Implementing Project-based Learning Activities in English Textbook- Benefits and Challenges: Voices of EFL High School Students

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Abstract

This descriptive study is an attempt to explore the perceptions and practices of EFL high school students in using Project-based Learning (PBL) activities in their English textbook under the General Education 2018 curriculum. Both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed to collect the quantitative and qualitative data for this study. A total of 160 EFL high school students in a province in the Mekong Delta, including 12 students purposively selected from the population for the interviews. The findings of the present research revealed that students had a positive perception about the benefits of PBL and implemented PBL activities very frequently. The major challenges that affect the effective implementation of PBL were collaboration skills, time management issues, limited IT skills, lack of PBL assessment skills, and lack of English proficiency and confidence that restrain students' practices of PBL. These findings provide insightful pedagogical implications for how PBL can be more feasible, applicable, and effective in Vietnamese learning contexts.

Objectives

In the 21st century, students are required to develop both academic knowledge and skills related to real-world experience. Thus, the 2018 English Education Curriculum has been conducted since 2022 to adapt to the latest changes. The Program is built from the perspective of taking communicative competence as the goal of the teaching process, and at the same time developing thinking capacity and improving students' communication skills, and understanding of culture and society, equipping students with lifelong learning skills to continuously learn and develop future work capacity. It is expected to create more opportunities for students to use English as a means of communication to develop their proficiency and improve their life skills. The results of this research contribute to understanding EFL high school students' perceptions and their actual practices of project-based learning activities in their current English textbook. Moreover, one of the main focuses is to understand the extent to which the project-based activities were conducted and to identify the specific challenges students faced during their implementation. Consequently, the findings can significantly benefit learners, teachers, and educators, including administrators and programme designers, by offering a deeper understanding of the effectiveness and challenges of PBL in the EFL context.

Literature review

Project-based learning is a direct implementation of constructivist theory, which posits that learners achieve their understanding and knowledge of the world through reflection and experiences. According to circular No. 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT dated December 26, 2018, issued by the Minister of Education and Training, six general competences are vital for EFL learners to adapt with the changes in the 21st century including autonomy, creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, communication and self-learning.

The importance and benefits of PBL

Improving students' language skills	*Syukri et al.(2022); Vo and Tran (2023)*
Promoting motivation and confidence	*Yuliani and Lenkanawati (2017); Shin (2018)*
Encouraging autonomous learning	*Le (2018); Ly et al. (2020), Tran and Tran (2020)*
Developing the 21st century life skills	*Tran and Tran (2020); Chi and Dieu (2021); Oduro et al. (2024)*

Challenges of PBL implementation

Group work	Kapps (2009); Hussein (2021)
Time management	Gulbahar and Tinmaz (2006); Mapes (2009); Le (2017)
IT skills	Grant and Branch (2005); Nguyen (2014); Le (2017); Le (2018); Aldabbus (2018)
Assessment	Graham (2010); Laboy-Rush (2011)
Teacher support	Kurzel and Rath (2017)

Methodology

Participants

160 EFL students in a high school in Vinh Long province

Grade 10	Grade 11
80 students	80 students

Design: Sequential mixed design (Creswell, 2012)

Questionnaire	(1) EFL high school students' perceptions of the importance and benefits of Project-based learning activities in their English textbook
	(2) EFL high school students' challenges when implementing PBL activities in their English textbook
Interview	(3) Clarifying the reasons for their perspectives

Implications

Students	• Being equipped with a foundation language knowledge • Integrating information technology in PBL • Encouraging autonomy in learning
Teachers	• Willingness to use PBL and active participation in PBL implementation • Creating a positive environment • Adopting strategies to assist students in managing challenges: clear guidelines, criteria and checklists
School Board	• teaching and learning equipment and facilities • teachers' workload (flexible schedules, financial and spiritual support)

Findings

Benefits of PBL

The findings of this study demonstrated that participants exhibited a significant awareness of the general competences identified in circular 32 of MOET (2018), comprising communication, collaboration, problem-solving, autonomy, self-learning and creativity. This awareness positively influences their actual engagement of doing PBL activities, thereby enhancing their overall enjoyment of the learning process. Students gave positive responses about the importance and benefits of PBL. They enhance understanding by discussing and sharing with peers during project work, fostering a more active exchange of knowledge within the group. Consequently, they can improve their integrated language skills and enhance their life skills. PBL can increase students' motivation and enthusiasm for learning English.

Challenges when implementing PBL activities

Development of group work skills

Most EFL high school students strongly agreed that they faced challenges when working in groups to do project-based learning activities (M=3.77, SD=.88). The findings from interviews showed that EFL high school students found challenges related to a lack of group work skills to be the most challenging in PBL implementation because working collaboratively requires the active use of communication, organization, and negotiation skills, which may not be preferred by all students.

Time pressure

The second challenge that students faced in this study was time management issues. The mean score of this cluster (M=3.75, SD=.81) indicated that the participants had a high level of agreement on the challenges related to time pressure. They emphasized that they did not have sufficient time to complete the project activities due to the demands of studying other subjects. Students also felt that the implementation of PBL activities with many steps was time-consuming.

IT skills

The third challenge was that EFL high school students had difficulties using IT skills in their project. Technical issues, a lack of searching skills, and inadequate IT facilities were significant obstacles that hindered students from effectively applying IT skills. Students faced challenges with their proficiency in using IT tools and software, which limited their ability to search for and analyze information for their project activities. These findings align with the studies of Grant and Branch (2005), Le (2008), and Le (2017), who indicated that students may lack the technical skills necessary to effectively utilize the software and digital tools required for PBL. Additionally, inadequate IT facilities, such as a lack of computers or laptops, prevented them from completing their project on time. This finding aligned with the studies of Aldabbus (2018) . They revealed in their studies that students lack personal devices or access to technology, hindering their ability to search for information and share it with their classmates in group projects.

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