INVESTIGATING THE INFLUENCE OF PROJECT-BASED TASKS ON FRESHMEN TO IMPROVE PRODUCTIVE SKILLS AT SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES - TOURISM

KHẢO SÁT TẦM ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA PHƯƠNG PHÁP DẠY HỌC QUA DỰ ÁN CHO SINH VIÊN NĂM NHẤT NHẰM CẢI THIỆN KĨ NĂNG PHÁI SINH TẠI TRƯỜNG NGOẠI NGỮ - DU LỊCH

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ABSTRACT

The backbone of every interesting in-class lesson is how it can capture the attention of students. At School of Languages and Tourism, however, this is a common dilemma for many teachers of the English subject. The following research would focus on providing a solution to this problem by proposing integrating project-based tasks into the curriculum. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of project-based approach in teaching productive skills for students. By using quantitative and qualitative method, the research seeks to answer the question how beneficial project-based tasks would be for freshmen at School of Languages and Tourism, and how it would be received by them.

Keywords: *Project-based approach, productive skills.*

TÓM TẮT

Cốt lõi của một bài giảng hấp dẫn là cách nó có thể khiến người học tập trung chú ý. Tuy vậy, tại Trường Ngoại ngữ - Du lịch, đây lại là một vấn đề nan giải của nhiều giáo viên, đặc biệt là giáo viên bộ môn tiếng Anh. Nghiên cứu sau đây sẽ tập trung vào việc đề xuất tích hợp phương pháp dạy học qua dự án vào chương trình giảng dạy để giải quyết vấn đề này. Nghiên cứu sẽ đánh giá mức độ hiệu quả của phương pháp dạy học qua dự án để dạy kĩ năng phái sinh cho sinh viên. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp định lượng và định tính để trả lời cho câu hỏi liệu phương pháp dạy học qua dự án sẽ có hiệu quả đến mức nào và thái độ của sinh viên đối với phương pháp dạy học này như thế nào.

Từ khóa: *Phương pháp dạy học qua dự án, kĩ năng phái sinh.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationale of the study

Students in School of Languages and Tourism are taught mainly by task-based methods. The advantage of this approach is students will get to practice language in an authentic context and is practical to their major, since the textbooks are tailored for each discipline (i.e. Mechanical Engineering, Accounting & Auditing, Information & Technology, etc.), but this approach is not without flaws. Adding project-based tasks into the curriculum can complement what task-based lacks. Kavlu wrote that project work incorporates real-life communicating scenarios (analyzing, deciding, editing, rejecting, organizing, delegating, etc.) and frequently calls for multi-disciplinary abilities that can be applied from other topics, aside from the pleasure factor [5]. Overall, it encourages higher level thinking as opposed to only mastering words and patterns. As such, the research seeks to answer the question whether project-based teaching method would be effective as an approach to teach English in School of Languages and Tourism, and how it would be received by the students.

1.2. Significance of the study

The downside of solely applying task-based method is that the activities in every unit are identical, potentially making students feel bored of doing the same tasks repeatedly. Besides, although the tasks are authentic, some require the students to have background knowledge of the social context on which it was based, and it would be challenging for the majority of freshmen since they have not come into contact with the English-speaking countries' culture. Finally, there are usually 5 - 7 tasks in one unit, so it is expected that students do not have enough time to practice all of them. The teachers will mainly cover the relevant tasks in class, and will assign the remaining tasks for students to do at home, either individually or in pairs/groups. In most cases, students will fumble their assignment since they are not used to doing everything on their own or will make mistakes but do not know how to correct it by themselves. Consequently, even though the curriculum looks good on paper, it has yet to yield desirable results for both teachers and students.

To sum up, the tasks in the textbook are useful and practical in theory. That being said, the students do not

actually get much from them since they do not have actual motivation to seriously practice (because they are bored or do not understand what to do) or feel it is too complex and takes too much time, etc.). This mindset makes most students get low marks for the English subject, making them even more reluctant to actually devote their time to study English seriously.

The attainment of achievable goals is the primary focus of both task-based and project-based approach. Both methods have benefits and drawbacks, but the obvious benefit of project-based learning is the motivating factor, in that students can see the meaning of their work in the long term, and thus are more likely to take their work seriously [1].

1.3. Research aim

This paper seeks to evaluate how freshmen at School of Languages and Tourism receive project-based assignment. It also takes into consideration how effective it would be to facilitate freshmen's productive skills using project-based method.

1.4. Scope of the study

The study involves 4 classes with 120 freshmen, who major in Business English at School of Languages and Tourism, Hanoi University of Industry, which is located in Campus A: Minh Khai ward, Bac Tu Liem District, Hanoi. The overall English proficiency of these students is from A1 to B1, according to CEFR. The project-based tasks are integrated into the curriculum of these 4 class. The study also includes four English teachers who have over 4 years of teaching experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Project-based approach, an overview

According to Oxford Dictionary, a project is "a piece of work involving careful study of a subject over a period of time, done by school or college students." Tan defines projects as assignments focused on issues or problems which involve students in design, problem-solving, decision-making, or research activities, offering students the ability to work reasonably independently for an extended time, resulting in practical products or presentations.

Moss and Duzer elucidated that project-based approach is "an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop", whereas Lam further explained PBA is a learner-centered approach, and it gives students chances to work independently to solve challenging questions or problems over an extended time period.

As stated by Kubiatko and Vaculová [8] defined project-based learning as a learner-centered approach in which students have to provide a solution to a problem, often in the form of a piece of work (a report, a presentation, a play, etc.). Assignments in the form of project-based would take a considerable length of time and involve a combination of educational activities. In this approach, teachers will assume the role of an advisor, rather than an authority, and guide students to complete their work.

Finally, project-based activities could boost students' enjoyment and engagement in learning. In addition, it could raise students' motivation since most of the tasks are authentic, meaningful and relevant to their major. Furthermore, with project-based tasks, students will have more time to perfect their work, since one project can last from a week to a whole semester [1]. When they see the work that they do have actual meaning, they might be further motivated and more interested in studying the subject actively.

With so many definitions provided by various renowned researchers, the author decided to combine these definitions to guide this paper.

There are some types of assignment stemmed from this approach that are applicable to the current situation at School of Languages and Tourism.

2.1.1. Writing portfolio

Over the course of the whole semester, students would be given a weekly writing topic that corresponds with the unit they learn in class. Each week, the teacher will select 5-6 writings and give comments, and the students will write the second version and make improvements on the mistakes they have made. At the end of the semester, students can look back and reflect on how much progress they have made and the areas they need to work on more.

Even though this type of assignment is similar to what the students are already doing, the difference is that their writing will be corrected weekly; therefore, they will need to take their homework more seriously. As of now, students only need to submit their writing on EOP, and many problems have come up with this system, such as plagiarism, copying each other's work, or outright submit an irrelevant writing just for the sake of completing the assignment. Due to the number of students and classes that one teacher has to undertake, he or she might miss these violations, and students gain nothing from writing assignment. Hence, a writing portfolio could be beneficial for non-English major students.

One more benefit of writing portfolio is that teachers do not have to mark every writing error, since holistic rubric is more favored for this type of assignment.

2.1.2. Presentation project

Presentation is a familiar task, and the students are required to this every lesson, be it presenting in groups, in pairs, or an individual talk. However, those are all in-class presentations, where students have 10 to 15 minutes to prepare at most. This is particularly daunting for non-English major students, in which they have to come up with ideas in a short span of time, all while having to integrate the vocabulary and grammar structure they have just learned earlier into their talk. It is even more challenging for freshmen who have not got used to the higher education life.

With presentation project, the teacher could assign students to work in groups and prepare a presentation about one of the topics that they study in the semester.

Students will be given time to do research (with instruction and guidance from their teacher), make PowerPoint slides for illustration, then deliver the presentation. Naturally, this is a big project, so the teacher will assist all groups along the way. The day of the presentation can be at the end of term so that the students could have ample time to prepare and perfect their work. Having more time to do research and select vocabulary and grammar to use in the presentation could boost students' confidence in their part. Plus, a familiar topic that they have studied in the semester could make them see all that they are doing is practical to their major, so they may put more effort into it.

2.2. Freshman

As defined by Oxford Dictionary, a freshman is a first-year student at a university or a college. Plus, based on the author's own, personal observation, the freshmen from Hanoi University of Industry have some common characteristics: eager to learn but afraid to voice their opinion; generally not good at English, especially vocabulary and productive skills. There are also students who are not enthusiastic about learning English for reasons stated earlier.

2.3. Research gap

The aforementioned studies are indeed extensive, and although there has been ample research related to this topic done in Vietnam, the same cannot be said for the situation in School of Language and Tourism in particular. Therefore, there is no precedent to measure the effectiveness of integrating project-based approach into the school's curriculum. This paper hopes to shed a light on this matter.

2.4. Research question

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the survey and the interview were conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the responses of the freshmen at School of Languages and Tourism towards the application of project-based learning into their curriculum?

2. Would project-based approach help improve teaching productive skills for freshmen at School of Languages and Tourism?

3. METHODS

This paper aims to analyze students' reaction towards performing project-based tasks and how effective it would be in fostering their productive skills for non-English majors. The research questions will be answered by using both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. The tools used to collect data are interviews and questionnaire. The author conducted interviews with four English teachers, and handed out questionnaire forms for 120 freshmen of 4 classes of the Department of Business Administration at School of Languages and Tourism.

3.1. Research setting

This research is conducted at School of Languages and Tourism - Hanoi University of Industry, with target participants being non-English major freshmen and teachers of English faculty. The data-collecting process lasts for a semester, with five teachers and 120 students involved.

3.2. Participant selection

A questionnaire and an interview were used to answer the research question and fulfill the study objective. In this study, 120 freshmen from four different classes who specialized in Business Administration at Hanoi University of Industry were chosen to answer the questionnaire. Since most of them possess the same level of English proficiency, out of 120 students, 5 of them were selected randomly to participate in the interview. In addition, four teachers who taught Business English were also chosen to be interviewed.

3.3. Data collection instrument

A questionnaire and an interview were employed to answer the two research questions.

3.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire method is chosen as it enables the author to collect a large amount of data in a short period of time. The questionnaire was designed by the author to collect the essential data. Two multiple-choice questions and a 5-point Likert scale were included in the questionnaire. All questions focus on determining students' attitude towards studying following project-based approach, and how they see their productive skills improved after a semester.

3.3.2. Interview

Data from the questionnaire alone is insufficient, as it might be hard to interpret the meaning behind participants' choices, not to mention some students might choose the answers randomly. The interview method will rectify this drawback by reporting students' reasons and further explanations behind their choices. This interview was conducted based on the results from the questionnaire. For this interview, five students were selected randomly to answer a set of questions. These questions are closely related to the questionnaire, seeking to find more details and explanations regarding their choices. Furthermore, four teachers of English were also asked to participate in this interview. The interviews are transcribed and then interpreted to serve the purpose of this study.

3.4. Data collection procedure

First, the questionnaire was handed out directly to 120 students who were chosen to participate in the study. The questionnaire seek to find out students' attitude towards project-based tasks and how effective students think they are for their study. Before giving out the questionnaire, the author explained the purpose of the research, and then the participants were asked to complete the questionnaire in 10 minutes. During this time period, the author waited and was ready to answer any questions from the students.

After analyzing the results from the questionnaire, four teachers, along with five students who were selected randomly, joined in the interview. The interview aims to further elaborate the students' choices in the questionnaire,

as well as the teachers' reactions towards using project-based tasks during the semester, and whether there were any difficulties in implementing project-based tasks in class (i.e with the students, with the content). During this interview, their answers were recorded at the author's request and the interviewees' approval.

3.5. Data analysis method

When all of the data is gathered, they will be analyzed by both quantitative and qualitative methods via questionnaires and interviews, respectively.

3.5.1. Quantitative method

The answers from the questionnaire were analyzed using quantitative method. Specifically, Microsoft Excel was used for interpreting the data, namely to count the frequency of participants choosing each criterion in the two multiple-choice questions, then calculate their percentage. The 5-point Likert Scale was also analyzed by frequency and percentage.

3.5.2. Qualitative method

The author interviewed five students to figure out the rationale behind their answer in the questionnaire, as well as five teachers regarding their experience of teaching using project-based approach throughout the semester.

The interview data interpretation was followed by Dudovskiy's framework [4]:

"**Word and phrase repetitions** - scanning primary data for words and phrases most commonly used by respondents, as well as words and phrases used with unusual emotions;

Primary and secondary data comparisons - comparing the findings of interview/focus group/observation/any other qualitative data collection method with the findings of literature review and discussing differences between them;

Search for missing information - discussions about which respondents did not mention aspects of the issue, although you expected them to be mentioned;

Metaphors and analogies - comparing primary research findings to phenomena from a different area and discussing similarities and differences."

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. Questionnaire results

During the first semester of year 2022-2023, four English teachers who teach Business English applied project-based tasks into their teaching. Students of the four classes were asked to submit weekly writing assignment, then compile them into a writing portfolio at the end of the semester. Plus, they were asked to do a big group presentation on the last lesson of the semester. Naturally, many difficulties arose during process, as most freshman students are unfamiliar with such daunting tasks. Thanks to the support from the teachers, their assignment proceeded smoothly and finished with few hiccups.

Table 1. Students' responses towards the application of project-based learning into their curriculum

Attitude	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Love it	68	56.7
Like it	34	28.3
Normal	18	15
Dislike it	0	0
Not care	0	0
Total	120	100

Overall, the analysis result shows that more than half of the participants took a liking to project-based assignment. Only 15% of the participants expressed nonchalance towards the approach, whereas 85% of them showed interest in this new form of assignment. No participant had negative feelings towards project-based learning. Hence, the implementation of project-based tasks had received positive welcome by the students.

All 120 students expressed they are more enthusiastic to study English after a semester of doing project-based tasks. More than 80% of participants thought these tasks help them better digest and remember the lesson, whereas about 11% to 15% of participants saw no difference in their comprehension. Finally, a majority of students became more active during the lesson, with only around 3% of students disagreed.
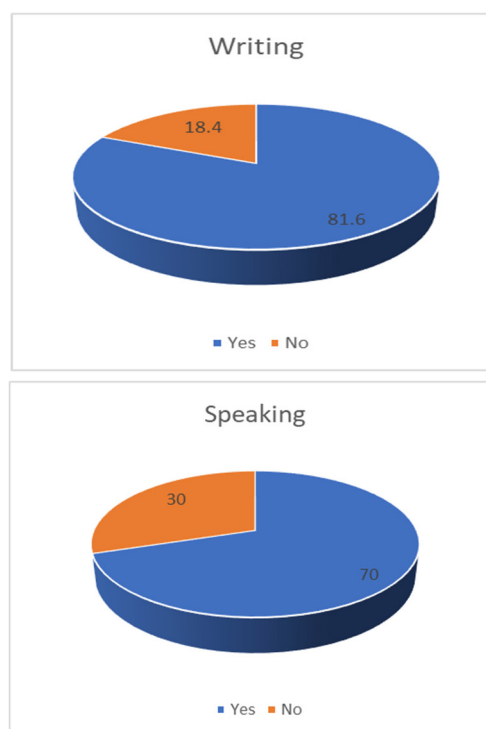

Figure 1. Student's self-assessment regarding improvement in their productive skills

In general, more than half of the participants showed improvement in their productive skills, with only about 18% did not see improvement for writing and 30% did not see improvement for their speaking.

Table 2. Impact of implementing project-based tasks into the curriculum

Impact	Totally agree		Agree		Disagree		Totally disagree	
	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
Enjoy studying English more	104	86.7	16	13.3	0	0	0	0
Understand the lesson better	40	33.3	66	55	14	11.7	0	0
Remember the lesson better	50	41.7	52	43.3	18	15	0	0
Participate more in class	100	83.3	16	13.3	4	3.4	0	0

4.2. Interview results

The consensus was that students like to perform project-based tasks during the semester. All 5 intervewees agreed that when they work on their project-based assignment, they found it meaningful and the tasks gave them purpose and actually motivated them to study English more seriously in order to have a good final product. They also agreed that they became more focused during the in-class lesson and took notes more seriously in order to complete their assignment and get better grades. Lastly, all 5 students think project-based tasks have a positive influence on their productive skills, largely because they were given more time to complete the assignment, hence they felt more confidence in their final product.

For the teachers, generally they think project-based tasks are effective in teaching productive skills for their students. The teachers observed that the majority of their students were more focused during the lesson, and were more confident with their product.

The difficulties during the semester that the teachers saw were: 1) most students fumbled at the start of the semester, since it was all new to them; 2) many students were shy to ask the teachers for assistance in the first few weeks; 3) with weaker students, they were still uncertain of their final product, and thus not everyone received good results.

5. DISCUSSION

Following Tables 1 and 2, it is clear that project-based tasks are positively received by the participants. The number of students that see effectiveness after a semester of doing project-based assignment dominated the ones who do not by a huge margin. Plus, as can be seen from table 3, most students show improvement in both their writing and speaking skill.

The data proves that there is potential in applying project-based activities on a larger scale. The implication behind this could be huge. First, the students will get to experience different activities throughout the semester. They would be less likely to feel bored of repeating what they do in every lesson. Second, with project-based assignment, students will have more time to prepare their work. Longer preparation time could boost their confidence to showcase their work, which can lead to them liking the subject more. Finally, with writing portfolio, their essays will be commented on, which could help them improve the quality of their writing both in terms of grammar and lexical resources. As for their speaking proficiency, having more time to polish their presentation means they could have more opportunities to perfect their preparation as well as practice with their peers. Getting comments from both the teacher and their partners throughout the semester should be able to boost their speaking skill, as shown in table 3.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the author has defined the concept of project-based learning and freshman. At the same time, the author delves deeper into the effectiveness of using project-based tasks and how they are received by some students in School of Languages and Tourism. The results shows project-based tasks are effective to help improve students' productive skills, albeit weaker students still find it hard to perform the tasks. Further research are needed to see how to boost weaker students' motivation, ability and willingness to study English.

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