên. Chính vì vậy, nghiên cứu này tập trung vào điều tra nhận thức của sinh viên về hiệu quả của phương pháp dạy học này. Đối tượng nghiên cứu là 120 sinh viên năm thứ 3 chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh tại Khoa Ngoại Ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên. Những sinh viên này được tham gia vào đề án về tiểu thuyết trong khi học môn Văn học Anh tại trường. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng phần lớn các sinh viên có nhận thức tích cực về phương pháp dạy học theo đề án. Ngoài ra, theo nhận thức của sinh viên, phương pháp này giúp họ phát triển các kỹ năng như: làm việc theo nhóm, quản lý đề án, giao tiếp và các kỹ năng mềm khác. Tóm lại, trong nhận thức của sinh viên, dạy học theo đề án mang lại nhiều lợi ích.

Từ khóa: *dạy học theo đề án, nhận thức của sinh viên, quan điểm của sinh viên, động lực, nhận thức tích cực, hiệu quả, kỹ năng*

INTRODUCTION

Project Based Learning (PBL) has been proven to be an effective method in teaching languages. In reality, there are a number of students who have little interest and motivation in learning. It is undeniable that students' motivation determines the success of teaching [1]. If success can be hindered by lack of students' motivation, then teaching has to motivate students in their learning.

The effects of teaching methodology on students' motivation have been proved in numerous studies [2], [3], [4]. Constructivists claim that when students are active participants in authentic projects (i.e., those that are related to real-world situations) that are shared and reviewed with others, the learners can then create meaning or ideas [7]. Allowing learners to create their own meaning, instead of using them as receptacles for information, forces them to become more involved with their learning experiences. Project-based learning is based on constructivist theory that involves students working collaboratively to produce a meaningful artifact or product representative of the knowledge learned [12].

Traditionally, students taught in traditional English education environments are preoccupied by exercises, grammar rules, and that need to be learned, but are of limited use in unfamiliar situations such as solving real-life problems. In contrast to conventional English classroom environments, a PBL environment provides students with opportunities to develop their abilities to adapt and change methods to fit new situations. Further, students participating in PBL environments have greater opportunity to learn real literacy associated with seeking information from any resource such as Internet, international text book or journal and making a presentation in English. Students have opportunities to use several skills (e.g., problem-solving, creativity, teamwork, as well as language) at different work stages, so the work and language skills are developed.

Currently, there is still little research at SFL - TNU about the impact of using PBL in the field of education from students' perceptions. Therefore, this research is conducted to study how students perceive the PBL when it is applied in teaching and learning at SFL – TNU.

Aims

The aims of this research are to investigate the participants' perceptions about the use of PBL in teaching at SFL - TNU.

Research Questions

The aims of this study were investigated through the following research questions:

1. Based on the perceptions of the participants, is PBL effective in teaching?

2. Does PBL, in students' view, help them develop the skills such as: Teamwork, Project Management, Communication Skills and Interpersonal Skills?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of PBL

Many definitions of PBL have been proposed by various authors. Project work is viewed as "An approach to learning which complements mainstream methods and which can be used with almost all levels, ages, and abilities of students" ([8]: 6). The Department of Curriculum and Instructional Development (1998) [18] said that PBL is a method that assists learners to study and practice their abilities and interests by using the scientific process to reach the result of that topic. Teachers act as facilitators from the beginning of the project; choosing topics, planning the process and presenting the results. Thomas ([19]: 43) proposed a definition of PBL "… a teaching model that organizes learning around projects" and projects as "… complex tasks based on challenging questions or problems that involve students in designing, problem-solving, decision-making, and/or investigative activities, that give students opportunities to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time, and culminate in realistic products or presentations". From the definitions above, it can be concluded that PBL is a teaching and learning approach that

allows learners to study independently under the observation of teachers by creating plans, designing the process, and evaluating the project. Learners are offered opportunities to study on the topics that interest them. They use the language skills and other skills naturally. At the end of the project, they can make their own presentation and apply their knowledge in real life.

Characteristics of PBL

Stoller (2006) [17] identifies 10 characteristics of PBL: (1) having both a process and product; (2) giving students (partial) ownership of the project; (3) extended over a period of time (several days, weeks, or months); (4) integrating skills; (5) developing student understanding of a topic through the integration of language and content; (6) students both collaborating with others and working on their own; (7) holding students responsible for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information gathered from target-language resources; (8) assigning new roles and responsibilities to both students and teacher; (9) providing a tangible final product; and (10) reflecting on both the process and the product. According to Hedge (2002) [10], projects usually integrate language skills by means of activities. These activities may include the following: planning; the gathering of information through reading, listening, interviewing, and observing; group discussion of the information; problem solving; oral and written reporting; and display.

More detailed characteristics of project work will be discussed as follows:

(1) Project work focuses on content learning: Project work focuses on content learning rather than on specific language targets. Hutchinson claims that "there is nothing simulated about a project […] students are writing about their own lives […] and because it is such personal experience […] they will thus put a lot of effort into getting it right." (1991: 11

(2) Project work is student centered: Fried-Booth asserts that "project is student-centered rather than teacher-directed." ([5]: 5)

Hutchinson suggests that "content and presentation are determined principally by the learners". ([11]: 11)

(3) Project work is cooperative rather than competitive: Richards and Renandya state "project work is cooperative rather than competitive." ([16]: 108) The students can work on their own, in small groups, or as a class to complete a project, sharing resources, ideas, and expertise along the way.

(4) Project work leads to the authentic integration of skills: "Project work leads to the authentic integration of skills and processing of information from varied sources, mirroring real-life tasks." ([16]: 108)

(5) Project work focuses on fluency: It provides students with opportunities to focus on fluency and accuracy at different stages of the project. Basically, "project work encourages a focus on fluency […] therefore some errors of accuracy are bound to occur. ([11]: 8).

(6) Project work makes students become responsible: "If we put students in situation where they need to make decisions for themselves we allow them to become more responsible for their own progress."

(7) Project work culminates in an end product: Hutchinson states that "projects are often done in poster format, but students can also use their imagination to experiment with the form. "([11]: 8). Průcha, Walterová and Mareš (1995) [15], and Fried-Booth (1986) [5] are of the opinion that project work culminates in an end product which can be an oral presentation, a chart, booklet, poster session, bulletin board display, report, or stage performance. Harmer (1991) [9] considers the end product as the most important thing of the project work, and all the language use that take place should be directed towards the final version. Richards and Renandya (2002) [16] state that the end product can be shared with others which gives the project a real purpose. Moreover, they add the value of the project, however, lies not just in the final product but in the process of working towards the end-point.

In conclusion, PBL has a variety of features that makes teaching more effective; therefore, this paper examines students' perspective of the use of PBL as a tool for them to learn novels in the literature course at SFL – TNU.

METHODOLOGY

Research setting and participants

This project was carried out in the second semester of the academic year of 2017-2018. The participants were 120 K38 students. The age of the students varies from 22 to 25. They were all female. They come from different regions in Vietnam. Some of them are from urban areas; some are from rural or remote areas. They were all taking part in English Literature course. The authors would like to apply the novel project before delivering the questionnaire to students so that they can be exposed to PBL first, and then make more correct perceptions about this method of learning.

Description of the course and the project

The course

English literature is a compulsory course at SFL - TNU. This course is aimed at:

- Helping students understand the history of English literature development from the beginning (5th century) to the 20th century through basic presentations of English writers and their famous literary works as well as activities.

- Providing students with a platform to practice four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking while they are learning about the content specific to English literature.

- Helping the students thoroughly understand and critically analyze English literary stories and extracts through:

- introduction of stylistic devices,
- famous literary stories,
- extracts from famous novels, andexercises for literary appreciation.

The project

In Literature course at SFL TNU, students have chance to study novels by some famous author. The researchers conducted four stages: preparation, implementation, presentation and evaluation when carrying out this project. The project lasted 6 weeks.

a. Preparation

The purpose of this stage is to help students identify the content of their project as well as the whole plan for it. When students have an idea of what they have to do, they will make specific plans. It is important for students to work together to make decisions right from the beginning.

While conducting the teaching of novels in the form of a project, the authors have implemented the following contents. First of all, the students were divided into groups of 2 or 3 students. After that, the teacher asked students to choose one English novel which will be discovered in their project. Their tasks were:

 - Read the novel carefully.

- Write a review about the novel: its content, what students like or dislike about the novel, the character they like and dislike, their opinion and feeling about the ending (about 1000 words).

- Choose a chapter in the novel and write their own drama scene; then perform in front of the whole class in the last week of the project.

- Write a reflection on the process of doing the project: what they have done, what they like about the project, how to make the project more successful.

- Make a presentation about the novel and their reflection.

b. Implementation

In this stage, students worked collaboratively to finish their project. As working in a group, students played different roles such as actors, actresses, designers, and writers.

Teachers assisted students in editing work by highlighting errors in grammatical organization, grammar (punctuation, punctuation, word usage ...), and style ... Students made corrections based on the teacher's recommendations. During the editing process, the reviews would receive the suggestions from the teacher.

c. Presentation

This phase was carried out once the students had completed the project. Students will perform their drama scene in front of the whole class and present their review as well as the reflection.

Many researchers assert that the most common way of sharing results is by presenting projects to the audience. This phase is essential for a project because the provision of information to the reader or the audience makes the project purposeful.

d. Evaluation

There were two types of evaluation: cross – check among team members (30%) and teacher evaluation (70%).

The team was asked to create a profile including: team contract, plan, audio recordings of meetings, minutes of meetings, evaluation of the members, evaluation of members, and group assessment). Students were asked to evaluate (1) their own activities (2) the activities of the group (3) the activities of the group members. Peer evaluation among members followed teacher assessment criteria assigned to the team. We have used a number of evaluation benchmarks on https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/te ach/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/index.html because the criteria here are consistent with item from the teacher evaluation rating. (*See APPENDIX 1*). Teachers conducted the assessment of the project after the presentation had completed.

Instruments

Survey questionnaire was used as the main research instrument of the research *(see APPENDIX 2)*. Questionnaires were distributed to 120 students to administer. The questionnaire has been divided into 2 sections. The first section included demographic questions such as gender, faculty, and major for the respondents. The second section included five point - scale questions related to the usage of PBL.

Research method

The descriptive method was used in this study in order to evaluate the effectiveness of PBL based on students' perceptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Student's perceptions of PBL

The descriptive analysis for early four questions shows positive perception of students for the Project-based learning discussion implementation. This is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive analysis of questionnaire about the benefits of PBL*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I think I gain more knowledge about the subject as well as the real world through this project.	0%	3%	15%	46%	36%
2. I think I prefer doing projects to listening to lectures.	0%	6%	11%	55%	28%
3. I think learning through PBL is very beneficial.	0%	0%	15%	40%	45%
4. I think learning through PBL is fun and interesting.	0%	1%	12%	45%	42%

(1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree)

As can be seen from Table 1, none of the respondents strongly disagree with the statements about the benefits of PBL. In addition, only few percentages of students disagree, and the number of participants who had neutral opinion is not high. For the four questions, the percentage of students who answered 'agree' and "strongly agree" is equal or more than 80% which strongly shows students' positive perceptions of PBL in learning.

Student's perceptions of enhancing skills from PBL

Table 2. *Students' responses on teamwork from PBL*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I learnt how to work actively in my group.	0%	1%	20%	40%	39%
2. I learnt how to make appropriate questions and give appropriate response to my group members.	0%	2%	16%	45%	37%
3. I learnt how to be assertive when exchanging ideas with other members.	0%	1%	15%	42%	42%
4. I understood that team-work makes contribution to the success of the project.	0%	1%	10%	47%	42%

(1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree)

For the teamwork skills, the percentage of students who answered 'agree' and "strongly agree" is equal or more than 79%, which strongly shows students' positive perceptions. The majority of the respondents (89%) agreed that good team-work contributed to a successful outcome of the project. In addition, 84% of students responded that they learned how to be assertive when exchanging ideas with group members.

Table 3. *Students' responses on Project Management from PBL*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I am confident to give suggestions to other members.	0%	2%	15%	40%	43%
2. I learnt how to express my ideas with other members.	0%	2%	15%	38%	45%
3. I could gather information for the project.	0%	1%	11%	45%	43%
4. I learnt how to identify the relevant ideas from materials regarding project.	0%	3%	18%	45%	34%

(1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree)

The project which was successfully completed as a result of teamwork effort also helps develop individual soft skills especially project management. It is apparent that when students are able to work in a team, they display confidence in giving suggestions. A total of 83 % of the respondents acknowledged they feel they have the confidence to give suggestions to other members. 83% of the respondents stated that they learned how to express ideas appropriately with group members after they have undergone PBL. Gathering information from reading materials is a required skill in doing project work. 88% agreed that they were able to gather information for the project, based on the reading materials. Finally, the findings show that 79% agreed that they learned how to identify the relevant ideas from the materials gathered regarding project work. This means that through PBL, students have acquired relevant reading skills such as skimming and scanning, gathering information and identifying relevant ideas related to the project undertaken by their group.

Table 4. *Students' responses on Communication Skills from PBL*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I learnt how to write emails and letters related to teamwork settings.	0%	5%	20%	45%	30%
2. I responded well or emails or letters I received.	0%	5%	20%	40%	35%
3. I became more accustomed to the writing format and style.	0%	5%	18%	47%	30%
4. I learnt to organize ideas in writing the summary and review.	0%	2%	16%	42%	40%
5. I learnt how to write reports, reviews based on the findings.	0%	4%	10%	50%	36%

(1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree)

A total of 75% learned to write e-mails related to workplace settings, but there are 20% students responded in neutral. In addition, 75% responded well to e-mails received related to the project assigned. Furthermore, 77% became familiar with the writing format and style of workplace e-mails, (72%) learned to organize ideas in the executive summary and a large number of students (86%) learned how to write reports based on the findings. The findings have shown that students greatly benefit in developing their communication skills especially in writing e-mails, executive summary and reports which are greatly valued by the employers.

Table 5. *Students' responses on Interpersonal Skills from PBL*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I became more sensitive to the needs of other members.	0%	5%	15%	45%	35%
2. I learnt to co-operate effectively with other members.	0%	4%	15%	46%	35%
3. I learnt to use formal and informal language appropriately in different contexts.	0%	3%	10%	53%	34%
4. I improved my social skills when meeting and talking to other persons.	0%	0%	8%	55%	37%
5. I learnt how to interrupt appropriately during the discussions.	0%	4%	10%	46%	40%

(1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree)

As for interpersonal skills, more than half of the respondents, 80% agreed that they became sensitive to the needs of others. When working with others, almost 81% agreed to it. In carrying

the project work, respondents were required to use both formal and informal language according to different contexts; total of 87% agreed that they have acquired the skill. They have also improved their social skills when they engaged in conversations with employers and employees of a company when undergoing their project. In addition, they have also learned how to interrupt appropriately where 86% agreed to the statement.

CONCLUSION

Summary

In conclusion, research results show that most of the students have positive perceptions of using PBL as a teaching method. Another finding from this study is that PBL contributes to the development of many soft skills such as teamwork, project management, communication and interpersonal skills with applications to the workplace. This apparently will fulfill the needs of the 21st century job market.

Recommendations

It is suggested that other researchers investigate the impact of PBL to students using different research variables. Moreover, researchers could also study effectiveness of PBL in various universities.

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APPENDIX 1:   **Peer Evaluation Form**

Your name _____

Write the name of each of your group members in a separate column. For each person, indicate the extent to which you agree with the statement on the left, using a scale of 1-4 (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=agree; 4=strongly agree). Total the numbers in each column.

Evaluation Criteria	Group member:	Group member:	Group member:	Group member:
Attend group meetings regularly and on time.				
Contribute meaningfully to group discussions.				
Complete group assignments on time.				
Prepare work in a quality manner.				
Demonstrate a cooperative and supportive attitude.				
Contribute significantly to the success of the project.				
TOTALS				

Feedback on team dynamics:

1. How effectively did your group work?

………………………………………………………………………………………………………

2. Were the behaviors of any of your team members particularly valuable or detrimental to the team? Explain.

………………………………………………………………………………………………………

3. What did you learn about working in a group from this project that you will carry into your next group experience?

………………………………………………………………………………………………………

.*(Adapted from a peer evaluation form developed at Johns Hopkins University (October, 2006))*

APPENDIX 2:   **SURVEY QUESTIONAIRE**

Section 1: General information

Full name: (not obligatory) …………………………………………………………

Course: …………………………………………………………………………...

Major: …………………………………………………………………………

Age: …………………………………………………………………………...

Gender: …………………………………………………………………..…

Section 2: Content

Instruction

Please tick the response from 1 to 5 to each statement.

1: strongly disagree

2: disagree

3: neutral

4: agree

5: strongly agree

1. The benefits of PBL

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I think I gain more knowledge about real world when using PBL.					
2. I think I prefer using PBL to listening to lectures.					
3. I think learning through PBL is very beneficial.					
4. I think learning through PBL is fun and interesting.					

2. Enhancing soft-skills from PBL

2.1. Teamwork

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I learnt how to work actively in my group.					
2. I learnt how to make appropriate questions and give appropriate response to my group members.					
3. I learnt how to be assertive when exchanging ideas with other members.					
4. I understood that team-work makes contribution to the success of the project.					

2.2. Project Management

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I am confident to give suggestions to other members.					
2. I learnt how to express my ideas with other members.					
3. I could gather information for the project.					
4. I learnt how to identify the relevant ideas from materials regarding project.					

2.3. Communication Skills

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I learnt how to write emails and letters related to teamwork settings.					
2. I responded well or emails or letters I received.					
3. I became more accustomed to the writing format and style.					
4. I learnt to organize ideas in writing the summary.					
5. I learnt how to write reports based on the findings.					

2.4. Interpersonal Skills

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1. I became more sensitive to the needs of other members.					
2. I learnt to co-operate effectively with other members.					
3. I learnt to use formal and informal language appropriately in different contexts.					
4. I improved my social skills when meeting and talking to other persons.					
5. I learnt how to interrupt appropriately during the discussions.					

Thank you for your co-operation!