

EXPLORING VIETNAMESE EFL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS PROJECT-BASED LEARNING ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This case study explores the attitudes of EFL students towards an alternative means of assessment: project work. The research is based on empirical data collected in a Vietnamese high school. A group of 40 high school students took part in the project in place of the regular traditional English exam. These students were then required to complete a questionnaire focusing on their attitudes towards this kind of assessment. Positive reactions concerning task value, task clarity and resources were revealed from the data analysis.

1 Introduction

For many years, Vietnamese public high schools have employed the paper-and-pen test in evaluating students' English language competence. This kind of language assessment has long been criticized for being too exam-oriented and causing many problems (Trinh & Mai, 2018). This so-called 'formative' assessment is, however, carried out for the purposes of evaluating students' knowledge and preparing them for the National Examination in English, not for monitoring the learning process. Leaving most communication features of the English language, high school tests primarily focus on the lexical and grammatical aspects. This reality not only turns English teaching and learning into something more like tips and tricks practice but also discourages students from studying the subject properly by creating negative attitudes (Hoang, 2010). Although public education in recent years has witnessed more freedom given to teachers, this traditional standardized form of evaluating students has not changed much. The Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has encouraged efforts in improving it with an orientation towards using English for real-life purposes by experimenting various teaching approaches and studying other English proficiency exams, and Project-based Learning (PBL) has been recommended by the MOET for these purposes.

PBL is a learner-centered teaching method that has recently proven to bring students close to real-life language use by allowing them to actively explore real-world challenges and problems (Nguyen, 2011). Life is brought into the classroom through project work. Instead of just seeing a play, students can actually play the roles and experience all the language in it. As Dewey (1916, p. 239), an American educational theorist, wrote, "Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself." Besides, by following this method, students are provided with opportunities in a meaningful context in which they are motivated to use the foreign language as an instrument to communicate and to improve it simultaneously (Díaz Ramírez, 2014). Studies show that there is potential for language improvement, as well as the development of , 21st century skills (social and thing skills-reference) (e.g. Bell, 2010). Due to the enormous

influence assessment has on learning (Jimaa, 2011), the idea of adopting PBL as a form of assessment may sound reasonable. McDonald (2008), in investing this idea, experimented her project-based models of evaluation and found that good results in students' self-improvement during the working process could be recorded. This author, accordingly, suggests that an effective assessment instrument can also act as a good learning tool and vice versa. Thus, utilizing PBL as an assessment instrument can possibly have a positive impact on the way students learn English.

At the preliminary stage of implementing PBL assessment, this paper aims to describe the attitudes of some Vietnamese high school students, who are currently taking traditional exams, towards the alternative method of evaluation using PBL. The idea behind it is to understand whether or not positive attitudes exist, because this could possibly help facilitate changes to the testing system in Vietnamese high schools. This study was conducted by carrying out a piece of project work and using a questionnaire to collect data. Characteristics of PBL, PBL assessment and motivational assessment tasks will be presented before the description of the study context, method, analysis and results.

2 Characteristics of Project-based Learning (PBL)

Generally, PBL is actually not a new teaching approach in education. Beckett (2006) claims that PBL has its origin from the mid-1800s from agriculture education. It was later developed as part of an instructional approach by Dewey (1938), who emphasized on the practical experience factor of learning.

PBL can be understood as a higher level teaching and learning approach compared to Task-based Learning, which that takes learner-centeredness for granted (Bilsborough, 2013). It puts much emphasis on long-term, interdisciplinary and learner-centered meaningful activities (Soparat, Arnold, & Klaysom, 2015). In a more detailed sense, Buck Institute for Education (2018), an American research and development organization, defines PBL as “*a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging and complex question, problem, or challenge*” while Guven and Valais (2014) state that the theories of PBL come from the idea that only by experiencing and solving real world problem can students actually learn. From another perspective, Solomon (2003) defines PBL as a process in which learners take their own responsibility in their own way. Habók & Nagy (2016) suggest that this learning approach is made up of five key components, namely: student engagement, social constructivism, focus question, reflective evaluation and interdisciplinarity. Each of these components play a different yet significant role in laying the foundation for PBL.

In PBL, students work collaboratively in groups or pairs to complete a task in form of producing a product or solving a problem. This can be done by following certain steps like planning, discussing about methods, materials, responsibilities and others. (Guyen & Valais, 2014). Language functions, like asking and refining questions, expressing ideas, negotiating and other skills like collecting and analyzing data, forming a conclusion and presenting are all practiced and improved (Poorverdi & Ezati, 2014). Students' active roles in conducting authentic and motivational tasks are required so as to reach a goal, which makes language as a means rather and an end. To perform a project successfully, Fried-Booth (2002) suggests eight steps:

1. Stimulus: ideas, comments and suggestions are generated.
2. Definition of project objective: the teacher and students negotiate the project.
3. Practice of language skills: language preparation for the project is made.
4. Group activities: information for the project is collected by groups of students.
5. Organization of materials: information is selected and classified to develop the final outcome.
6. End product: the end product of the project is developed.
7. Final presentation: students perform the product in one way or another.
8. Feedback: evaluation and feedback are made at the end or during the process by the teachers.

Kean and Kwe (2014) suggest that PBL can create a bridge that connects academic instruction and real-life experience. Furthermore, teamwork and time management skills can be both enhanced as students interact with each other in the allotted time to complete their project. These authors also claim that while working on a purposeful assignment, learners can find assessment meaningful and therefore develop the motivation for such approach. Finally, curriculum technology integration can also be considered a benefit as the 21st century students employ modern tools in their task.

From another perspective, Poorverdi and Ezati (2014) emphasize the practicing of socio-affective strategies, which they list as task-solving skill, teamwork skill, creative thinking skill and the use of English language. This can lead to the development of many different cooperative and interpersonal skills, which help develop students' confidence and learning strategies as well as to prepare them for higher education.

In greater details, Walsh (2010) describes PBL as an effective method to make learners work collaboratively, as it provides opportunities for them to learn how to communicate with room for students to learn more from their experience. Besides, the 21st century skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and technology skills are all improved as well as the barrier of basic factual knowledge is passed and new technology is implemented while the communication skills of making inferences, predicting and interpreting are honed while the incorporating skills across disciplines are developed with the use of knowledge from various fields (Walsh, 2010). One last benefit is that student retention of content is supposed to achieve a greater long-term level as they apply what has been learned into reality (Díaz Ramírez, 2014).

3 Project-based Learning Assessment

Despite the numerous benefits it may bring, implementing PBL as a form of assessment in any class can confront language teachers with many obstacles, as it may not fit into their teaching contexts in general and testing contexts in particular as Sawamura (2010) has pointed out. This author also claims that an appropriate method of assessing students' progress and achievement, consequently, should be required as besides just testing this kind of evaluation also assists students in reflecting their knowledge and skills and creating positive impact with various forms of assessment recommended, from judging the final products to teacher's observation, self-reflections and peer evaluations, mostly utilizing carefully designed marking rubrics. Additionally, McDonald (2008) claims that the variety of students' learning styles, personalities and personal difficulties require different ways of assessment.

To effectively perform the evaluation process for PBL, Debski (2006) suggests that the efforts that students put into their projects should be appreciated with a carefully weighed assessment

process. Students should be involved in this part in forms of diaries, checklists and questionnaires. Not only should the language skills in the final products be conscientiously assessed, but those performed throughout the stages should also be treated in the same way. In a more detailed way, Hunaiti, Grimaldi, Goven, Mootanah, & Martin (2010) remind language teachers that students will be even more motivated if they are allowed to have a voice in creating the evaluation criteria and setting up the goals for the projects. They also affirm that PBL assessment should be “valid, reliable and transparent” with well-defined learning outcomes and assessment criteria just like any other form of assessment. These authors add that students’ full potential should also be unlocked by fostering their learning strategies during the various stages of the project.

4 Assessment and Positive Attitudes

Although traditional forms of assessment have held their value over the years, more recently, their limitations are becoming apparent. For example, there has been much controversy over the use of these high-stakes standardized exams which has resulted in both calls for renovation and even abolishment (Kohn, 2000). Seale, Chapman and Davey (2001), while examining the impact of various forms of assessment on their therapy undergraduates, found that four factors are associated with positive attitudes towards assessment, namely, the relevance with course content and content of the assessment itself, as well as the enthusiasm of teachers and influences from the group. In another study, other characteristics, which are well-defined teacher’s expectation, clear rules and guidance, sufficient amount of preparation, inclusion of students’ own learning experiences and teamwork, have been discovered to improve students’ motivation (Stefanou & Parkes, 2003). Marzano (1992), while describing tasks that can foster learning attitudes and perceptions, suggests three features: task value (students’ own goals, students’ interests, students’ control of certain aspects of tasks, curiosity), task clarity (models, guidelines, teacher’s expectation, marking criteria) and resources (necessary materials, time, equipment, ability, effort, task difficulty, luck). The cited studies, in one way or another, all strongly focus on students’ autonomy and development as the primary means to positively promote attitudes about learning and assessment.

5 Methodology

5.1 Context of the Study

The research for this study was carried out at a public high school (School X) located in the suburb of Ho Chi Minh City with an approximate distance of 50 kilometers from the city center. In the academic year of 2017/2018, the school enrolled 1227 students from grades ten to twelve. The ranking of this school, which is primarily based on the admission grade-point, is 4th among 7 schools in the same district. This means most students attend School X are graded Average (3rd on the scale of 5 points).

English is taught as a compulsory subject at this school with a distribution of 6 periods per week (4 in-course periods and 2 extra ones) for all classes. The traditional assessment of grammar and vocabulary (fill-in-the-blank exercises, sentence transformation) as well as reading comprehension is administered 8 times throughout the school year with 2 end-of-term and 6 progress tests. No components of speaking and listening are included.

5.2 Participants

For the purpose of this study, 40 students from a typical eleventh classes were selected to participate in the project with 15 boys and 25 girls. Those selectees are of mixed abilities and levels of English proficiency. At the end of the first semester 7 of them were graded Excellent (highest grade, ranging from 8 to 10 out of 10) while 31 achieved Good (second grade, ranging from 6.5 to below 8) and only 2 were evaluated as Average (from 5 to below 6.5).

5.3 Method

At the beginning of the semester, all the 40 participants were informed about the new type of assessment with which they would get alternative grade points for one of the three progress tests in the second semester. Discussions about the project contents and procedures were held between the teacher-researcher and student participants, and an agreement on the project, organizing a free tour for foreign visitors to a historical site in the district, was reached. For this tour, those students worked in groups playing the roles of tour guides taking visitors to various places in the site. Specifically, responsibilities of collecting and organizing information, translating from Vietnamese sources and keeping the group on track were equally shared among the members. They were also required to fill in an interview form to collect information, experiences and feelings from the tourists. To make sure that the students were not biased towards any form of assessment, they were also allowed to take the progress test like those who did not take part in the study in case they would not be satisfied with the results from the project. Before the tour, the participants were carefully guided through Fried-Booth's steps (2002) in which they worked in groups on ideas, project objectives, language preparation, collection and organization of information, contacting foreign tourists as well as on other aspects of the tour. The marking rubric was also presented with negotiation from students so that expectations and abilities were well-balanced.

Throughout the stages, the teacher-researcher was an active participant observer who carefully listened and responded to the groups' work. Students' roles in the group, contribution, interaction with each other, engagement in the project and performance in the tour were carefully assessed. The tourists were also involved in the process by giving marks through a marking rubric explained to them in advance.

Data were collected primarily through questionnaires, the most favored technique to measure attitudes in educational research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Besides the researcher's critical observation, the participants were required to complete a questionnaire created by the researcher himself after feedback and grade points had been provided. The questionnaire was constructed based on the theories by Marzano (1992) and Stefanou and Parkes (2003) as they share many features with those of PBL. Cronbach's alpha was employed to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire with the internal consistency of .807.

The collected data was analyzed by utilizing quantitative method in which the questionnaire data was entered into computing storage for statistical analysis.

6 Results

Students' attitudes towards PBL assessment were examined in four clusters, each of which contains statements that describe their feelings about four aspects of the experimented form of assessment: task value, task clarity, external resources and internal resources.

6.1 Task Value

In regards to task value, Table 1 reveals a very positive result with most students indicating they valued the PBL assessment and claimed that they were motivated and would like to continue to do it in the future (92.5% and 85% respectively). More specifically, most students (80% to 100%) felt their interests, goals and autonomy were taken into consideration in the design of the task while a similar number of them (95% to 97%) agreed that they could learn much more from project work assessment in addition to the improvement of their language skills. However, it is also revealed that a non-trivial number of students were uncertain about the result (15%), the prepared knowledge (27.5%) and the preference for and acquaintance with the new form of assessment (27.5% and 22.5%), maintaining a neutral stance.

It can be observed that all aspects receive positive feedback from the participants when students' goals and interests were reflected. Students, in other words, were motivated and become more interested in school assessment. Furthermore, that students were allowed to control certain parts of PBL assessment is totally different from the traditional way of evaluation. In this way students can gain more confidence and autonomy in examination.

Table 1. Students' attitudes towards the value of PBL assessment

Item (N = 40)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
<i>Students' goals</i>			
Our inquiries were considered in design the project.	95	0	5
PBL assessment allows me to learn more new things besides language.	97.5	0	2.5
I was able to improve my communication, problem-solving and ITC skills through PBL assessment.	95	0	5
What I had expected before the tour started was included in the project.	80	0	20
I was not satisfied with the result.	0	85	15
I want to continue to do this assessment in the future.	85	5	10
<i>Students' interests</i>			
Our hobbies were included in the project task.	100	0	0
PBL assessment allows me to work collaboratively with my friends.	95	0	5
I was more motivated to do PBL assessment than the traditional test.	92.5	2.5	5
PBL does not make me feel as comfortable as the traditional test.	0	87.5	12.5
I would prefer the traditional type of assessment.	2.5	70	27.5

I cannot get acquainted with this kind of assessment.	0	77.5	22.5
Students' control			
We knew what the teacher expected by discussing the marking rubric.	92.5	0	7.5
There are too many things to learn to prepare for PBL assessment.	0	72.5	27.5

6.2 Task Clarity

Data about students' evaluation of the project clarity can be found in Table 2. Overall, the majority of students acknowledged that the guidance for the task was clear enough for them. Although only one-third (77.5%) could imagine from the beginning how the project would be like, nearly all students found the guidance and expectation apparent (92.5%). Noticeably, 45% of students did agree or held a neutral view on the complexity of the marking rubric although all of them agreed that it was moderately detailed in terms of expectation description. More significantly, many respondents found fairness problematic with 20% of them did not find the grading fair enough and only 50% agreed that some evaluated criteria were unbiased. Finally, only 62.5% thought that the teacher need not have provided more instruction.

Overall, there is a conflict between what the students actually saw and how they felt about the clarity. Most of them were not acquainted with the description of the marking criteria, which is totally different from the simple instructions of "Choose the correct option (A, B, C or D)" or "Fill in the blank with one word" in the traditional tests. However, other aspects including modelling, guidelines and expectation were highly appreciated.

Table 2. Students' attitude towards the clarity of PBL assessment task

Item (N = 40)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
We knew what the final project would look like when we first started work.	77.5	2.5	20
Guidance from the teacher was very supportive.	92.5	2.5	5
We were provided with step-by-step guidance.	92.5	0	7.5
We were provided with details of how the project would be graded (the marking rubric).	100	0	0
We knew from the beginning what target we should aim at.	92.5	2.5	5
I feel that this kind of assessment is fair in terms of grading.	80	2.5	17.5
Some criteria were not fairly evaluated.	0	50	50
The marking rubric is too complicated.	7.5	55	37.5
There should have been more guidance from the teacher.	2.5	62.5	35

6.3 External Resources

Students' attitudes about accessing external resources for the project assessment can be found in Table 3. Generally, a large proportion of students felt at ease with finding materials (92.5%), time (97.5%) and equipment (87.5%). However, approximately one-third of them (from 60% to 77.5%) disagreed with the difficulties of the translation work, searching for materials on their

own and exploring the limited resources, meaning a considerable number of students were still uncertain about these issues.

Obtaining the permission to utilize available resources while taking exams is not what those students expected as they showed confusion even in realizing their own difficulties. This can be understood as their lack of necessary study skills as well as the unfamiliarity with this new right in working with assessment. However, it can still be inferred from a comprehensive observation that those students acknowledged the usefulness and availability of the resources.

Table 3. Students' attitudes towards external resources for PBL assessment

Item (N = 40)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
We could get access to a wide range of materials to undertake this assessment.	92.5	0	7.5
The materials given to us were useful.	92.5	0	7.5
We were provided with enough time to undertake this assessment.	97.5	0	2.5
We could get access to necessary equipment to undertake this assessment.	87.5	0	12.5
We had to translate a lot of Vietnamese materials.	2.5	77.5	20
We were not instructed on finding necessary materials.	0	75	25
Some kinds of materials were limited.	2.5	60	37.5

6.4 Internal Resources

Table 4 reports students' opinions about internal resources for the assessment. Positive attitudes were identified with most students' agreement on the degree of suitability, effort recognition and appropriate level of difficulty (from 87.5% to 92.5%). Particularly, a lower number of students (77.5%) thought that luck played a role in their project.

The participants clearly indicated that their level was recognized with the assessment was made to be suitable for them all through negotiation and its design regardless of their competence. Besides, they also realized the teacher's observation and appreciation of their efforts. All these remarks have, to some extent, shown the difference between PBL assessment and the traditional one.

Table 4. Students' attitudes towards internal resources for PBL assessment

Item (N = 40)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
PBL assessment is suitable for our ability.	90	2.5	7.5
Our effort was recognized when the teacher graded the project.	90	0	10
The teacher observed us carefully when we worked.	92.5	0	7.5

We were allowed to negotiate with the teacher to increase/reduce the task difficulty.	87.5	2.5	10
Luck played a role in undertaking this assessment.	77.5	17.5	5

7 Discussion

Results drawn from the analyzed data show that the student participants took positive attitudes toward the PBL assessment with most of them preferred the new form of assessment to the traditional one. They appreciate the value, clarity, resources of the undertaken assessment task. What is more, the students were highly aware of the beneficial impacts that taking this kind of assessment may have on their learning, which is in line with the principles and theory proposed by (Hunaiti et al., 2010). In other words, students' feelings indicate that project work assessment can possibly allow them to avoid the negative attitudes that the traditional testing may create.

However, there are still challenges in implementing PBL assessment in the future as students may feel safer with the traditional tests due to their familiarity, as Stefanou and Parkes (2003) stated in their study. Furthermore, the testing system applied in Vietnamese high schools does not provide much opportunity for teachers to adopt alternative assessment forms. Additionally, by its very nature, the data could hardly be generalized to a larger population due to the small sample size.

8 Conclusion

Employing PBL in teaching English has proven to be beneficial not only in the linguistic competence aspect, and utilizing it as a form of assessment with a cautiously designed framework can offer advantages as well. Sharing similarities with existing literature, the results of the current study show that the students were motivated by the alternative form of assessment employing PBL, expressing positive feelings. Significantly, they were well-aware of the advantages that it could bring to their learning. Those students perceived this kind of assessment with strange interest, realizing that it differs from their traditional tests in a way that their interests, goals and voice were highly appreciated while the four walls and the paper and pens were there no more. Instead, testing can really mean going on a tour, learning new skills, exploring new cultures and creating more relationships as well. It, therefore, may seem legitimate to employ this teaching and learning method as an alternative assessment tool for learners of English as foreign language in place of the traditional one.

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