

MỘT HOẠT ĐỘNG ỨNG DỤNG HỌC TẬP DỰA TRÊN DỰ ÁN TẠI KHOA NGÔN NGỮ ANH, ĐẠI HỌC LẠC HỒNG

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TỪ KHÓA

Học tập dựa trên dự án;
Học tiếng Anh;
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ABSTRACT

Học tập dựa trên dự án hiện đang là mối quan tâm lớn đối với những nhà giáo dục vì nó thể hiện được ưu điểm trong việc mang lại cho người học những cơ hội phát triển khả năng chuyên môn và những kỹ năng mềm khác, nhưng cũng là một thử thách lớn với nhiều yêu cầu cụ thể. Đối với việc dạy tiếng Anh, đây là lĩnh vực mà sự đổi mới trong phương pháp luôn được đặt lên hàng đầu, trong đó có học tập dựa trên dự án. Đã có nhiều nghiên cứu được thực hiện trong lĩnh vực này và đã kết luận về sự hiệu quả của phương pháp này trong việc giúp người học tiến bộ trong kỹ năng giao tiếp, kỹ năng tổ chức và kỷ luật cá nhân. Tại Đại học Lạc Hồng, khi môi trường nói tiếng Anh thực tế đang là mối quan tâm lớn thì việc áp dụng học tập dựa trên dự án, cụ thể là trong việc tổ chức những hoạt động ngoại khóa cho sinh viên là rất cần thiết. Gần đây, một dự án mang tên The NNA Late Night Show đã được thực hiện. Qua dự án này, giáo viên đã thực hiện những quan sát để có thể đưa ra những mô tả sơ bộ về sự tham gia của sinh viên cũng như những tác động lên kỹ năng tổ chức, từ đó làm tiền đề cho những nghiên cứu đào sâu hơn về vấn đề này.

AN APPLICATION OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN THE FACULTY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LAC HONG UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Project-based, currently one of the major concerns among educators, is proved to be effective in offering learner's opportunities of comprehensive development in both academic competence and other soft skills, but this approach underlies several challenges and sets of requirements also need to be followed. Teaching English, particularly, has been an area in which novelty in methods is always a priority, among which is teaching and learning through projects. A number of studies have been conducted to evidence the effectiveness of project-based approach in English learning which refers to learners' communication ability, organisational skills and self-discipline. At Lac Hong University where an authentic English speaking environment provokes a big concern, applying project-based learning, particularly in extra-curricular activities is thought to pave the way. Therefore, a project called The NNA Late Night Show, based on the principles of project-based learning, has been organised. With the observation of the teachers who got involved in the project, an initial description of student's engagement and effects on organisational skills was given, aiming at further investigation to gain deeper insights.

Available online at: <https://js.lhu.edu.vn/index.php/lachong>.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been undeniable that the major purpose of learning English is to achieve the communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) which consists of a set of skills and knowledge in order to perform communication in real-world contexts and solve real-world problems. For that reason, developments in classroom instructions and the efforts to enhance self-study and life-long learning have been made; specifically, several changes in teaching and assessing methods which set room for meaningful practice and authentic communication have been implemented, which is believed to make huge contributions to the breakthroughs in the teaching and learning of English language.

In Lac Hong University's EFL classes, particularly those of English-majored students, a wide range of teaching and assessing methods, e.g. simulations, presentations, role-plays, discussions, etc., are used so as to ensure both students' language acquisition and their experience in certain situations of communication. However, within the limitation of the classroom, the practice of English language communication performed by students can be considered as that which lacks authenticity, is highly controlled and test-driven. This leads to an urge for a far-beyond-the-classroom place where those limitations are eliminated – an authentic, stress-free, process-oriented environment to answer the question 'How can real-world situations be brought to students packed in classrooms?' In addition to such common models for extra-curricular activities as English Speaking Club and English Speaking Contest which focus on individual needs and accomplishments, a campaign named The NNA Late Night Show is introduced, which is considered as an application of project-based learning – a learning approach which has been recognised to be effective and fruitful in education of 21st century.

2. CONTENT

2.1 Project-based learning in the EFL context

Project-based learning (PBL) is dated back to the mid-1800s, and went through several stages of development, one of which was carried out by William Heard Kilpatrick in the early 1900s (Beckett & Iida, 2006). In a more general perspective according to Muniandy (2000), project-based approach offers learners real, structured, purposeful activities – or projects – to implement through which they accumulate knowledge and skills. To be more specific, the projects enable learners to make meaningful connections between prior knowledge and new knowledge so as to enhance their competence in solving particular problems which are typically exposed as end products. The competence can break down into such constructs as investigation, discussion, decision-making, problem-solving and communication. Within the EFL context,

Moss and Van Duzer (1998) consider PBL as an approach that could be appropriate with English language teaching and learning as it represents a method of student-centeredness, interdisciplinarity, skill intergration “giving learners a problem to solve or a product to develop”.

Because PBL is both process- and product-oriented (Stoller, 2006), the approach exposes learners to a wider environment in which they demonstrate numerous skills and considerable amount of knowledge, which include planning, managing and accomplishing projects; confidence, self-esteem, language skills, content learning and cognitive ability (Simpson, 2011). Besides, in fact, numerous researches have been carried out to evidence the benefits of PBL in EFL context. Haines (1989), Brophy and Alleman (1991), Levine (2004), Stoller (2006) described PBL as an approach with

- A national integration of all four language skills focusing on both understanding and expressing information;
- A huge exposure of natural communication situations with high level of authenticity where they apply classroom instructions;
- An opportunity to develop metacognitive ability through stages of planning, implementing and evaluating.

All in all, Lam (2011) concluded in her article that PBL can be a model which promotes and enhances “learners' ability for life-long learning through contextualizing learning by presenting them with problems to solve and/or artifacts to create”.

As surging to the newer educational settings, PBL has developed and implemented under a set of criteria. According to Stoller (2006), the criteria include

- Student support in terms of both language and content which are integrated and extended beyond class time;
- An orientation to both process and product, in which learners contribute their ideas and make reflections;
- Room for both individual and group work through which learners demonstrate their responsibilities to their own learning as well as the completion of projects (Stoller, 2006).

Models of PBL can vary, e.g. Papandreou (1994), Alan and Stoller (2005), etc.; however, the entire process can be divided into major stages beginning with planning and ending with reflection.

Step 1: Project Planning and Design

A real-world problem is identified, an end product is conceptualized and project outcomes are constructed. Specifically, an overview of topics and activities to finalise the product is clarified involving the

brainstorming of both teachers and students while well defined skills and concepts which students are expected to learn are identified usually by teachers. Besides, an anticipation of results and a plan for assessment are also drawn out.

Step 2: Preparation

Firstly, the necessary equipment is prepared. Secondly, project management is conducted. During this stage, a detailed timeline with clear task assignment is set.

Step 3: Project Launch

During this stage, planned activities are conducted, mostly by students under teacher's supervision and instructions. The end product is presented which have the identified problem well tackled.

Step 4: Assessment, Reflection and Celebration

Assessing activities are carried out in order to evaluate how expectations are satisfied. The assessments include those of project completion, and student's language acquisition and skill development.

2.2 An application of project-based learning at the Faculty of English Language, LHU

Project-based learning is a teaching and learning model which has been exploited in numerous programmes at LHU. Generally, by following this model, students become the centre of development who directly take part in the procedure of solving problems and making innovations, with the supervision and facilitation of the teachers in the programme, creating a new educational eco-system. Projects often derive from social demands, particularly, the needs to improve operation and production of enterprises who offer students opportunities to conduct research and development. Those enterprises control the requirements of final products as well as fund projects, so that students carry out their learning practices with a clear view of real life situations in industries. Within the programme, on the other hand, teachers supervise and give assistance students' activities, helping them work on the project under principles. Besides, in order to run projects effectively, students are offered to work with university- and programme-funded infrastructure, equipment and facilities, creating an environment assembling that in which students will be working after graduation. Actually, PBL is more common to students majoring in engineering programmes, such as Information Engineering Technology, Electrical – Electronics Engineering Technology, Automation & Control Engineering Technology, etc. Regarding students of Social Science and Foreign Language programmes, PBL is of less popularity, except for occasional translating projects. Therefore, to create opportunities for those students, particularly English majors, to experience PBL

in their learning programme is of necessity because of the urge for educational innovation.

With the effort to implement Vietnam's National Foreign Languages Project and LHU's English Language Communication Stimulation Plan, a series of extra-curricular campaigns have been conducted, namely The English Speaking Club, English Speaking Contest and the urge for speaking English within LHU's campuses. Besides, an investigation conducted by Long & Ha (2022) indicated a correlation between various levels of communication readiness and out-of-class English language exposure; more specifically, those researchers have found that LHU English-majored students get exposed to the authentic language through different activities, especially those with a relevance to their interest areas. Additionally, Anh & Nhi (2020) also carried out a study on a new model of extra-curricular activities to boost authentic communication among students and concluded that taking part in activities giving students access to real-life problems and affairs help enhance their engagement and willingness to use English language. Therefore, it is believed that an application of PBL learning into extra-curricular activities could be a combination of the findings of the above studies which aims to bring out the best of the approach to LHU English-majored students.

The application project of PBL to extra-curricular activities hosted by Faculty of English Language Students' Association is called The NNA Late Night Show. The project was conducted within the context of English as a Foreign Language at The Faculty of English Language, Lac Hong University as part of the faculty's extra-curricular syllabus where The Faculty of English Language plays the roles of both faculty and industry. Firstly, the Faculty gives a set of detailed requirements including the format of final products as well as expected media performances. Particularly, The NNA Late Night Show was expected to be a long-run project with the primary objective of creating an environment in which English-majored students authentically performed their communication skills using English language discussing real-life topics, and the final product was a periodical series of English talk shows featuring musical performances which targeted at improving online communications on FEL fan page and FEL's brand awareness. Secondly, teachers of the English Language programme had the participants, 30 students who majored in English language from different cohorts and with a wide variety of backgrounds, work on the project under their supervision and facilitation. In addition, The NNA Late Night Show project was conducted at LHU's Studio with the technical support of LHU Media team.

Underlying the project as a whole was the exposure to English language and the opportunity of speak the

language in a natural manner. Particularly, all four language skills were covered through the activities of reading materials, listening to songs and other speakers, demonstrating ideas and telling stories and writing online posts. What was special was that those activities were not controlled and limited to an unreal scenerio but genuinely performed in a product orientation. In addition, during the process of conducting the project, students trained other important soft skills such as organisation, administration, team work, content writing, script writing, and IT skills. Besides, the project featured aspects of online communications, branding and marketing, though in a certain limit, which were relevant to the business-oriented English language major they were taking. The project also offered opportunities for cognitive development through the process of producing, collecting, analysing and evaluating data, which to some extent had impacts to students' research abilities.

The operation of The NNA Late Night Show project

The project was implemented according to most of the suggested models, which consisted of three major stages as follow.

Stage 1: Preparation

- Decide on the theme of the project
- Determine the expected outcome
- Call for participation and task allocation

Stage 2: Implementation (for each episode)

- Discussion of content
- Masterclass & Practice (the language input)
- Filming (the language output)
- Editing
- Publishing

Stage 3: Completion and evaluation

- Project evaluation
- Students' reflection
- Teachers' reflection

The stage of Preparation included meetings of all participants – teachers and students – in which the format of the show was discussed. Prior to that, participants were informed about the project requirements and expected outcomes followed by a brainstorming session where ideas were generated. The discussions then entailed an agreement on the number of episodes, topics for conversations and featured songs, the show timeline and communications activities. In those meeting, participants were arranged into groups, each of which was responsible for a specific number of episodes.

The stage that followed was Implementation. The NNA Late Night Show project lasted eight months and was divided into two phases: phase 1 occurring during the first four months with ten episodes of Late Night Show and phase 2 taking place during the remaining four months featuring individual home shows. During the two phases, students were in charge of most of the tasks which needed to be done, while teachers played the role of facilitators and supervisors who gave assistance upon request. As for each episode of the project, students were to have a number of meetings in which they exchanged ideas in order to decide on the content of the episode's storyline, and assigned roles, namely the host, story tellers, performers, editor and publisher. The students were encouraged to speak English during those meeting sessions, and in reality, English was spoken with the estimated proportion of 80 percent. The stage that followed was called Masterclass which offered students practice sessions before show time. This masterclass session not only helped students better their performances, but also brought about language inputs as lexical items, structural knowledge and pronunciation practice were presented by teachers aiming to maximize the accuracy in their communication. The stage that followed was the filming sessions where participants performed what they had previously planned and trained. These sessions consisted of unscripted story-telling and opinion exchanges together with musical performances, taking place entirely in English. Video clips captured from these sessions were then edited and published on the faculty's fan page for popularization and interaction generation. In this activity, students demonstrated their ability to write content using their knowledge of public relations, writing skills and media management.

Finally, the Reflection stage wrapped up the project. During this stage, the participants took part in meetings in which deep insights into strengths and weaknesses, achievements and failures were generated. Those aspects were categorised according to the expected outcomes, including English language communication engagement and enhancement, organisational skills acquisition, and other soft skills improvement.

Criteria (Stoller, 2006)

The NNA Late Night Show project features

- Language support: Teachers as facilitators; masterclass sessions.
- Content support: Meetings; idea exchanges, masterclass sessions.
- Process orientation: long run (8 months); repeated activities, plan – do – check – act (each episode)
- Product orientation: Audio and visual publication

- Group work: Meetings; discussions, task assignment, group filming, group assessment
- Individual work: Self practice; story telling.

Regarding assessment in the PBL model of The NNA Late Night Show, progress is ensured by formative assessment, which is an assessing method for, rather than of learning. (PBL). Formative assessment helped determine the students' current status in relation to the expected outcomes, also gave them insightful criticism and clear suggestions for improvement (Trauth-Nare & Buck, 2011). During the implementation of the project, formative assessment was regularly carried out in a number of ways. Firstly, group check-ins were deployed during project work. They were checklists consisting of sessions where students could put a check indicating their agreement with statements. The quantity of checks depicted the extent to which students had achieved certain objectives. The following statements can exemplify those used in the check-ins.

- *Tasks were properly allocated.*
- *Activities were conducted according to the time frame.*
- *Content was well discussed and approved.*

Secondly, keeping individual journals was another activity of PBL assessment used in the project. Unlike the group check-ins which primarily focused on organisational skills and other soft skills, individual journals kept track on the progress of English language communication ability. Students were asked to write a journal entry after an episode, expressing their opinions on communication performances, broken down into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

In the final stage which is Reflection, a checklist consisting of items focusing on the completion of the project as a whole was offered to students so that they could have a wrap-up assessment on their performance as well as the extent of achievements they had gained. The checklist included a section for industry (Faculty of English Language)'s requirement fulfilment, a section for English skills enhancement and a section for soft skills acquisition. Regarding the role of the teachers in the project, they made use of the rubric for assessing speaking skills officially issued by the Faculty of English Language to give feedbacks on speaking performances as observed in video publications. The rubric mainly focused on four areas which were coherence and fluency, lexical resources, grammatical range and accuracy and pronunciation.

The observation of students' participation

From the constant observation and formative assessments conducted along the organisation of the

project, a number of conclusions on the level of expectation fulfilment were drawn out.

Firstly, students' engagement in the activities was highly positive. Almost all students showed a great interest in the project as a whole and the involved activities particularly though there were some inconsistencies here and there. The engagement was first demonstrated by the enthusiasm and willingness to be part of an activity. Three key indicators of this were the great deal of opinion exchanges in discussions in which they shared about both the musical works and the underlying English language features, the concentration and participation in masterclasses, and the on-going conversations during the filming sessions. However, masterclasses, among the sessions, especially those containing new concepts and professional training in music performance, exposed the lowest degree of engagement. With over 80 percent of English language used in those engagements, it could be indicated that students were actually getting more authentic in their communication using the target language. Another

feature was the participants' facial expressions. They usually delivered with direct eye contact and changes in

their emotion which was exposed through their expressions on their face. In most of the time, they did the work, discussions, presentations and masterclasses, with fresh, smiley faces, besides some serious arguments sometimes when they were extremely eager to defence what they thought was right. However, it was believed to

signal a good point because it showed that they significantly got engaged in the task. Besides, the general level of confidence among the participants was described as high in accordance to that of engagement. In other words, those students who were actively engaged in the practice often showed a great level of confidence.

Confidence, more specifically, was evidenced by several indicators including body language, facial expressions and voluntary spirit. Especially in the filming sessions, confidence was demonstrated with a remarkably high level with little anxiety and hesitation of students performing conversations and musical works entirely in English in front of audience and cameras, indicating an extent of public speaking ability. However, a number of members did not express that much confidence, even though they actually got more confident as they went along the project. They, in fact, showed a sense of not being comfortable because of their lack of eye contact and body movement when joining the activities. And very often, they came up with 'being nervous', 'shaking' or even 'sometimes wishing that they were not invited for an individual performance.' However, the good sign was that the group of 'unconfident individuals' was not consistent all the time, because, according to the observation, there

were often new students to be willing to be involved in discussions and performances, and their physical expressions were also observed to be more frequent. It could be understood as a process of ‘building a habit.’ Considered as the post-stage, the publishing activities also received a great deal of attention when students got involved in writing content for social media posts and generating online interactions, e.g. post comments and shares. These authentic activities brought about the opportunities for students to get into the new platform of communication in the expansion of social media.

The project also depicted a positive demonstration of organisational skills. Most of the sessions took place as scheduled and within budget. With the clearly assigned tasks to the project participants, students showed their capabilities of goal-setting, scheduling, time management and problem solving. Specifically, students, during discussion times, were able to decide on the themes, storylines and occurrences of activities and events and make necessary adjustments in case of conflicts. Moreover, the spirit of teamwork was another feature which was about communicating with teammates, indicating a sign of accountability and support. In fact, participants could communicate updates on their part of the project as they occurred or at the end of the day, which contributed to the smooth run of the whole session. Those indicators proved the project as a place where students could actually conduct project administration, which was believed to be essential for their future career. Besides, information taken from the final checklist also showed relatively positive results.

Table 1. *Participants’ responses on organisational skill*

Indicator	Goal setting	Task allocation	Scheduling	Time management	Problem solving
Percentage of respondents	87	63	87	53	47

Table 2. *Participants’ responses on teamwork*

Indicator	Shared goals	Clear tasks and responsibilities	Well-specified roles	Communication
Percentage of respondents	100	93	70	93

According to table 2, setting goals and scheduling were top of the list of indicators of organisational skills

which accounted for 87% of the participants, followed by task allocation and time management. The numbers indicated that students were better at planning, but when it comes to running the project and keeping work according to plan, it was more challenging to them. Especially, problem solving was still the area which exposed least enhancement with 47% of participants saying they were good at that. In terms of teamwork skill, highly positive results were achieved with more than 90% of respondents indicating they had good performances in understanding shared goals, communication of messages and making tasks and responsibilities clear to one another.

Another important feature which was observed during the organisation of the whole project was students’ English skills. One of the most appealing aspects of this category was the fluency and natural style in speaking. Actually, the participants were able to speak without pausing often to look for words; pausing only occurred when they needed to look for ideas. As observed during the discussion and masterclass sessions, English was spoken very often except for the times when complicated concepts needed to be clarified. In this stage, fluency was in above average but speaking was conducted in a natural style, sometimes with colloquial expressions and even slangs. The filming stage witnessed a difference. In particular, fluency was in higher degree and more complex language structures were used and content organisation occurred, which showed that discourse management was another good point. During the observations, several words and phrases were noted down as indicators of the use of discourse markers, most common of which were ‘If I have to talk about...’, ‘One reason is that...’, ‘another point I would like to add is...’ etc. Certainly, the rate of using those phrases were getting higher and higher, showing that the participants steadily made it a skill from what was repeated over time and building habits, which is believed to be among the initial phrases to gain learning inspiration and to develop independent-learning.

By investigating the assessment using speaking skill marking rubrics, it was shown that fluency was the area which experienced the most positivity with 63% of performances given an 8 or above. It was followed by grammatical accuracy and pronunciation which received 8 points or above in 16 out of 30 performances (accounting for 53%). Lexical resources were least positively performed among the four areas, in which 12 out of 30 performances were given an 8 or above.

Table 3. *Participants’ speaking performances*

Grammatical range, pronunciation	53%
Fluency and coherence	63%

Lexical resources

40%

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, learning through projects could happen in a variety of educational settings, areas of expertise and organisational patterns. With the EFL context, project-based learning offers learners opportunities to get involved in real communication and administration which could hardly be available within classrooms, gradually giving the context more characteristics of ESL – English as a second language. In addition to language and communication skills, other essences could benefit learners as they make self-improvements in several aspects such as organisational skills, team work, problem-solving and decision-making. Projects are of different styles and forms; however, making use of them in order to fit within certain purposes requires a critical and creative mindset of organisers so that no projects could be considered invaluable.

Faculty of English Language, Lac Hong University, with a team of youthful lecturers, is highly concerned over an environment where learners could perform their speaking authentically and effectively; therefore, extra-curricular activities always receive an extensive deal of attention, one of which was The NNA Late Night Show project. It is recommended projects of that kind be organised more frequently and professionally with the involvement of more lecturers and guest experts so that the activities can be more academically-oriented and attractive to a bigger number of learners. As for other research studies on this topic planned to be conducted, more observations and assessments should be carried out so that the effectiveness and shortcomings can be clearly identified, aiming at betterness.

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