

IMPROVING WOULD-BE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING THROUGH READING CLASSES

Trinh Thi Hang¹

Received: 26 March 2025/ Accepted: 09 June 2025/ Published: 25 August 2025

<https://doi.org/10.70117/hdujs.E10.08.2025.798>

***Abstract:** This article reports the results of a study aiming to equip English majors - English language teachers-to-be with knowledge of project-based learning. A learning-by-doing approach was adopted, in which students cultivated their knowledge by doing the project themselves in reading courses. A survey questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the course to investigate students' current knowledge of project-based learning. Another survey and interviews were conducted at the end of the course to find out whether the intervention could improve students' knowledge of project-based learning and their attitude to it. The obtained results revealed that the intervention did help English majors have a deeper understanding of project-based learning and they had positive reaction to it.*

Keywords: *Project-based learning, would-be English language teachers, reading classes.*

1. Introduction

Along with the rapid development of science and technology, education is also improving dramatically to meet the requirements of the contemporary society. Education needs to focus on training students to become dynamic, creative, and capable of adapting to the state-of-the-art science and technology. That is the reason why our country is implementing a comprehensive reform of general education. 2018 General Education Curriculum with new goals requires new materials and teaching methods, which involve proactive participation of students with the proper orientation and instruction of teachers. This helps develop students' independence and critical thinking, fosters their interest in learning, as well as builds their self-confidence. This innovation in education entails diversifying learning styles comprised of teaching and learning in schools as well as in real-life environments.

Currently, the new textbooks are officially being put into use at all levels throughout the country to meet the requirements of the new general education curriculum. Global Success series have been chosen by many schools as the official textbooks for English. One of the highlights of the series is the learning project at the end of each lesson. The purpose of this activity is to help students apply the knowledge they have learned to improve real-life skills, solve problems related to learning content, and develop personal attributes.

¹ Hong Duc School; Email: trinhthihang@hdu.edu.vn

Results of a survey administered to English language teacher training students at Faculty of Foreign Languages, Hong Duc University showed that most of them had vague perception of project-based learning. In order to help these would-be teachers of English carry out project-based learning in their future classes, we need to provide them with knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes to implement project-based learning. The focus of this action research is to help English language teachers-to-be improve knowledge of project-based learning through reading classes.

2. Theoretical and Practical Framework

2.1. Concepts of Project-Based Learning

Stanley (2021) defined project-based learning as a learning-based inquiry and real-world experiences that typically entail teamwork, open-ended, needing new projects for every group of students, and student-centered, provided a more complicated description.

According to David (2008), “the core idea of Project Based Learning is that real-world problems capture students’ interest and provoke serious thinking as the students acquire and apply new knowledge in a problem-solving context. The teacher plays the role of facilitator, working with students to frame worthwhile questions, structuring meaningful tasks, coaching both knowledge development and social skills, and carefully assessing what students have learned from the experience” [2; p.80].

Project-based learning is also defined as “an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop” [4; p.2].

Stoller (2006) pointed out the characteristics of PBI as: 1) having a process and product; 2) giving students (partial) ownership of the project; 3) extending over a period of time (several days, weeks, or months); 4) integrating skills; 5) developing students’ understanding of a topic through the integration of language and content; 6) collaborating with other students and working on their own; 7) holding students responsible for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information from target language resources; 8) assigning new roles and responsibilities to students and teacher; 9) providing a tangible final product; and 10) reflecting on both the process and the product [7].

Although there are various concepts related to project-based learning, we can understand it in the most general way as follows: Project-based learning is a form of teaching in which, with the guidance of teachers, students build, acquire and form knowledge, competencies and personal attributes by themselves through implementing a project, combining theory and practice, and creating specific products.

2.2. Steps to Implement a Project

Different views can be found when it comes to dividing the stages in the process of project-based learning. The following are two of the many ways that we chose to refer to in our study.

According to Andi Stix and Frank Hrbek (2006), there are nine steps to implement a learning project and teachers can edit them to suit each specific class.

Step 1: Teachers prepare students to do projects

Step 2: Students design projects

Step 3: Students discuss and collect necessary background information for the project

Step 4: Teachers and students negotiate project evaluation criteria

Step 5: Students collect necessary documents to implement the project

Step 6: Students create projects

Step 7: Students prepare to present the project

Step 8: Students present the project

Step 9: Students reflect on the project implementation process and evaluate the project based on the criteria established in step 4.

Pham Manh Thang (2018) divided the process into five steps as follows:

Step 1. Choosing a topic for the project: Teachers select from the program to find content that is related to practice to implement the project; from there, divide learners into small groups, guide learners to choose topics. The project topic must be issues related to the learning content, linked to the practice that the learner is interested in.

Step 2. Developing an outline: The teacher guides the learner to make a plan to determine the goals, tasks to be done, implementation methods, expected time, budget, etc.

Step 3. Implementing the group project: Under the guidance of the teacher, the group will focus on performing assigned tasks such as collecting information, processing information, and gathering data to ensure the progress and direction of the project.

Step 4. Collecting results and present the project: Synthesize all analyzed results into a final product and present it in different forms such as multimedia presentations, pictures, website design, flyers, posters, etc. Those products will be reported by the group to the class.

Step 5. Project evaluation and experience drawing: After presenting the report, student groups will evaluate each other, group members will evaluate themselves, teachers will evaluate and draw experiences for the next project implementation.

In our research, we introduced these two views to the students participating in the study. Based on these ones, we negotiated to make the appropriate procedure to be applied in our reading classes.

2.3. New English Language Curriculum

According to the General Education English Language Curriculum issued with Circular No.32/2018/TT-BGDĐT dated December 26, 2018 by the Minister of Education and Training, “The general education English language curriculum shall ensure student-centered teaching approach. Students’ communicative competences in English are developed through active and creative learning activities. Teachers organize and lead the teaching process, encourage students to engage in language practice activities to the maximum extent and step by step improve their self-learning ability”.

Towards the innovation of the English language program, official learning materials, specifically English textbooks for secondary and high school students, have radically been changed in the direction of promoting the comprehensive competencies of

learners. One of the modern teaching methods, expected to bring many effective results in the active teaching and learning process, is project-based learning. It has been integrated into all lessons in the learning and teaching program for secondary and high school students. In order to help students majoring in English, would-be English language teachers, at Hong Duc University get ready to carry out project-based learning once they embark on their teaching career in the near future, it is essential that they be provided with in-depth knowledge of this teaching and learning approach.

2.4. Reading skills 6

Reading Skills 6 is the final reading skills course in the English language teacher training program at Hong Duc University. The course consists of 63 periods divided into 13 weeks. Apart from week 13 which is reserved for revision, the other 12 weeks each focusses on a different topic. Each reading lesson includes three parts: (1) Vocabulary and grammatical structures, (2) Reading skills and reading comprehension, (3) Discussion about issues related to the topic.

In this study, the participants were divided into 10 sub-groups, each of which was required to make a project related to the topic of the week assigned to them (from week 2 to week 11). They had 10 weeks to finish their project, and they were supposed to present their project in week 12.

3. The study

3.1. Subjects

Participants in the study comprised two separate groups (30 students/1 group) of third-year English majors at Hong Duc University. They were pursuing a degree in English language teacher training and would become teachers of English in the near future. These students were taking the final reading course in the curriculum - Reading Skills 6.

3.2. Research Methods

In order to measure the efficacy of the intervention program, both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized.

Quantitative method: Results of the survey questionnaire were synthesized and compared before and after the intervention program to find out whether it could improve English majors' perception of project-based learning.

Qualitative method: Interviews with the participants provided the researchers with raw data for analyzing the students' reaction and attitude to the intervention program.

3.3. Instruments

In order to find out whether this model worked well in reading classes and how the students reacted to the intervention program, different instruments were utilized in the study.

Survey questionnaires: Two survey questionnaires were administered, one before and the other after the intervention program to find out students' current knowledge of

project-based learning at the beginning of the course and their improvement at the end of the course. Survey Questionnaire 1 comprises five questions. The first question is a close-ended one pertaining to participants' perception of the degree of importance of project-based learning. The other four are open-ended questions associated with the reasons why project-based learning is important and students' knowledge of steps to implement project-based learning, possible project products, and criteria for evaluating a project. Survey Questionnaire 2 is composed of seven questions. The first four open-ended questions aim to find out whether students can better justify the importance of project-based learning and whether their knowledge of project-based learning improves. The final three close-ended questions involve their attitude to the intervention program and the difficulties they encountered when carrying out projects.

Interviews: The interviews consist of open-ended questions which delve deeper into the matters mentioned in Survey Questionnaire 2. Interviews were carried out with 15 random students from each group.

3.4. Procedure

In order for English majors to master the knowledge of project-based learning and get ready to conduct project-based learning in their English classes upon graduation, one of the best ways is for students to implement projects themselves. The focus of this action research was to improve their knowledge of project-based learning, so they had to discuss in detail the steps of doing a project, the possible products of a project, criteria for evaluating a project during the process of doing the project. Moreover, unlike usual project presentations in which only project product is presented, in this course students had to present all the aspects of doing a project in their project presentation in week 12. They had to present why they decided to choose their project, what their project product was and why they chose it among all the other possible products of a project, what their plans were. Moreover, when 1 sub-group presented their project, the other 9 sub-groups had to mark this group using the agreed marking criteria. By this way, they could perceive the importance of project-based learning, remember all the steps of doing a project, know how to choose the product of a project, and use the marking scheme to grade a project. The detailed procedure to carry out the study is shown in the following table.

Table 1. Procedure for carrying out the study

No.	Time	Description	Lecturer's tasks	Students' tasks
1	Week 1	Introduction to the study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State the purpose of the study. - Introduce project-based learning in textbooks for secondary and high school students. - Administer Survey Questionnaire 1. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be informed of the study. - Have an overview about project-based learning in textbooks for secondary and high school students. - Complete Survey Questionnaire 1.

2	Week 2	Helping students deal with Step 1: identify the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State the importance of project-based learning. - Give instructions on project implementation steps. - Introduce 10 topics corresponding to weeks 2-11 in the Syllabus for Reading Skills 6 (equivalent to 10 projects). - Divide students into 10 groups and guide them to brainstorm the possible projects for the topic they are assigned to work on. - Instruct each group to choose a suitable project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be aware of the importance of project-based learning. - Grasp the steps to implement a project. - Have an overview of the topics relevant to the reading course - Work in groups and brainstorm the possible projects related to the topic they are assigned to work on. With the guidance of the lecturer, discuss to choose the best one. - With the approval from the lecturer, decide on the project to carry out.
3	Week 3	Step 2: Making a project implementation plan	<p>Guide the sub-groups to determine project objectives.</p> <p>Guide the group to develop a project implementation plan.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Determine project objectives. - Develop an implementation plan: tasks to be done, timeline, division of tasks, implementation methods.
		Step 3: Teachers and students negotiate for project products and evaluation criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guide students to discuss and agree on project products and project evaluation criteria. - Agree on the project products for all sub-groups and a list of project evaluation criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discuss in groups and give opinions on the project products and the criteria for project assessment.
4	Week 4 to week	Step 4: Project implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guide, comment, suggest, and help groups complete projects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collect, synthesize, organize, and analyze information - Create products - Make a presentation

5	Week 12	Step 5: Project presentation	- Have all groups present their project to the whole class.	- Deliver the project presentation.
		Step 6: Project evaluation	- Instruct all the sub-groups to grade each other using the agreed marking scheme. - Evaluate all the groups using the agreed marking scheme (the final grade will be 50% from the lecturer). - Give suggestions for better projects next time.	- Know how to evaluate projects using the marking scheme. - Evaluate each other using the agreed marking scheme. (The final grade will be 50% from the average mark of all the other sub-groups). - Post-project recommendations.
6	Week 13	Closing of the intervention program	- Conduct Survey Questionnaire 2 and interview students about their reaction to the intervention program.	- Complete Survey Questionnaire 2 and answer the questions in the interview with the lecturer.

3.5. Findings and Discussions

3.5.1. Participants' perception of the importance of Project-based Learning

The survey results related to participants' awareness of the importance of project-based learning for high school students came as no surprise. The findings show that 100% of the surveyed respondents believe project-based learning is important and very important for high school students. No respondent thinks that this teaching method is not very important or not important at all. Because all the participants in the study have realized the great importance of project-based learning for high school students to achieve objectives in the new education program, this matter was not included in the survey questionnaire after the intervention program.

Regarding the reasons for including project-based learning in the new textbooks for high school students, at the beginning of the semester before carrying out the research, most students (91.7%) had a vague idea about why project-based learning is important. Just some students (8.3%) stated that this teaching method aims to develop students' creativity and independence. At the end of the semester, participants' perception of reasons for project-based learning improved significantly. They all came to know that project-based learning helps high school students in many ways: Beside cultivating students' creativity and boosting their independence, it also helps develop students' skills in detecting and solving problems; high-level thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation), soft skills (teamwork skills, communication skills, collaboration skills, negotiation skills, etc.); and allows students to learn skills in using information technology.

3.5.2. Participants' knowledge of steps to implement Project-based Learning

Before the intervention program, the participants knew little about how to implement project-based learning. When asked about the steps to implement project-based learning, 25% of the respondents generally stated that they include project preparation, and project presentation. 75% knew little about what to do during the process of carrying out a project in English classes. They just mentioned making a presentation. No participant clearly stated the specific and detailed steps to conduct a project.

After the intervention program, 91.7% of the respondents mentioned the correct steps of implementing a project comprised of (i) identifying the project, (ii) making a project implementation plan, (iii) teachers and students negotiating for project products and project evaluation criteria, (iv) project implementation, (v) project presentation, (vi) and project evaluation. The remaining 8.33% could not remember all the steps, but just some of them.

3.5.3. Participants' knowledge of possible project products

At the beginning of the semester, all participants in the study stated that the project product is a presentation. No one could point out any other type of project products. That's why in the intervention program, the researcher had to stress that project products are diverse and can take many different forms. The presentation is not a product of a project, but it is normally to show the process of doing the project and its product. In this study, we negotiated and agreed on the possible project products as follows.

Table 2. Possible products of a project

No.	Product	Description
1	Scientific reports	Scientific research in the field related to the topic of the week.
2	Articles	Newspaper or magazine articles about an event or an issue related to the topic of the week.
3	Blueprints	Design of an object, a machine or a building, etc.
4	Setup plans	A setup plan of an event, a club, a shop, a language center, etc.
5	Art products	Pictures, posters, movies, songs, poems, short stories, novels, etc.
6	Consumer products	Household items, health-enhancing items, recreational items, etc.
7	Educational products	School supplies, learning materials, etc.
8	Operation procedures	a set of step-by-step instructions for performing a task.

At the end of the semester, 100% of the respondents perceived clearly that there are various project products, which may include scientific reports, articles, blueprints, setup plans, art products, consumer products, educational products, operation procedure and so on. They were also aware that the presentation itself is not the product of a project; the purpose of the presentation is to show the process of doing the project and its product.

3.5.4. Participants' knowledge of criteria for evaluating a project

Before the intervention program, 86.6% of the respondents stated that criteria for evaluating a project in English classes were composed of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and fluency. 13.4% added some more criteria such as nice slides and eye contact. It means that they just evaluate how students deliver the presentation of the project.

In this study, with the focus of improving participants's knowledge of project-based learning, we evaluate the whole project implementation process, the project product as well as the project presentation. After much negotiation, we developed 20 criteria shown in the table below.

Table 3. Criteria for assessing a project

No.		1	2	3	4	5	
Assessment of project implementation process							
1	Importance of the project						Overall group assessment
2	Aims of the project						
3	Project product (what the project product is and how group members decided on project product)						
4	A detailed plan (steps to implement a project, timeline for the steps, resources, responsibility assignment)						
5	Equal work division among group members						
6	Project attractiveness						
7	Feasibility of the project						
8	Project Creativity						
9	Novelty of the project						
10	Difficulties during project implementation and ways to overcome them						
Assessment of project presentation							
11	Diverse and appropriate vocabulary						Individual assessment
12	Diverse and correct grammatical structures						
13	Correct pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm						
14	Degree of fluency						
15	Cohesion and coherence (structure of the presentation and cohesive devices)						
16	Degree of confidence						
17	Posture and gestures						
18	Interaction with your audience (eye contact, asking questions)						
19	Vivid illustrations						
20	Appropriate clothing						
Total score						/100

Based on the agreed criteria in the above table, the lecturer evaluated the groups as a whole and each individual in particular. In addition to the lecturer's evaluation, the groups also evaluated other groups. Peer evaluation gave students opportunities to practice project evaluation skills. This helps them be able to evaluate students' projects when they become teachers in the future.

After the intervention program, 100% participants came to know that criteria vary, depending on the negotiation between teachers and students. Moreover, one important thing they realized is that they should not only evaluate the presentation of the project but they should also evaluate the product of the project, and maybe the process of implementing a project as well.

3.5.5. Students' reaction to the intervention program

Results from the survey questionnaire at the end of the semester revealed that most of the students appreciated project-based learning in reading classes. 46.7% liked it very much, and 50% liked it. Only 3.3% did not like it very much. No student stated that they did not like it at all. Similarly, many students remarked reading lessons with project-based learning are 'very useful' and 'useful' (68.3% and 31.7% respectively). However, there still existed some difficulties for students. When asked about the biggest difficulty participants encountered when taking part in the intervention program, 38.3% claimed there was too much work. 25% lacked IT skills and 26.7% found it hard to present in front of the class. 10% complained that other members in their group were too lazy to fulfil their duty which delayed the group's process to complete their project as required.

Interviews with the participants also reinforced that although there were still some students who were not completely satisfied, most of them had positive attitude toward the intervention program. They agreed that project-based learning in reading classes helped them have an in-depth knowledge of project-based learning. They showed appreciation for it because it will be useful for them in their future job as an English language teacher.

4. Conclusion

The new textbooks designed for the new English Language Curriculum aim to develop students' language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and other soft skills of the 4.0 technology era such as teamwork skills, problem solving, research and collection, time management, analysis, synthesis of information, use of high-tech tools, cooperation skills, presentation skills; and at the same time, to promote creativity, self-reliance, and active learning of students. One of the methods to achieve the goals of the new program is project-based learning, which is included in Global Success series, the English textbooks widely chosen for secondary and high school students.

Based on the results of a survey conducted to third-year English majors who are pursuing an English language teacher training degree at Hong Duc University at the beginning of the semester, we found out that they had limited understanding of project-based learning. To help these students access this new teaching and learning method, we have made attempt to equip them with more in-depth knowledge of project-based learning. We suggested a learning-by-doing approach in which students improve their knowledge of

project-based learning by doing the project themselves in Reading Skills 6 course. During the process of implementing the project, the students had to discuss steps to carry out a project, products of a project as well as criteria for assessing a project. These aspects had to be included in the project presentation besides presenting the project product to the whole class. All groups also had to evaluate the other groups in the presentation session. After the intervention program, another survey questionnaire was administered. Findings revealed that they had more in-depth understanding of project-based learning. Interviews with participants showed that they had positive attitude to the intervention.

To be able to implement project-based learning successfully in English classes, teachers need to have required knowledge, skills, and competencies. However, this study is solely aimed at equipping would-be English language teacher with knowledge of project-based learning. More action research should be done to help them improve skills and competencies to carry out project-based learning effectively.

References

- [1] Andi Stix, Frank Hrbek (2006), *Teachers as Classroom Coaches: How to Motivate Students across the Content Areas*, Assn for Supervision & Curriculum.
- [2] David, J.L. (2008), *What Research Says About Project-Based Learning*, Educational Leadership Teaching Students to Think, 65 (5), 80-82.
- [3] Ministry of Education and Training (2018), *Circular No. 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT on the Issuance of the General Education Program*, <https://moet.gov.vn>.
- [4] Moss, D., & Van Duzer, C. (1998), *Project-Based Learning for Adult English Language Learners*, Washington DC: National Center for ESL Literacy Education
- [5] Pham, M. T. (2018), *Applying Project-Based Teaching Methods in the Civic Education Subject for 11th Grade at the Practice School - Ho Chi Minh City University of Education*, Scientific Journal, 15(1) 162-172, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education.
- [6] Stanley, T. (2021), *Project-based Learning for Gifted Students: A Step-by-Step Guide to PBL and Inquiry in the Classroom (2nd eds)*, Routledge.
- [7] Stoller, F. (2006), *Establishing a Theoretical Foundation for Project-Based Learning in Second and Foreign Language Contexts*. In G. H. Beckett, & P. C. Miller, Eds., *Project-Based Second and Foreign Language Education: Past, Present, and Future* (pp. 19-40), Information Age Publishing.