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Integrating Project Work into English Proficiency Courses for Pre-Service Teachers' Training

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Abstract

The effectiveness of project-based learning (PBL) on language learning outcomes is well-documented in the literature. However, research on using projects to supplement direct instruction is scarce. This study, thus, is aimed at examining the effects of integrating project work into English skills courses for pre-service teacher training courses in English teaching. The participants were fifty Vietnamese student teachers and two instructors who implemented the project component in their course instruction over two semesters. Three projects were assigned to the students as one additional activity of three courses: Grammar, English for International Communication, and Basic Reading and Writing. The students' English gain was measured by a pre-test and a post-test on English proficiency, and an interview with both students and teacher educators aimed to collect corroborating evidence on the perceived effects of project activities. The results showed that 90% of the students gained English proficiency at least by one level after one-year of training. They also reported a positive attitude, perceiving the values of project work in generating an authentic language learning environment, and enhancing their motivation, autonomous and collaborative learning skills.

Keywords: *Project-based learning, English proficiency, Motivation, Autonomy, Pre-service teacher*

The field of foreign language teaching (FLT) has witnessed the development of multiple methods and approaches alongside research achievements in linguistics and psychology and the consensus is that no best method exists (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This position is in line with the

perspective that teaching methodology is contextually situated (Holliday, 1994). In contexts where the transmission style of teaching remains a traditional practice, constructivist educational theories have gradually been inducted, but such induction may need to take account of the educational context.

Relying on a constructivist view on learning, project-based learning (PBL) has gained its position in FLT in recent decades (Beckett & Slater, 2005). Research on implementing PBL in language instruction has uncovered its differential effects on learning outcomes, as well as learners' positive evaluations towards the method (Affandi & Sukyadi, 2016; Beckett & Slater, 2005; Park & Lee, 2019; Thomas, 2000). However, a paucity of research has explored the impact of combining project work and coursework activities in training pre-service teachers of English. Drawing upon the characteristics of PBL as well as its effect on language learning, the current study reports the impact of inducting project work into English proficiency courses in an undergraduate teacher training program in Vietnam. Specifically, the study examined the impact of the training model on the trainees' English proficiency gain and their perceptions of the effects of project work.

Literature Review

Project Work and Project-based Learning

Employment of project work in education and training has passed a long history since it was first used to create opportunities for students to study beyond the 'four wall' teacher-centered lectures (Knoll, 2014). Through project implementation, students experience a realistic learning environment and apply theory to solve practical problems, thereby acquiring professional knowledge, which is closely related to thinking, action, and context (Fragoulis, 2009). More specifically, Thomas (2000) identified PBL as research on practical community problems. He summarized five typical criteria of PBL as followed:

- Projects must be a key element or unit of training, meaning that the project is both content and learning activity in the curriculum. When a project is used to complement the traditional way of teaching, this approach is not called PBL.
- The project should focus on researchable issues and questions to motivate learners to apply the core concepts and principles of a discipline. The questions, activities, performances, and products that learners make must aim to improve knowledge.
- In a project learners must participate in researching and building knowledge, through a research process.
- Learners must be proactive and autonomous in selection, decision making and implementation, without results or products being assigned by the teacher.
- The project must be practical, not like school work or an academic challenge. Products, performances, tasks, contexts, roles of implementers and participants must be realistic.

In foreign language instruction, Stoller (2006) recognized similar characteristics, but emphasized that a project needs to inspire students, giving them equal opportunity to use personal skills during group work; and the teacher should provide feedback and opportunities for students to self-assess and reflect on their work. In particular, she stressed that projects should include a series of tasks that help learners integrate language, content, and skills, providing them with opportunities to reproduce and use knowledge and skills.

In general, two basic characteristics of PBL are identified: (1) projects must be characteristic of a research problem, stimulating curiosity to explore knowledge, and (2) the project is a central

activity or unit of teaching and learning. However, in second language education, as Stoller (2006) described, the project provides tasks for language knowledge reproduction and language use and development, which slightly differs from its ultimate nature in PBL. The fact is that in the context where traditional teaching methods still prevail, the curriculum is influenced by the centralized policy, and learners may still be used to learning from teacher-fronted instruction, the effectiveness and feasibility of PBL needs consideration. In this respect, further research is essential to understand the intervention of project work into a training course or program as an additional activity.

Effectiveness of PBL in Foreign Language Instruction

Research overall has confirmed the impact of PBL on learners' learning outcomes (Thomas, 2000). Using PBL activities has proved to be effective in fostering learners' motivation, positive attitudes towards learning, and autonomous learning (Imtiaz & Asif, 2012; Levine, 2004; Van Loi, 2017; Maftoon et al., 2013). In various educational and social contexts, research on PBL in teaching English both general and academic showed that the target language skills, social skills and collaborative capacity increase substantially (Affandi & Sukyadi, 2016; Baş, 2011; Cusen, 2013; Houat, 2012; Levine, 2004; Zhang, 2015). Specifically, learners' active interaction and integration of language skills for processing information from various sources greatly impact their language skills achievement, and computer skills, especially the ability to use the Internet to search documents (Fragoulis, 2009).

A body of research at tertiary level, nonetheless, has uncovered mixed results, with most of the studies producing positive outcomes. Omar et al. (2012) studied the impact of a project-based English course for students enrolled in English medium programs at UniKL MFI University in Malaysia. They concluded that the students became more interested and positive in using English, and better in self-directed learning. Bakar et al. (2019) further found that students on a Communicative English course at Malaysian TVET College improved their listening skill by doing projects after 16 weeks better than those following a conventional teaching strategy. Similarly, Mills (2009) designed a primary French course as a joint project for language and culture learning for 47 American university students. This study showed that the students increased confidence in using French for communication with the target culture and community.

In a different way, with a long-term study in the context of Japan, Ross (2005) proved the benefits of using projects as an assessment tool to promote English learning gain. The study, which lasted 8 years, involved 2215 undergraduates enrolled in a four-semester academic English program. The participants involved eight cohorts of students divided into two groups: The first four cohorts followed traditional assessment methods such as tests, homework, and exams. The remaining cohorts studied the same program in which the evaluation method was shifted to self-assessment, group evaluation, and collaborative project. Using a TOEFL test, the researcher found that using projects for self-study and assessment had an impact on the learners' English ability. The impact was further testified by Spring (2020), who added evidence that Japanese students improved their English speaking accuracy and complexity as a result of a video project work.

For English majors specifically, research has observed similar impacts. Nazriani et al. (2018) revealed the positive effect of PBL on the interpersonal communication ability and creativity of Indonesian English-majored students at a university. Using a one group design to experiment drama projects for English majored students at a Thai university, Lawarn (2018) likewise confirmed that the project activities namely script writing, designing, casting, poster activity, improved their speaking ability.

However, research has simultaneously reported no outweighing effects of PBL on English proficiency. By comparing two groups of EFL students enrolled in an English Art-based Communication course, one of which participated in a project on reels, Park and Lee (2019) concluded that their speaking ability equally improved, but the experimental group was better in vocabulary knowledge, attitudes towards language learning, and self-efficacy. Affandi and Sukyadi (2016) similarly conducted an experiment at an Indonesian university with 78 students divided into two groups: the PBL group, and problem-based learning group. No significant difference in English proficiency was observed, but PBL proved to help students develop critical thinking, and encouraged them to participate in exploring knowledge.

In summary, most of the previous studies have pinpointed the usefulness of PBL as an approach, while some have failed to testify the effect. Nevertheless, scarce research has examined the impact of integrating project work with coursework training especially for pre-service teachers of English in contexts where the textbook-based instruction remained an irreplaceable practice like Vietnam. For this reason, this study was conducted to further inform the literature and pedagogical practice. It seeks to assess the teacher students' English proficiency gain and their perceptions of the effects of project work.

For the purpose of the current study, project work was used as a major task implemented in parallel with other coursework activities such as lecturing, controlled and guided practice. Learners collaborated with peers in a group over an extended period of time, and completed a specific product. The main objective of the project activity was to create an authentic language learning environment. Its basic characteristics involves creativity in product presentation; focus on real-life or relevant topics; use of the target language in project presentation; initiatives in selecting and making decisions; and group collaboration.

Research Methods

Design and Participants

Drawing upon the rich literature on the effectiveness of PBL, project work was designed into English skills courses as an assessment component over two semesters of an undergraduate teacher training program. This approach is considered an innovation in view of classroom research. Since each course was offered in two parallel classes (each approximately from 40 to 50 seats) either of which the trainees could choose to enroll in, a one-group pretest-posttest design was opted for to ensure that the whole cohort had the same equal opportunity to engage in project work.

The study lasted two consecutive fifteen-week semesters with a five-week summer break in between. During that time, the students took English for International Communication, Basic Pronunciation, Pre-intermediate Grammar, Pre-intermediate Listening and Speaking, Intermediate Grammar, Advanced Pronunciation, and Pre-intermediate Reading and Writing, apart from the Vietnamese-medium courses. Because the classes were run in parallel, to ensure equality and consistency, we chose to integrate project work into three courses taught by the same two instructors namely English for International Communication (Teacher 1) and Pre-Intermediate Grammar (Teacher 2) in one semester, and Pre-intermediate Writing and Reading (Teacher 2) in the other.

The trainee population was 86 students who were admitted into the English teacher training program on the competitive basis using their test scores including English, Literature and Mathematics attained in the national examination held by the Ministry of Training and Education and administered by the provincial Departments of Training and Education. Before the study began, they had spent one semester fulfilling a five-week military training session and completing three

Vietnamese-medium courses and one course on Basic Grammar.

Out of the total population, 50 students, including 45 females and 5 males, volunteered to participate in both proficiency tests before and after the treatment. Therefore, their data were suitable for the purpose of the current report. Twenty of them graduated from commune high schools, 16 from district town schools, and 14 from city schools. Their ages ranged from 20 to 21. Eleven participants had experienced English study since they entered Grade 3, and the other 39 started since Grade 6. The school English curriculum aimed to train them to attain a proficiency level equivalent to A2-CEFR. The participants also involved two female instructors who implemented project work in their courses. They both held a Master's degree in TESOL. Teacher 1 was 30 years old and had taught English for eight years, and Teacher 2 was 42 years old and had a 20-year experience.

Data Collection Instruments

Two main instruments including a proficiency test and an interview were employed for data collection. English proficiency testing was open to all the students on the program before the experiment and after two semesters of training which included a project component.

The proficiency tests (pre and post) were extracted from past-version IELTS tests on English proficiency of Cambridge ESOL International, General Module format for three reasons. Firstly, the students' knowledge and skills were mostly relevant to the general topics which the tests assessed. Secondly, the test format was relatively familiar to the students, so face validity was guaranteed. Thirdly, the skills and competencies measured were in line with the curriculum goals. Each test consisted of three written papers: a 35-minute listening paper, a one-hour reading paper, and a one-hour writing paper. For the speaking test, ten common topics were selected and each topic was employed for two successive examinees.

As the students worked on the projects in coherent groups, a semi-structured interview was conducted in groups. We informed the students that the interview was to understand their feelings and opinions about doing project work, and any groups could volunteer to participate. This arrangement aimed to create a comfortable safe environment for the students to share their ideas, not a focus group discussion (see [appendix](#)). They were also aware that their data would be used for research, and their identity would be anonymized. As a result, two groups with eight students volunteered to partake in the interviews which lasted approximately 20 minutes each and Vietnamese, their mother tongue, was used during the interviews.

An individual interview was also conducted in Vietnamese with the two instructors at the end of the treatment, which lasted approximately 15 minutes. The purpose was to corroborate the trainees' perceptions of the project work. Both interviews focused on the impacts of project work on English learning and additional skills, and the feasibility of project activities (see [appendix](#) for questions).

Procedure

Informing. Before the study began, all the students were informed that the new policy required all graduates from English teacher education programs to achieve an advanced level of proficiency equivalent to C1-CEFR (National Foreign Languages 2020 Project, 2013; SRV, 2008), and that the Department trialed a project component to provide opportunities for further practice. It was also the opportunity for them to experience project work as the new English curriculum they would teach in the future includes project activities. They were also informed of the proficiency tests as the opportunities to assess their progress and regulate their own learning, and the test scores would be used for research with measures to ensure confidentiality. They had a choice to sit for the tests by registering for them, and there was no imposition from the Department.

Test administration. The pretest was administered at the beginning of the study, and the posttest was given one week after they had completed all the last semester courses. During the test administration, the participants were placed into two separate rooms supervised by two proctors each. The three paper tests namely listening, reading and writing lasted three hours, with a five-minute break. The speaking test was conducted in one separate session with two examiners who were experienced English instructors and held Master's or Doctorate degrees from an English speaking country. They had already attended training workshops about how to assess speaking and writing papers organized by British Council experts invited by their university. Two test rooms were arranged with 25 candidates being placed into each room. All the speaking and writing papers were marked by two independent raters, and an average point was obtained for each paper before the data was entered into SPSS for analysis. Grading followed the 9-point scale of IELTS and marking schemes for speaking and writing (IELTS, n.d.b).

Intervention. Before the treatment, both instructors discussed the features of projects with the main researcher and agreed on the procedure for implementing a project. A common procedure consisted of three stages: (1) introducing project requirements, (2) planning and implementing with the teacher's support and monitor, (3) reporting and evaluating. Then, the project work was intervened into the program for two consecutive semesters. Three projects were assigned and counted as one assessment component of the courses (30%). For English for International Communication, the students made a video clip of a film, skit, play, or any production on a communication topic over 14 weeks. The students could film themselves acting, or create a multimedia clip, all with self-written scripts. For Pre-intermediate Grammar, the students were engaged in researching a grammar topic of the course and presenting their results, which spanned over five weeks. For Pre-intermediate Reading and Writing, they had to create a booklet, guidebook, or a manual on a specific topic of the course, and this project lasted 12 weeks.

A common procedure was that on the first week, project requirements were introduced to the students, and assessment criteria were discussed and negotiated. On the third week, each group discussed and chose a topic, and planned their work under the teacher's supervision. During the implementation, the lecturer held report briefings or tutorials with each group. Two weeks before product showing, the students submitted their drafts for the teacher overall feedback. The final products were showcased to the whole class, and peer and teacher evaluations were conducted, using the assessment criteria established at the beginning of the courses.

Alongside were the coursework activities which were based on three textbooks: *People Like Us, Too – Level 2* (Greenall, 2004); *Northstar 2 – Reading and Writing* (Haugnes & Molher, 2009), and *Focus on Grammar 3: An Integrated Skills Approach* (Fuchs, Bonner, & Westheimer, 2012).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics of the test data, and non-parametric Z-tests (Wilcoxon) were conducted to compare the results before and after the intervention. Individual mean scores were categorized into CEFR levels according to the scale standards of IELTS (n.d.a) (level 1 <3.5; level 2 = 3.5 – 4.0; level 3 = 4.5 – 5.0; level 4 = 5.5 – 6.5; level 5 = 7.0 – 8.0) for each individual skill, and averaged to obtain the group overall mean. The interviews were transcribed and coded for the perceived impacts on language learning, motivation, and other skills.

Results

English Proficiency Gain

As seen from Figure 1, the test results showed a substantial gain over two semesters. Before the experiment, 8% of students had level 1, 34% reached level 2, 44% possessed level 3, and 14% level

4. However, after two semesters of training with the integration of project work, the students' level of English significantly increased. Specifically, all the students of level 1 moved up to level 2, while the percentage of level-2 students remarkably dropped from 34% to 8%, causing a rise by 10% in level 3, whereas the percentage of level-4 students grew from 14% to 34%. Of the seven students who started with level 4, two attained level 5 (equivalent to the advanced level of CEFR), accounting for a rise by 4% of the total students. The other five (10% of the sample) remained at level 4.

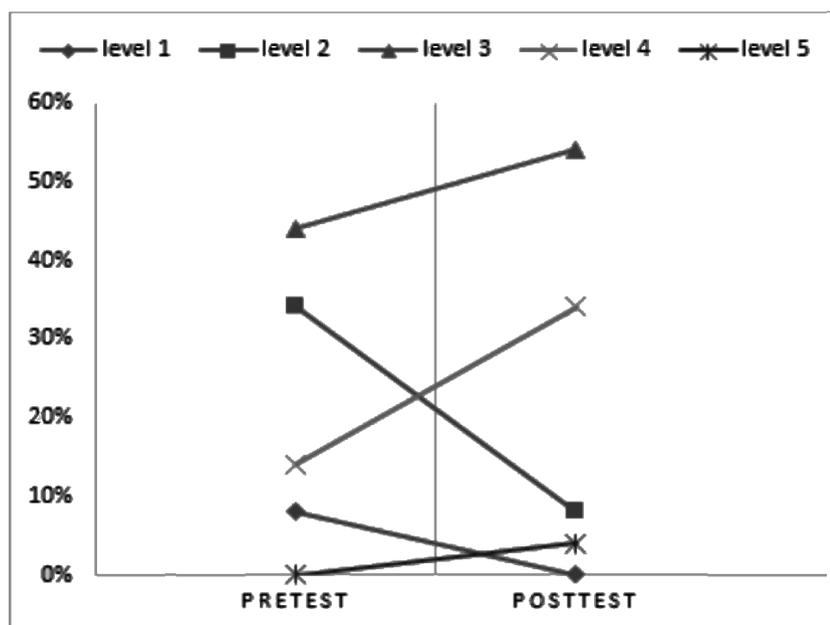


Figure 1. Pretest-Posttest English Proficiency Scores of Trainees by Level (n=50)

Table 1. English Proficiency Levels of Trainees by Skills (n = 50) *

Skills	Pretest			Posttest		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Listen	3.40	1.23	1	4.71	.97	3
Read	4.68	.87	3	4.82	.85	3
Write	4.67	.96	3	5.34	.82	4
Speak	4.85	1.09	3	5.69	1.07	4

*(level 1 < 3.5; level 2 = 3.5-4.0; level 3 = 4.5-5.0; level 4 = 5.5-6.5; level 5 = 7.0-8.0)

Comparison of the average scores of four English skills of the same cohort before and after the treatment further revealed that they made significant improvement across all four skills. The overall average scores increased by at least 0.2 (reading) and at most 1.41 (listening). Speaking and writing proficiency increased by one level both from level 3 to level 4 despite the slight difference in mean scores. In contrast, the students' listening proficiency improved the most from 3.4 (level 1) to 4.7

(level 3) and reading remained unchanged with a slight growth in the mean score.

Table 2. Statistics of Mean Difference Between Pretest and Posttest by Skills

	Listen post – Listen pre	Read post – Read pre	Write post – Write pre	Speak post – Speak pre
Z	-4.841 ^b	-.868 ^b	-4.593 ^b	-5.170 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.385	.000	.000

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test b. Based on negative ranks.

The non-parametric Z-test (Wilcoxon rank) results in Table 2 confirmed that the score growth for these skills was statistically significant ($p < .05$), while for reading ability, the score gain was not statistically significant ($p > .05$). The general statistical results of the time difference (Table 3) further showed that the average points increased significantly ($p < .05$)

Table 3. Statistics of Within-group Mean Difference

	N	M	SD.	Min.	Max.	Post-test mean – Pre-test mean	Z Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Posttest	50	5.146	.7869	4.1	7.4	0.75	.000
Pretest	50	4.400	.7245	2.9	6.1		

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test b. Based on negative ranks.

In summary, the cohort’s overall English proficiency improved, with most of the students levelling up after one-year experiencing the project work in conjunction with course work activities in English proficiency training. The gain was evident in almost all the skills except reading comprehension. Ten percent of the whole cohort made no progress.

Perceptions of Gains

The interview data revealed an overall positive attitude towards project activities. All the student interviewees said that they enjoyed studying English by doing projects for the benefits they had experienced. These comments were further corroborated by the instructors.

Skills development. Overall, the students appreciated the contributions of project activities to their development in different ways. One of the recognized benefits of working on projects is the opportunity to improve English proficiency. Through teamwork on the projects and product handling, the students could extend their ability to understand and express themselves more precisely. Student 1 commented on this aspect, which was further confirmed by Student 2

Student 1: I gave it 4 out of 5 points because the project required us to find materials and synthesize them. Therefore, we had to understand exactly what is in the material, and then used our own language to report it. By that way, we greatly improved vocabulary and how to write a good sentence.

Student 2: Our language use is more refined and flexible through working together to complete the projects.

However, one student who remained at the score of 5.5 (of the 10% students reported in the quantitative results) commented that he felt little improvement in his language proficiency because

he spent much time on the project work at the expense of individual intensive practice.

The project work also offered students the opportunity to practice and develop other skills. Teamwork skills are recognized as one that improved as the students were engaged in the activity. Although working in groups was sometimes difficult, they could manage themselves to negotiate with one another. Student 3 in a group commented, "There were some conflicts, but we negotiated to come to an agreement, and it taught us how to work in groups". Student 4 further explained:

I learned how to listen to the opinions of other members and then gave comments to contribute to the development of those ideas, to be corrected by members of the group when making reports and drawing experience.

However, Student 2 expressed preference for working with close friends rather than with members she was not acquainted with because of face threatening. She said,

Sometimes my group was split between different opinions. For me, it will be quite difficult to work in a group with members who just knew me or don't know me because I am often afraid of proposing ideas or making comments on other members.

Other self-study skills including planning, presentation, and computer skills were also reported as the learning outcomes that project activities generated. Student 4 said:

They [project activities] helped me develop information technology skills, video recording and editing techniques, document collection skills, reporting skills, etc. However, in a group you will each take on a different role. Therefore, one will be good at one thing but weak at another, you will not develop all skills.

In particular, through project activities, the students had the opportunity to develop creative thinking. Student 1 reported how the project work helped her develop this ability.

In the past, I always followed a sample or model, but through working in groups, interacting with highly creative friends, I felt motivated to do something creative and impress other people, but still focus on required contents.

The claims above are further supported by the instructors, who admitted that the students had a rewarding experience by engaging in project activities whereby they developed many skills and abilities including autonomy.

Teacher 1: For English skills, there is a general improvement, but to what extent I am not sure; but according to my observation, students can learn different writing structures and types; and students also read more, so there might be progress.

Teacher 2: For the autonomy in learning, I see it was evident in two points: For one, students have many choices, then each group will choose to do whatever they are strong in, so it is a suitable for them to learn. In addition, they manage their own time, and sometimes they could not meet the deadlines, resulting in terrible work, but after receiving feedback on it, they adjusted and their contents became more diverse and better.

Motivation for learning and use of English. Doing projects has really generated interest among students in the learning process. Student 5 commented, "I feel that if I study alone, I will not feel interested, compared to studying with other friends. I can develop skills that I have never had before". Student 6 likewise confided, "At first I did not feel happy and interested, but then working in a group and making a film project gradually made me motivated."

In particular, the use of English becomes more natural as the project activities generated authentic interaction, motivating the students to use English actively and meaningfully. Student 7 stated this

below.

It makes a different way of learning. If we follow the textbooks, we only practice language according to a certain pattern; but with the film project, I feel my studies ..., as if my perspective on learning English has been expanded. Not only do you learn from practice in a certain form, like turning to talk to a peer and finish, here I feel I use English in real communication, interact with my peers, not just practice a sample lesson and done.

When asked whether they would recommend project activities, the interviewees highlighted the importance of studying beyond the four walls, especially through implementing projects. They believe that projects will provide true learning opportunities, making learning more fun and comfortable. The motivation factor can be achieved through project activities, and was emphasized by Student 8.

I think that the course activities should make students feel more motivated to learn English. Practice should not be confined to the classroom, ...Extracurricular activities expand our learning space. For example, when we have a project like this video, I feel like learning and relaxing.

The motivational effect was further confirmed by the instructors. To them, the project work helped students become more interested in learning English mainly because they had to apply their knowledge and skills in order to solve a problem and create a product, and also because they had their own voice. Teacher 2 commented:

Students like it a lot, because it creates something; they always explain that the product must be realistic, so they like it because they apply the learned knowledge into making products. For traditional teaching is also boring, the project creates a new learning environment, more options of content to study, so the students like it. I think the students have more choices than traditional classes.

Feasibility. When asked whether they were willing to participate in project activities in the following semesters, all the student interviewees expressed their willingness. However, they proposed that only one or two projects per semester be sufficient because of the time and workload pressure. Student 4 explained that “It is no problem for me to study individual courses, but having to complete projects in several courses simultaneously will be too demanding and overloading, and this will result in undesirable results.”

The teachers also reported a few challenges in implementing the project method. They had to spend more time planning, implementing, and organizing group feedback. Although they could take advantage of the class time, adequate time allocation would be important for each group to receive detailed feedback on their progress and products. Lack of computer skills was another challenge for the teachers as it reduced their confidence in assisting the students in handling multimedia skills. According to the instructors, any teachers who are short of computer skills would find it difficult to support students in that respect. In addition, they acknowledged the biggest difficulty was how to ensure objectivity and fairness in project assessment.

Teacher 1: It was the students' first experience in learning by doing projects, so they were not familiar with this way of learning. We spent a lot of time on tutorial sessions. Due to large class size, we had to spend extra hours after lessons. We did not have much experience in applying the project activity in teaching.

Teacher 2: The biggest difficulty was to follow and evaluate the project work from the beginning to the end because the students expressed a concern that the group work must be

evaluated objectively. A few kids worked a lot, and there was a group that asked me how to manage their work. It was generally time-consuming, and the project reviews had to be accompanied by a general evaluation, a group evaluation, a content evaluation, at each product phase, in terms of accuracy and reliability.

In terms of feasibility, the teachers generally think that project work is highly likely but there is a need to guarantee that it will not overload students as they have to take many courses over a 15-week semester whose assessment usually consists of several components namely mid-term tests, presentations, or essay assignments.

Discussion

The results presented above reveal that project activities integrated with direct classroom instruction of English overall lead to productive learning outcomes. In terms of English proficiency, the students gained by one level after one academic year of training. This finding further supports the role of project-based activities in FLT in terms of enhancing learner language proficiency as indicated in previous studies (Affandi & Sukyadi, 2016; Bakar et al., 2019; Lawarn, 2018; Mills, 2009; Nazriani et al., 2018; Ross, 2006; Spring, 2020). In particular, the levelling-up of 42% low-proficiency students (level 1 and level 2) is consistent with the findings of Omar et al. (2012), and challenges the concern that low-proficiency learners are threatened by project work and unable to control learning (Kalabzov, 2015).

The English achievement outcome may have been attributable to the fact that the project activities such as reading to find ideas, discussing, writing scripts, preparing presentations, and so on created an authentic language environment that exposed them to comprehensible input, and encouraged meaningful communication and interaction among the group members and teachers (Beckett & Millers, 2006; Grant, 2017). Scaffolding in the constructive stages (Jusoff et al., 2010) during group work and tutorials with the instructors may also explain their improvement. Specifically, the project activities promote motivation (Zhang, 2015), which in turn increases the amount of English spoken (Brent, 2018).

Although projects allow learners to integrate language skills and improve (Stoller, 2006), the students' reading failed to improve substantially probably because the projects assigned were not engaging the students to read extensively. This finding reflects the caution that the effect of PBL may depend upon the types of projects (Spring, 2020). The little improvement of 10% trainees who started with level 4 might be due to the fact that 'climbing up' the advanced level of proficiency requires more time and extensive practice (Moeller, 2013). Previous research has revealed that even training in the English rich environment for one year, only a small proportion of trainees attained the advanced level (Faez & Karas, 2019).

Furthermore, the students' perceptions were also positive in terms of the impacts of project activities on other skills namely study and inquiry skills, collaborative work and learner autonomy, adding further evidence to the previous research (Affandi & Sukyadi, 2016; Imtiaz & Asif, 2012; Levine, 2004; Mills, 2009; Nguyen, 2017; Omar et al., 2012; Maftoon et al., 2013; Nazriani et al., 2018). The development of autonomous learning might be the result of choices given to them in projects, setting goals via assessment criteria at the beginning and the peer evaluation activity conducted when all the products were showcased. Although the instructors' formative assessment comments during the tutorials were not obtained for the study, the students reported in the interview their progress in vocabulary and writing.

Projects in the current study were employed mainly to create the opportunity for extensive authentic English practice rather than a curricular unit of teaching and learning any language contents.

Therefore, the effective results as reported above cannot exclude the roles of other coursework activities. Despite the limitation of the one-group design due to ethical issues regarding equal treatment, which means that the effect of project work and direct instruction could not be distinctively isolated, it can still be inferred from the revelation of students' and instructors' comments. This revelation echoes what the literature has to say about the impacts of PBL with respect to creating an authentic language environment, and increasing learners' motivation to use English purposefully and meaningfully, instead of 'practicing it' as a usual activity in the EFL classroom.

Implications

The study offers some implications for FLT and future research. First and foremost, since the effectiveness of foreign language teaching depends upon many factors such as learners' characteristics (motivation age, and learning strategies), the nature of language acquisition and context (Brown, 2006), the implementation of any new method or approach should be contextually ecological. An English proficiency training model with project work as a supplementary component can be applicable in pre-service FLT teacher training programs in order to foster active learning, and improve learning outcomes. Project activities encourage trainees to use the target language authentically and creatively, assisting them to self-regulate their language performance.

However, consideration should be taken into the extent of workload. Specifically, PBL activities could be conducted in two ways. One way is to intervene projects into core subjects such as listening, speaking, reading and writing independently. In this way, it is essential to consider the amount of workload that students have to complete for credits in a semester. It may be less demanding if one to two projects per semester be integrated into one or two of the subjects, and alternated in the subsequent semesters. Alternatively, an inter-course project can be assigned to encourage the trainees to integrate knowledge from the separate skills courses. For the instructors, project design and assessment are two important skills which need further attention. Departmental resources and trainers can be mobilized to design highly attractive projects and formulate consistent assessment criteria to ensure fairness and consistency during implementation.

Conclusions

This study explores the effectiveness of applying PBL activities alongside coursework activities in training English proficiency in the context of an undergraduate teacher education program. The study is limited to a one-group design, but some conclusions that follow draw on the theoretical basis of PBL and empirical evidence from this study as well as the previous ones. Firstly, integrating PBL activities with coursework training has a certain impact on student learning outcomes, especially the development of overall language proficiency and increased motivation for learning. Secondly, students' positive attitudes towards and motivation for English learning and an authentic language use environment arising from project activities may function as mediating factors. Finally, project work is highly feasible in an undergraduate training program if the trainers consider the extent to which it will be designed into the program. Because the design of the current study is restricted to one group and involves non-random sampling, which limits its generalizability, future research may deploy a time series design to track the impact over longer periods of time. Additionally, more qualitative data such as teachers' feedback and students' peer evaluation could add rich evidence on the effect of project work.

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Nguyen Van Loi has been working as a teacher educator in English language teaching at Can Tho University. His major research interests involve English teaching and learning and English teacher education (including teacher cognition and change)

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Appendices

Appendix A: A Sample Project on English for International Communication

Course Description

This course aims to introduce basic communication and culture knowledge covering a wide range of topics related to the real life of people in English-speaking countries. The contents aim to improve students' culturally appropriate communication ability, training them cultural values and skills in cross-cultural communication.

Phase 1: Introducing the project work

Week 1: Introduction of the project, project purpose, products and grading criteria.

+ Raising awareness of the benefits of project work

+ Project requirements

- Students make a video clip on one of the 10 topics in the course, for different viewers, for the purpose of introducing, analyzing, criticizing and solving a cultural topic in communication.
- Students explore issues, analyze, discuss and work collaboratively in groups of 4 students.
- Product: one video clip in the form of film, drama, presentation, advertisement, etc.
- Students use English in project implementation (speaking, writing, performing, ...) to present their products.
- Duration of a clip: 10-15 minutes

+ Evaluation criteria

1. Video content (creativity, relevance, ...)
2. Presentation (interacting with audience, time, ...)
3. Creativity (animation, lively, clever, ...)
4. Teamwork (cooperation, arrangement of work, ensuring time progress, ...)
5. Cross-evaluation (after the training course, members evaluate their peers in collaboration during the project work)
6. Submit the product on time

Phase 2: Developing implementation plan

Week 2: Teachers help students develop a project implementation plan, using the worksheet below.

– Divide class into groups of 4 students (students may choose who to work with)

– Students select a topic

– Instruct students to plan according to the suggestion box below.

When	What to do	Who will do it?	Where to search for information or resources	Where to meet for discussion
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Phase 3: Information gathering and project implementation

Week 3: Teacher guides students to collect information.

- What type of information does the team need for their project?
- How to find this information? Textbook; Online resources: using search engines, which websites, books, newspapers, magazines?
- Each group meets with the teacher to present their plan and ideas, telling the specific direction of the group's project, and how to find documents

Week 4: Students conduct the project (through observation, taking notes, filming about practical issues related to the group project)

Week 5: Teachers meet with groups to monitor progress and give support and feedback. Each group reports briefly and receives feedback within 10 minutes.

Week 6: Teacher guides students to make videos, introduces application software to make videos (Window movie maker, Windows media video)

Phase 4: Progress report and feedback

Week 7-11: Students carry out the project. Teachers hold group meetings, and listen to each group report progress, and gives feedback, so that students can promptly adjust their work.

Phase 5: Complete the product

Week 12: Complete the scripts for their products

Week 13: Teacher comments on the scripts

Week 14-15: Editing and completing the products

Phase 6: Presenting products

Week 16: The teams present their products and review others' ones, teachers evaluate them.

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Appendix B: A Pre-test Sample

WRITING TEST PAPER

TIME ALLOTTED: 60 minutes

TASK 1- You should spend about 20 minutes on this task. Write at least 150 words.

You have recently gone to live in a new city. Write a letter to your English-speaking friend. In your letter

- Explain why you have gone to live in the new city.
- Describe the place where you are living.
- Invite your friend to come and see you.

TASK 2- You should spend 40 minutes on this task. Write at least 250 words about this topic.

Production of private vehicles should be reduced. Instead, public transportation should be invested more in order to reduce traffic problems and pollution.

To what extent do you agree or disagree?

Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.

A SPEAKING PAPER

DURATION: 10-12 minutes

PART 1

The examiner asks the candidate about himself/herself, his/her home, work, studies and other familiar topics.

EXAMPLE

Keeping in contact with people

- How do you usually contact your friends? [Why?]
- Do you prefer to contact different people in different ways? [Why?]
- Do you find it easy to keep in contact with friends and family? [Why?/Why not?]
- In your country, did people in the past keep in contact in the same ways as they do today? [Why?/Why not?]

PART 2

<p>Describe a party that you enjoyed. You should say: Whose party it was and what it was celebrating Where the party was held and who went to it What people did during the party and explain what you enjoyed about this party.</p>	<p>You have to talk about the topic for one to two minutes. You have one minute to think about what you are going to say. You can make some notes to help you if you wish.</p>
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PART 3

Discussion topics

Family parties

What are the main reasons why people organize family parties in your country?

In some places people spend a lot of money on parties that celebrate special family events. Is this true in your country? Do you think it is a good trend or bad trend?

Are there many differences between family parties and parties organized by friends? Why do you think this is?

National celebrations

What kinds of national celebration do you have in your country?

Who tends to enjoy national celebrations more: young people or old people? Why?

Why do you think some people that national celebrations are a waste of government money? Would you agree or disagree with this view? Why?

(Source: <https://www.ielts-gt.com/speaking-sample/speaking-sample-22>)

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Appendix C: Interview Questions

For Students

1) Do you like studying English by doing projects? Why?

Prompts: English skills development/other skills/learner autonomy/feasibility of doing projects

2) Was the time allotted to the projects suitable for your management?

3) What do you think about the project topics?

Prompts: Like them? Why?

4) Were you allowed to choose the directions for your projects?

Prompts: Your opinions on the right to choose the project directions?

5) Were the teacher's explanations about the requirements for the projects clear?

6) Did the teacher guide you during the process? How?

7) What do you think about the teacher's assessment? Were you informed of the assessment criteria?

8) Did you have any problems during the projects?

9) Do you want to continue doing projects? Do you have any suggestions?

For Teachers

1) Can you tell what projects you assigned to your students in the last semesters?

2) What were their objectives?

3) What do you think about integrating projects into the English skills courses?

Prompts: Feasibility/benefits for students/effects on learner autonomy/difficulties in implementation/Others?

4) What do you think about the effect of the project activities overall?

Prompts: on students? on yourself?

5) Do you have any suggestions regarding using project work in teaching English?

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