

DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING A PROJECT-BASED COURSE OF THE THIRD-YEAR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 07/3/2022	This study aims to explore the difficulties that 3rd year English major students at a university in Vietnam have when doing a project-based learning course - the Magazine Project. A survey questionnaire was built basing on a proposed model and administered to 60 English major students at the university. The quantitative session of the questionnaire was to test how the students rate the different types of difficulties in the model. The qualitative session was to investigate additional problems (if any) and seek for solutions suggested by the students. The quantitative data revealed that teachers' lack of support and enthusiasm caused difficulties to the students. In addition, students struggled the most with finding IT tools and authentic magazine resources, writing in magazine conventions, and collaborating with peers. Meanwhile, the qualitative data show that low learning motivation was additionally the source of troubles. Some suggestions were also given by the students to minimize the difficulties. The study contributes to the limited existing literature of a particular PBL course –the Magazine project and brings more insights into students' learning difficulties in similar contexts.
Revised: 31/3/2022	
Published: 31/3/2022	
KEYWORDS	
Project based learning	
Magazine Project	
Students' difficulties	
English major students	
Vietnamese English as a foreign language context	

KHÓ KHĂN TRONG THỰC HIỆN MỘT KHÓA HỌC DỰ ÁN CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ 3 CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 07/3/2022	Nghiên cứu nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu những khó khăn mà các sinh viên năm thứ 3 chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh tại một trường Đại học ở Việt Nam gặp phải khi học một khóa học dự án cụ thể (Đề án Tạp chí). Một bảng điều tra được xây dựng dựa trên mô hình nhà nghiên cứu đề xuất và được triển khai đến 60 sinh viên. Phần định tính của bảng hỏi xem xét mức độ gây khó khăn của các yếu tố đề xuất đối với việc học Đề án Tạp chí. Phần định lượng điều tra những khó khăn khác (nếu có), đồng thời tìm hiểu những giải pháp do sinh viên đề xuất. Kết quả định lượng cho thấy sự thiếu hỗ trợ và thiếu nhiệt tình của giáo viên gây ra khó khăn cho người học. Bên cạnh đó, sinh viên gặp nhiều khó khăn trong lựa chọn công cụ công nghệ và tạp chí tham khảo, viết bài theo văn phong báo chí, và hợp tác với các thành viên nhóm. Dữ liệu định tính bổ sung thêm yếu tố động lực học tập thấp. Một số giải pháp do sinh viên đề xuất cũng được đưa ra ở cuối bài báo. Nghiên cứu đóng góp vào tài nguyên nghiên cứu về khóa học dự án cụ thể (Đề án Tạp chí) và mang đến thêm một góc nhìn về những khó khăn của người học trong các bối cảnh tương tự.
Ngày hoàn thiện: 31/3/2022	
Ngày đăng: 31/3/2022	
TỪ KHÓA	
Dạy học qua Dự án	
Đề án Tạp chí	
Khó khăn của người học	
Sinh viên Tiếng Anh	
Dạy học Tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam	

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34238/tnu-jst.5642>

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1. Introduction

1.1. Project-based learning

The 21st century witnesses the emerge of Communicative Language Teaching where teachers can provide authentic uses of the second language [1]. The approach puts emphasis into content-based language learning and project-based language learning (PBL). PBL was a term which was coined in the early 1900s by educational reformers such as John Dewey or William Heard Kilpatrick [2]. Although a number of PBL definitions have been given and are worded differently, there is a tendency for the authors to agree on some of the PBL constructs which could be summarized as followed: a model of an educational approach that (i) places students in an authentic problem scenario and produce important results/ solutions (ii) creates a pleasant and flexible learning environment, (iii) lets students work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time (iv) involves team-work, critical thinking, problem-solving skills [3]-[7]. A more recent model of John Larmer introduces the “Gold Standard” of PBL which includes seven essential elements of project design: (i) Challenging Problem or Question, (ii) Sustained Inquiry, (iii) Students’ voice and Choice, (iv) Authenticity, (v) Reflection, (vi) Critique and Revision and (vii) Public Product [8].

Various aspects of PBL have been subjected to research. Some, for example, discussed the characteristics of PBL [2], [9], [10] and its procedures [11]-[14], while others looked into PBL benefits such as increased student achievement [15]-[19], built student self-efficacy [16], [20], [21], enhanced student engagement [22]-[24], developed students’ problem-solving and critical thinking skills [25], [26], [18], developed leadership skills [22], and improved students’ community awareness [27]. Despite the benefits, PBL model is considered not popular in schools due to certain factors [28].

1.2. Previous studies

Within the pools of research bodies in PBL, there have been those that explore the barriers (prohibiting factors) toward effective PBL implementation. Many of those studies focus on factors from the part of teachers and their teaching strategies. Jenny Jasper [29], for example, pointed out the difficulties due to teachers’ factor such as inadequate support to learners, lack of subject area knowledge, or traditional teaching strategies. In an earlier qualitative research, Richard Savage claimed that the prohibiting factors to PBL in a school context include teacher training/ frequency or consistency of professional development, funding, culture that opposes PBL, communicating to stakeholders about PBL, view of PBL as difficult and time consuming, student skill level (varying abilities), schedule constraints, lack of specific types of technology [28]. In this paper, with a focus on students’ difficulties in a specific PBL course, we consider teachers’ limitations as one of the sources of difficulties for students.

Within the limited literature available that discusses factors that cause students’ difficulties in PBL up to the time of this study, we organized them into three major groups that we found the most emerging themes among the current studies: (i) teachers’ limitation, (ii) students’ content knowledge, and (iii) students’ skills. Firstly, with regards to **teachers’ limitation**, some studies concluded that while students require more support and motivation, teachers demonstrate a lack of necessary skills, training, and guidance [30], particularly in areas of assessment [31]-[35], lack of appropriate materials, resources, technologies and fund [31], [34]-[37], time management and the loss of initial motivation [29], [28]. The next factors to mention are **student’s content knowledge and skills**. Blumenfeld and his colleagues emphasized that to be successful in a PBL environment, “students must have sufficient knowledge of the content and specific skills to explore information” [38, p. 378]. In a study of 2020, Yanuarti Apsari investigated students’ difficulties writing recount text while using Project-Based Learning [38]. The findings revealed that the majority of students struggled with five aspects of writing: content (23.33%), grammar or language use (56.67%), organization (36.67%), mechanics (43.33%) and vocabulary (26.67%).

With regards to learners' skills, Barron's study (1998) showed that students struggled to apply the skills required to answer the driving question [39, p. 276]. First, *collaboration and group work* during PBL implementation is a major challenge [34], [33], [36], [31]. In a Baysura's study, teacher candidates complained that their students had difficulty working in groups and might not be able to contribute equally to project work; only the leaders in groups took responsibility, while others were passive [34]. Lack of *time management skill* is also a problem discussed in several studies. Some empirical studies investigating students' and teachers' perceptions of PBL reported that it is a time-consuming approach [34]-[37], [40], [41]. This implied a lack of time management skill since a good project time management should involve the key milestones that are planned and are kept close track of by both teachers and students [8]. Matthew Harris in 2014 investigated the difficulties associated with implementing PBL in a suburban school district outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and found that both students and teachers reported not having enough time to implement PBL; for students, they had to meet with their peers to plan and work on projects together. Some research reported students struggling with *IT skills* in accomplishing projects [33].

In the Vietnamese context, research on PBL mostly treats this model as an intervention for specific courses and results almost confirm the benefits of PBL, e.g. a good source for integration of cultural content [42], an alternative to teaching a foreign language which enhances learning experience and increases creative teambuilding and group skills [43], or a new direction in professional training and development for primary school teachers [44].

In short, the term PBL has been in existence for quite a long time. The topic attracts numerous studies that examine different areas of PBL including the principles, procedures, key elements, benefits, and challenges. Although much research has addressed the challenges of PBL, these are mostly discussed from the view of teachers and teaching practices. Limited resources have been found to investigate the difficulties from the view of the students.

1.3. The current study

In this paper, we consider the difficulties experienced by learners in a Magazine Project course (a PBL course) at a university in Vietnam by using a self-report instrument. The self-report instrument is a questionnaire built on a proposed model which the researchers generate from the previous studies. Students' self-report of their difficulties will be of significance as it will provide a different angle into the barriers to PBL. Therefore, the result is expected to inform teaching practices for more effective implementation of the project.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research setting

The university which is the site of this study has applied PBL into their curriculum since 2007. There are several courses in which PBL is applied to its full extent; that is, throughout the semester, teachers and students work entirely on a project. Those courses include but do not limit to Drama Project, Magazine Project, TV show Project, Culture Project. A group of teachers who were trained to understand elements and principles of PBL are in charge of those courses.

In the Magazine project, students create their own magazine by designing graphics and writing articles, applying community involvement, teamwork skills and critical thinking [45]. The teachers use a guidebook compiled for internal use only [46]. The guidebook provides the guidelines for teachers that require (i) student-centered classroom, (ii) roles of clarifying sample products, an action plan, and all other assessment tools, (iii) extensive knowledge of the project's field, (iv) responses to students' weekly reports, (v) encouragement of self-discovery, (vi) students' agreement on punishments in advance and (vi) intolerance to plagiarism. Meanwhile, the guidelines for students ask for (i) well-planned content prior to class meeting, (ii) self-discovery, (iii) clear milestones/ schedules, (iv) creativity and motivation. The guidebook also provides clear samples of project course frame, weight of assessment components and rubrics.

The teaching and learning notes in the guidebook prove a clear understanding of PBL principles and techniques, and they act as a source for good practices.

2.2. Theoretical proposed model

From the review of PBL literature (particularly prohibiting factors to PBL) and the discussion of the specific context of the research site, we propose a model which is our hypothesis on the students' difficulties while learning the Magazine Project (see Figure 1). Based on the model, we build a scale to test the hypothesis. The key components of the model are explained as followed.

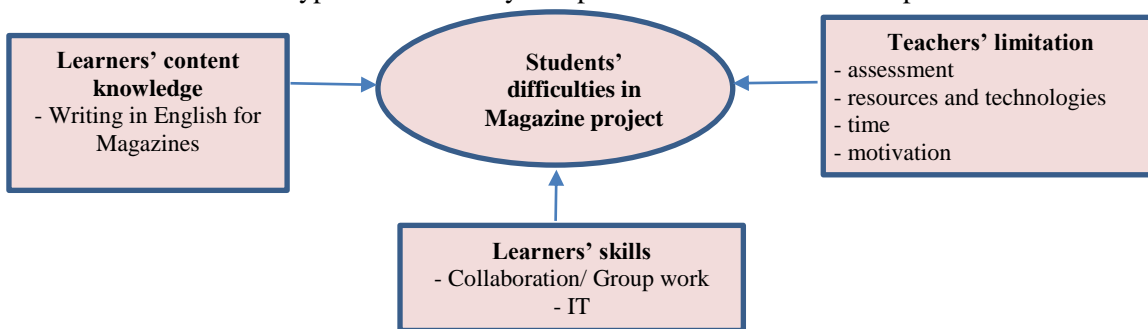


Figure 1. Proposed model of the study

Learners' content knowledge is the knowledge needed to conduct the content of the project. For the specific course of Magazine Project, it is the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence and conventions of magazines. *Learners' skills* refer to the skills that students need to succeed in their project. Learners' skills may vary; however, this model focuses on collaboration and IT skills that emerge as the most problematic in previous studies. *Teachers' limitation* refers to the sources of students' difficulties due to teachers' lack of necessary elements to support students in PBL, i.e., proper assessment, resources and technologies, time, and motivation.

2.3. Research questions

The research aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) How much the following prohibiting factors affect the implementation of PBL in English magazine project as rated by the students?
 - Students' content knowledge
 - Students' skills
 - Teachers' limitation
- (2) Are there any other difficulties that the students report in implementing the Magazine project?
- (3) What solutions are mostly suggested by the students to minimize the difficulties?

2.4. Participants

The participants of the study were third year English major students at the university who had just finished the Magazine project course by the time of the study. The sampling technique used was cluster random sampling [47]; that is, all the classes studying the Magazine project in the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year were numbered (i.e. from 1 to 6), and every odd class was selected (i.e. classes numbered 1, 3 and 5). A random sample, according to Cohen [47], ensures the equal chance for every member of the wider population to be included in the sample. Therefore, it is more useful to make generalization and is less bias compared to non-random sample. A sample of 75 was identified, and the received responses were 60.

2.5. Research design

The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative research method to analyze the survey data. The quantitative data was drawn from the questions with answer options in Likert scale of 5, while the qualitative data was taken from the two open-ended questions.

2.6. Data collection instruments and procedures

The instrument used to collect both types of data was a questionnaire. All the questions were written in Vietnamese to avoid possible misunderstanding due to language barrier. The questionnaire has three sections with 20 items in total. The first part includes demographic questions aiming at describing the participants' background. The second part seeks for students' difficulties due to teachers and student's factors. The items were built basing on the constructs defined in the proposed model. The last part includes two open-ended questions: The first one asked the participants to name other difficulties besides those mentioned in the questionnaire while the second asked for students' suggested solutions for the problems encountered.

The questionnaire was first piloted to 15 students to see if there is any ambiguity in the wording. Basing on the feedback of the participants, the researchers reworded some of the expressions and finalized the scale. The final scale was then delivered via Google form to students from the 3 selected classes at the university and received 60 responses. The data was then collected and transferred into Microsoft Excel sheet for statistical calculation. Finally, responses to the 2 open-ended questions were coded using the thematic analysis technique. The researcher read the responses and manually coded students' reports into themes showing difficulties.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Students' learning background

Data obtained from the first part of the questionnaire (mostly demographic ones) revealed some aspects of students' background. All participants claimed they had learnt English for at least 10 years by the time of the study. In addition, the majority of the students got the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of 2.5 (rated *fair* in the students' grading system) or higher (72%), the rest got lower than 2.5. Regarding the scores for the Magazine project course, 53.3% got A and 46.7% got B; none received C or D. The CGPA and course grade data showed that most those students had a quite satisfactory study result, which in turns, implied their language competence.

3.2. Difficulties due to teachers' limitation

Students' report of their difficulties due to teachers' factors are shown in Table 1 below. Most students agreed that their teachers gave useful feedback (67%), clear assessment criteria (71%), fair assessment (65%) and a clear time frame (60%). From the discussion of the research context in 2.1, it could be concluded that the teachers follow quite well the school guidelines for teachers in PBL courses and that they demonstrated quite clear understanding of PBL principles in areas of giving assessment and feedback.

Table 1. Students' difficulties due to teachers' limitation

Difficulties due to teachers' factors	SD	D	NT	A	SA
The teacher provides useful feedback on our work.	5%	3%	25%	40%	27%
The teacher shows enthusiasm in supporting students	25%	33%	17%	13%	12%
The teacher gives clear assessment criteria.	0%	12%	17%	38%	33%
The teacher's assessment is fair	7%	12%	17%	47%	18%
The teacher supports us with useful technologies and referential magazine resources.	30%	42%	12%	8%	8%
The teacher provides a clear time frame	0%	5%	13%	47%	35%
The teacher keeps good track of students' progress	28%	32%	22%	10%	8%

(Note: SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; NT = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree)

However, the result also revealed teachers' lack of enthusiasm (claimed by 58%), lack of support in technologies and resources (62%) and poor tracking of students' progress (60%).

3.3. Difficulties due to students' content knowledge

Writing in English for magazines is the content knowledge in this study. The aspects of writing considered in the questionnaire are grammar, vocabulary, organization (coherence and cohesion) and magazine language conventions. Table 2 summarized the responses from the students.

Table 2. *Students' difficulties due to students' content knowledge*

Difficulties in learners' content knowledge	SD	D	NT	A	SA
I am comfortable with English grammar in my writing.	17%	22%	30%	25%	7%
I had sufficient vocabulary to express my ideas in writing.	13%	17%	28%	30%	12%
I know the conventions of English magazines and apply these in my writing effectively.	28%	33%	17%	15%	7%
I can organize my ideas in writing coherently.	10%	27%	32%	18%	13%

As can be seen, although students reported differently to some different aspects of writing (grammar, vocabulary, organization), the number of students claimed at least “neutral” to “agree” and “strongly agree” accounted for the majority (more than 60% in all the 3 categories), meaning they were confident to some extent about their English writing. The result was also consistent with students' report of their CGPA and course scores. This indicates that although language barriers still exist, it seems not to be a major contributor to students' difficulties in the Magazine project.

However, there was one aspect of writing that many students claimed not being confident of, that was conventions of English magazines. 61% of the respondents did not agree that they know and apply those effectively to their writings. This result, together with students' report of not receiving useful support of referential magazine resources, could be interpreted as the students having difficulties in magazine conventions was partially due to teachers' providing limited resources for students to consult.

3.4. *Difficulties due to students' skills*

Table 3 shows results for students' difficulties in applying IT to their project. As reported, not many students found processing documents, taking qualified photos, or using photo editor tools a major challenge to them (respectively 10%, 17% and 3% claimed they did). In contrast, what struggled them the most was to find the relevant tools to help with graphic design. 63% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they had such a difficulty.

Table 3. *Difficulties due to students' IT skills*

Difficulties in learners' skills: IT skills	SD	D	NT	A	SA
I had difficulty processing texts, document printing and layout.	27%	30%	22%	12%	10%
I had difficulty finding tools to help my magazine graphic design.	8%	12%	17%	35%	28%
I had difficulty in using photo editor tools.	20%	20%	17%	27%	17%
I had difficulty in taking qualified photos.	33%	22%	25%	17%	3%

The result showed that most students did not have much trouble with basic IT skills such as processing text documents or taking and editing photos. Instead, they struggled more with specific IT tasks related to the magazine project, which was IT tools for designing the magazine.

With regards to students' collaboration skills, data indicated some problems in groupwork such as unfair work distribution (50%), lack of responsibility to group work (52%), or unhelpful discussion sessions (63%). The result revealed students' lack of necessary collaboration skills to be successful in group work (see Table 3).

Table 4. *Students' difficulties in collaboration*

Difficulties in learners' skills: Collaboration	SD	D	NT	A	SA
My group members did not support each other much.	13%	10%	33%	24%	20%
Work distribution in the group is unfair.	17%	17%	17%	30%	20%
The group members are not equally responsible for group work.	13%	13%	22%	30%	22%
I find it hard to arrange time to meet and discuss with my group members.	25%	28%	23%	17%	7%
Group discussions rarely yield useful suggestions.	13%	10%	13%	33%	30%

3.5. *Other difficulties and suggested solutions*

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed in analyzing qualitative data from the open-ended questions. In this study, we followed the phases of reflective TA [48], namely familiarization, generating codes, constructing themes, revising and defining themes. The main findings almost overlapped with results from quantitative data. The key themes emerged were:

(i) *unsatisfying teachers' support*: Answers were put under this theme when containing one or more of those features: teachers' not responding to students' questions, teachers' letting students to struggle with their own problems, not giving good advice, not very helpful, or not providing useful learning resources. For example, student C stated:

"...My teacher did not reply to my email and text messages asking for her suggestions of more authentic magazine samples."

(ii) *students' weak writing competence*: This was identified by students claiming not good at writing, finding it difficult to express oneself through writing, not knowing how to edit writing after receiving feedback, or feeling incompetent in using language for magazines.

(iii) *students' lack of success skills*: Some students mentioned that they were not good at IT skills, while some others stated that they often left the work until the last minutes. Responses also revealed students' lack of collaboration skills. For example, one student wrote:

"Sometimes a team member forgot to bring the required writings to the class and the whole group had nothing to feedback on."

A few others mentioned that they had little to say in group discussions because one or two members talked too much.

(iv) *low motivation*: Answers under this theme include students admitting not being interested in the course, having little motivation in any writing tasks or claiming a general loss of motivation throughout the learning process.

Among the themes identified, the first three were already mentioned in the quantitative questionnaire sessions, although the students termed them differently. The last one, low motivation, was a new theme. However, as they data were collected via the open-ended question, the source of students' low motivation was unknown.

For students' suggested solutions, we coded the answers and themed them under the major difficulties discussed above. *Firstly*, with regards to students' knowledge and skills, students suggested that they need to improve their knowledge and skills to better their magazine product. Examples of answers included in this theme were: learning more grammar and vocabulary and presentation skills, learning more about the language of magazines, doing more writing homework and practice, learning more about tools for magazine design. *Secondly*, with respect to collaboration problems, it was advised that the group needs to set clear rules as well as penalties from the first week of working together. In addition, the group needs to promote solidarity among the members, and they should choose a topic that all members of the group are interested in. Clear task division and timetable should be well-planned ahead.

Under the theme of solutions to difficulties due to teachers' limitation, the students suggested that every teacher should let students work on a variety of topics and help students more, i.e., providing more information channels, web resources and information technology tools.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study revealed students' major difficulties in the Magazine project course by a self-report instrument. The key challenges identified were selecting IT tools and magazine resources, writing in magazine conventions, collaborating with peers, and low learning motivation. The students themselves suggested some of the solutions to solve the problems. The limitations of the study lied in that the instrument of only a questionnaire might not be able to explain in depth the roots of some of the difficulties recognized. In addition, the statistical procedures include basic calculations using Microsoft Excel. From the limitations, the topic is open to more multi-dimensional studies with stricter statistical procedures.

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