



EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SENIOR EFL STUDENTS ON PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education plays a crucial role in a great number of universities where English is not a first or second language. In Vietnamese universities, students specialising in English are considered EFL learners. A lack of a language environment for language skills practice leads to students' challenges in their language skills. Therefore, creating real-life learning activities for students both to learn the subject matter and improve language skills and other features is necessary. This research aims to investigate experiences and perceptions of thirty senior EFL students in a Vietnamese university towards PBL. The study was conducted with the use of mixed-method research. Findings showed that PBL could bring a number of benefits such as enhanced teamwork abilities, improved language skills, enhanced critical thinking and engagement. Additionally, students perceived the importance of PBL employed in course instruction and recognised the differences between traditional teaching techniques and PBL. Future research should be conducted on a larger scale, and there should be more empirical studies on the long-term impact of PBL concerning learning outcomes, the role of instructor support in PBL implementation and success, and strategies for addressing time management challenges and group dynamics in order to prove the effectiveness of PBL on EFL education.

Keywords: project-based learning, experiences, perceptions, EFL

1. Introduction

English has become a common language which is widely used in various aspects such as education, business, health, and many other fields. In Vietnam, English has been taught to students from primary schools to high schools across the country. It proves that EFL

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education plays a pivotal role in the educational system for many reasons. To begin with, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become essential in the area of global communication, enabling people from different countries to get connected to each other. Additionally, according to a study conducted by Crystal (2003), English is considered as a lingua franca which has been adopted in many different domains like science, business and technology. In terms of academic opportunities, English has become the ultimate requirement for admission to universities, highlighting that proficiency in English is key to opening doors for students' education and success in an academic setting. More importantly, students can interact with a variety of viewpoints and be exposed to different cultures in the world thanks to EFL education, promoting cross-cultural understanding and communication (Byram et al., 2018).

However, during their English learning, students are likely to face many challenges. MacIntyre & Gardner (1991) revealed that speaking and writing in English can cause anxiety for many EFL students, restricting their engagement and having a negative impact on their academic performance. Furthermore, the language environment plays an essential role in their English learning. Due to limited exposure to language practice opportunities, students have nearly no chances to use English outside the classroom setting. This leads to impacting students' fluency and confidence (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011). Another challenge that EFL learners might encounter is cultural differences. Kramsch (1993) highlighted that cultural representations and idiomatic expressions may cause students difficulties in their understanding and communication. Project-based learning (PBL) has been considered a teaching method that encourages students to obtain knowledge through involvement in hands-on projects. Engaging in project-based learning activities provides students with opportunities to collaborate with peers to address complex questions or problems over a long period of time. Additionally, when getting involved in a project, students can have a chance to practice their language skills in real-world and authentic settings, necessitating the development of students' fluency and confidence.

2. Objectives of the Study

In order for educators to effectively employ PBL in an EFL classroom, it is important to gain insights from understanding students' experiences and perceptions with project-based learning activities. The goal of this study is to investigate the experiences and perceptions of EFL students – senior English-majored students at a university in Vietnam. This study aims to specifically assess students' perceived benefits, challenges, and attitudes towards project-based learning and present suggestions for employment and improvement when project-based learning is implemented. This study aims to focus on senior students since they have had more opportunities and time in project-based learning if teachers had employed PBL in their teaching practice.

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, a number of research questions will be addressed:

- 1) What perceived benefits do senior EFL students achieve by engaging in project-based learning activities?
- 2) How do senior EFL students generally view project-based learning?
- 3) What challenges do students encounter while engaging in project-based learning activities?

By exploring these research questions, this research is expected to contribute to the literature on project-based learning and its role in EFL education in particular and in language education in general.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Project-based Learning (PBL)

Project-based learning (PBL) has gained popularity as an effective teaching strategy in classrooms, especially for language education. It is argued that PBL is described as a student-centered teaching approach that enhances active learning via group work, inquiry and the application of knowledge in real-world projects (W. Sumarni et al., 2016; Wijayati et al., 2019). By engaging in practical activities through PBL, students could improve their language skills (Argawati & Suryani, 2020; Astawa et al., 2017; Sadeghi et al., 2016; Zhang & Wang, 2016). Additionally, students' motivation can be enhanced when participating in PBL activities (Assaf, 2018; Kartika, 2020). Project-based learning for language learners has been emphasised in many studies as it has brought a number of benefits. As an illustration, project-based learning has been linked to enhanced writing and speaking abilities as it promotes effective idea sharing among students while they collaborate on projects (Lombardi & Oblinger, 2007). Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2006) claimed that PBL also fosters critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, which are necessary for success in both academic and real-world settings. Additionally, students gain vital soft skills such as cooperation, communication and flexibility as they work with their classmates or peers and navigate project requirements. Using project-based learning is likely to enhance collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking skills (Bell, 2010; Vogler et al., 2018). These are the soft skills that students will need in the 21st century (Tindowen et al, 2016). Additionally, PBL provides students with chances to explore projects in depth while putting their language in real-world contexts. Project-based learning is also claimed to foster student engagement and retention of knowledge, and it can be effective in various educational settings (Helle, Tynjälä, and Olkinuora, 2006).

Bell (2010) claimed that project-based learning enhances deeper learning and engagement, specifically in EFL contexts, helping EFL students to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In addition to its advantages, PBL has posed many drawbacks in its implementation. Many issues, such as time management, group dynamics and understanding project requirements, are the ones that students frequently encounter

(Helle, Tynjälä and Olkinuora, 2006). These challenges are likely to affect the effectiveness of PBL; therefore, it is of importance to understand students' perspectives and experiences in order to improve the implementation process. By looking at these factors, educators can modify PBL activities to better meet the needs of their students and enhance learning outcomes.

3.2 Experiences and Perceptions of EFL Students on Project-based Learning

Experiences of EFL students on project-based learning have been shown to differ greatly, affected by a number of factors such as cultural background, language proficiency, and the type of projects. PBL projects are claimed to give students the chance to use the target language in practical situations, which enhances students' level of motivation and engagement (Cao, 2024). A study from Macau highlighted that PBL greatly improved intermediate EFL learners' self-regulated learning skills as well as their motivation and engagement in the learning process (Cao, 2024). These findings suggest that PBL not only helps students to learn languages but also gives them the confidence to be responsible for their education. Project-based learning is viewed as an effective strategy that improves EFL students' language proficiency and fosters a cooperative learning atmosphere. Many EFL students have a generally positive opinion of project-based learning.

3.3 Relationship between Experiences and Perceptions

Understanding the relationship between experiences and perceptions of EFL students on project-based learning is crucial because this would help to identify effective practices to be adopted in PBL activities. It is clear that the relationship between students' experiences and perceptions of PBL is complex and multidimensional. Positive experiences with PBL often lead to favorable perceptions, fostering students' motivation and willingness to participate in future projects. Conversely, negative experiences such as feeling overloaded by group projects or having unclear project instructions are likely to result in negative perceptions of PBL (Cao, 2024). In order to successfully implement PBL activities, teachers or educators in general need to comprehend this dynamic as it highlights the necessity of clear communication and supportive structures to improve students' experiences and perceptions.

4. Theoretical Framework

Project-based learning aims to foster students' engagement and motivation to gain knowledge through real-life situations, meaning that students will have opportunities to be exposed to experiential learning contexts. In order to fully understand the role of PBL and to effectively apply PBL activities in the classroom, it is of great importance to look at a number of learning theories. The following are brief overviews of these theories.

4.1 Constructivist Theory

According to the constructivist theory, students build their knowledge via their interactions and experiences with the surrounding environment. This theory serves as the foundation for project-based learning since it emphasises student participation and teamwork. In an EFL context, constructivism supports the idea that students can learn a language most effectively when they can use the language in real-world contexts via meaningful and practical tasks (Piaget, 1976; Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes the value of social interaction in learning, is especially relevant to project-based learning. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that students are likely to gain greater comprehension levels with the support of teachers and classmates or peers. The nature of the PBL setting is that it gives students chances to get involved in interactions, enabling them to collaborate with and give support to their classmates or peers in learning. Therefore, this cooperative learning environment both enhances language learning and fosters a sense of community and connection among students (Johnson & Johnson, 2014).

4.2 Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb (2014) developed experiential learning theory, which emphasises the significance of experience in the learning process. This theory holds the idea that learning happens through a cycle of abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation, concrete experience and reflective observation. PBL aligns with this framework because it provides students with opportunities to engage in hands-on and practical tasks that foster student reflection and the use of language skills in authentic settings.

4.3 Motivation and Engagement Theories

Theories of motivation and engagement like the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) put an emphasis on the crucial role of intrinsic motivation in learning. By providing students the chance to engage in projects that interest them and are relevant to their own experiences, PBL is likely to enhance students' intrinsic motivation. Additionally, students have an opportunity to interact deeply with the course materials when they are motivated, resulting in better language acquisition outcomes.

5. Methods

In order to investigate senior EFL students' experiences and perceptions on project-based learning, a mixed-method research was adopted for the research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By using a survey approach, the study seeks to gather quantifiable and qualitative information that can be statistically analysed to find patterns and relationships between many factors. The tool for gathering data was a well-structured questionnaire, which is composed of four sections. Section I collects demographic information from students such as their age, gender, year of study, and PBL experiences. Section II provides questions of Likert scale items (1-5), evaluating students' experiences

on project-based learning, including their level of engagement, perceived benefits and challenges. Section III includes questions which refer to general perceptions of project-based learning. This section will employ Likert scale items to measure what students perceive about PBL, including its relevance and efficiency in fostering language skills and other skills. Section 4 includes open-ended questions which ask students for qualitative feedback on specific projects they have engaged in terms of challenges and recommendations for improvement. Additionally, this section collects students' opinions about their intention to engage in project-based learning activities in which they have not participated.

In order to collect the data from participants, EFL students enrolled in undergraduate programs at a Vietnamese university are the target students. They are senior (fourth-year) English-majored students, specialising in the English Language Studies. Thirty senior students of the total 90 randomly participated in the questionnaire, accounting for about 33% of the total senior students. A structured questionnaire was employed, and it was distributed online to students through Google Forms. At the beginning of the questionnaire, there was an introductory message stating the aims of the study and guaranteeing confidentiality and encouraging truthful answers. Students' participation is entirely voluntary, and their withdrawal is possible at any moment (Boss & Larmer, 2018). In Vietnamese universities, English is taught as a Foreign Language; therefore, English-majored students are considered EFL learners. Several courses in the programmes are taught with the use of project-based learning, meaning that not all students have engaged in project-based learning activities. To get an overview of EFL students' experiences and perceptions of project-based learning, senior (fourth-year) students were selected because these students had more opportunities to experience project-based learning activities. A stratified random sampling technique was employed. To analyze the data, the Python software was employed to analyse quantitative data and provide the statistics. To summarize participant responses, descriptive statistics were measured. To investigate connections between students' experiences and perceptions of project-based learning, inferential statistics such as correlation analysis were used. Thematic analysis was used to find common themes and insights in the qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions that support the quantitative results.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Quantitative Data

6.1.1 Experiences with Project-based Learning

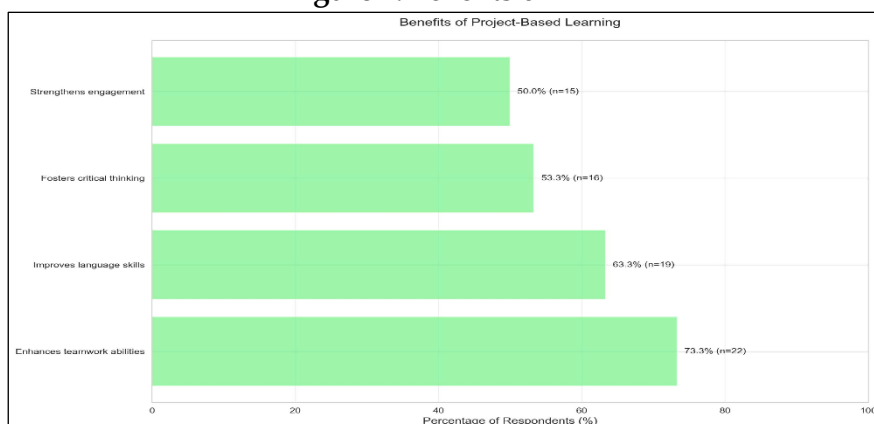
The Cronbach's Alpha for the experience scale is 0.902, and the Cronbach's Alpha for the attitude scale is 0.783. These scores are above 0.70, meaning that the internal consistency and the scale development of the structured questionnaire are reliable and meaningful.

Table 1: Mean score & standard deviation

Items	Mean	Standard deviation
Communication skills	4.28	0.61
Team collaboration	4.28	0.61
Learning alignment	4.24	0.66
Feedback utilization	4.20	0.82
Problem-solving abilities	4.04	0.79

The above mean scores showed that factors such as communication skills and team collaboration reached the highest mean score at 4.28 and the lowest standard deviation at 0.61. The findings indicated that communication skills and team collaboration are mainly agreed upon by many students, and many of them rated similar scores for these two items. It can be clearly seen from Table 1 that all factors reached a mean score of more than 4.0, showing that these factors, such as communication, teamwork collaboration, learning alignment, feedback quality and problem solving, were highly rated and valued by students experiencing project-based learning activities. The figures show that all question items have higher mean scores and lower standard deviation scores, meaning that project-based learning is beneficial to students. It is clear from the findings that students having experienced project-based learning reported the benefits they gained from the activities.

Figure 1: Benefits of PBL



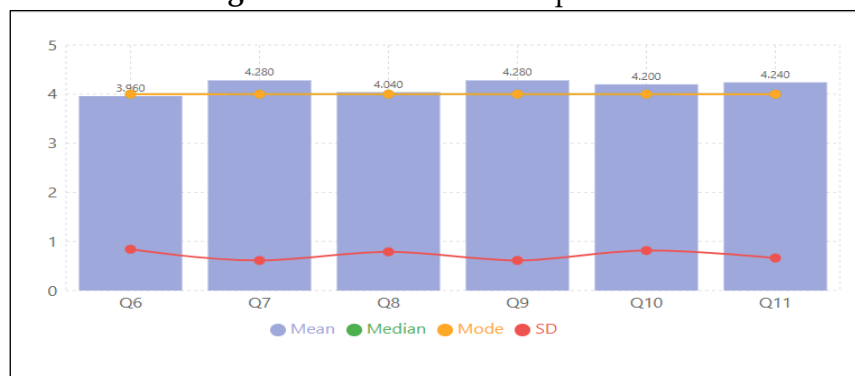
Research question 1: What perceived benefits do senior EFL students achieve by engaging in project-based learning activities?

As shown in Figure 1, project-based learning could lead to enhanced teamwork abilities, improved language skills, developed critical thinking and strengthened engagement. Among these factors, teamwork abilities reached the highest percentage (73.3%) and responses (22/30) and the second higher one was improved language skills. Teamwork abilities were likely to prove the best effectiveness of project-based learning, which can enhance cooperation skills and broaden students' connections. These skills are necessary in the 21st century (Tindowen et al., 2016). Additionally, it is reported that students could improve their language skills. Levine (2004) claimed that engaging in PBL

could encourage students to enhance their proficiency of the English language. Furthermore, participation in PBL with meaningful learning activities provides students with an opportunity to practice their practical use of language, with the inclusion of many skills and language skills, among these (Stoller, 2006). This aspect supports the application of hands-on activities in teaching English to EFL students. Critical thinking and engagement were reported to be less effective than teamwork and language skills, which accounted for over 50% of the total respondents. The least effective one is enhanced engagement, accounting for 50%. The results showed that PBL activities could be effective in EFL education.

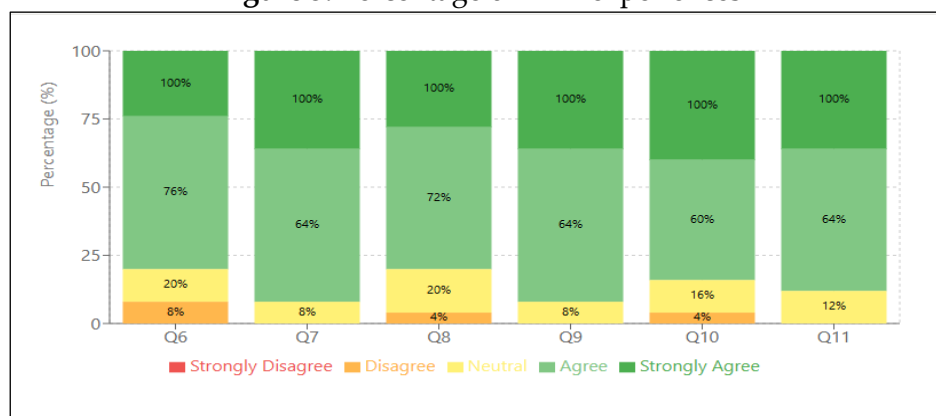
Concerning the questions for PBL experiences, questions about students' experiences in EFL, the results show that the mean and mode values are from 3.960 to 4.280, indicating that students could gain many benefits such as communication skills or teamwork skills, improved language skills, developed critical thinking, strengthened engagement and learning alignment.

Figure 2: Values on PBL Experiences



As can be shown in Figure 3, students responded positively towards the benefits of PBL, mainly indicating "agree" and "strongly agree".

Figure 3: Percentage on PBL experiences



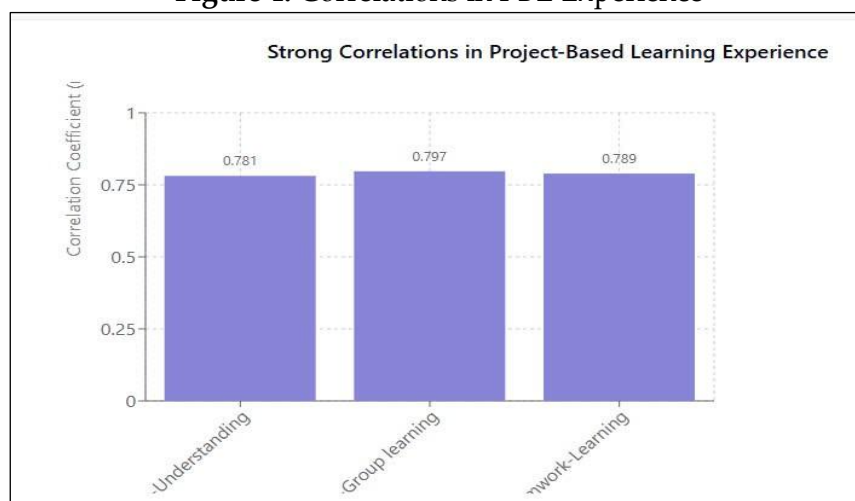
The findings showed that students who have engaged in PBL highly valued the benefits gained from participating in PBL learning activities. Students rated "agree" at

over 44% and “strongly agree” at over 24%. Students also rated “disagree” and “strongly disagree” low. It can be stated that PBL had a positive impact on students’ learning in terms of engagement, critical thinking, language skills and teamwork abilities. Teamwork skills refer to collaboration when students engage in a group project. This revealed that PBL could enhance students’ collaboration skills or teamwork abilities (Beckett & Slater, 2005). Additionally, critical thinking is one type of higher-order thinking skills. The finding showed that PBL could enhance critical thinking, which Allen (2004) emphasised the importance of PBL on developing students’ higher-order thinking skills.

6.1.2 Correlation Analysis

Research question 2: How do senior EFL students generally view project-based learning? The study showed that there were significant correlations between students’ experiences with project-based learning and their perceptions of its effectiveness. Strong positive correlations ($r > 0.7$, and $p < 0.001$) were found between active participation and understanding of subject matter ($r = 0.781$), problem-solving abilities and group learning effectiveness ($r = 0.797$), and teamwork skills and learning effectiveness ($r = 0.789$). Through these strong correlations, it is suggested that students actively participating in project-based learning activities report better understanding and improved learning outcomes.

Figure 4: Correlations in PBL Experience



6.1.3 Group Comparison

The independent t-tests comparing students with and without PBL experience showed that there was a significant difference in students’ ability to contribute ideas, with $t = -2.084$ and $p = 0.046$, meaning that students with PBL experiences could contribute ideas better than those without PBL experience. However, there were no significant differences in other aspects ($p > 0.05$). These values highlighted that PBL activities could foster students in expressing ideas, but these might not strengthen other features. Therefore, there should be improvement in designing PBL activities.

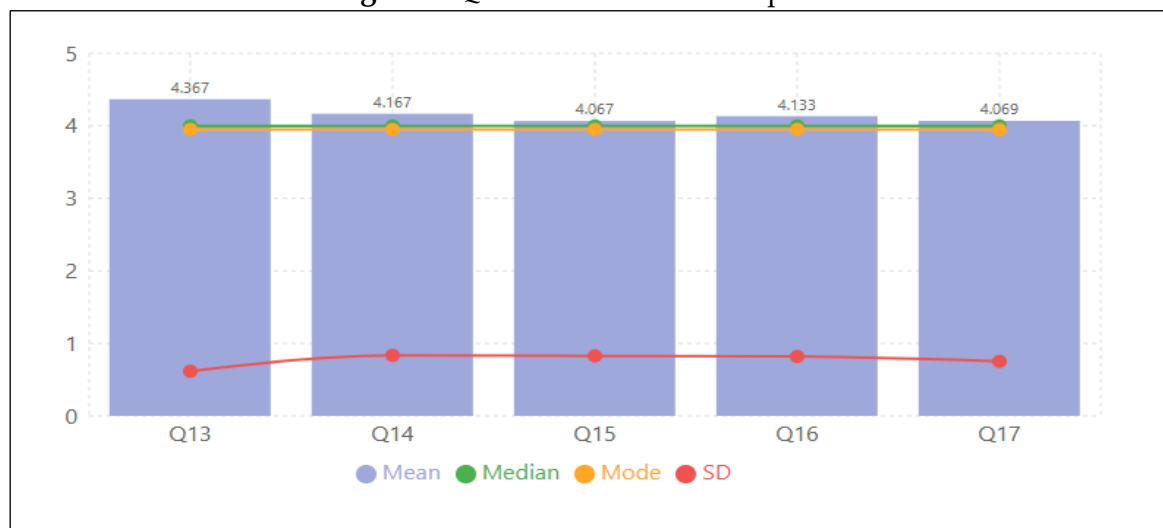
6.1.4 Gender Comparison Analysis

The ANOVA results revealed that there were no significant gender-based differences across all measured aspects ($F=1.452$, and $p=0.252$). This indicates that the effectiveness of project-based learning exceeds gender boundaries. Additionally, all measured aspects showed high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha>0.780$), which proves the strength of the findings. All mean scores exceeded the neutral point (3.0), showing strong positive perception toward the implementation of project-based learning.

6.1.5 Perceptions on PBL

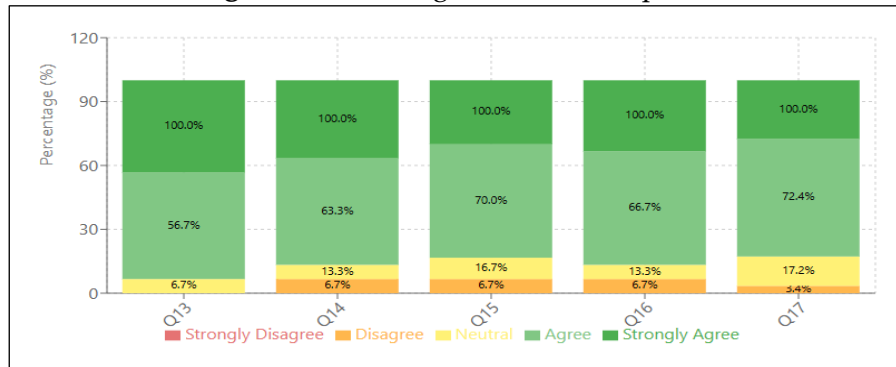
Figure 5 shows mean and other values about students' perceptions of project-based learning. Findings showed that students had high expectations of the use of PBL in their classes. All the mean scores over 4.0 prove that PBL is potentially employed in teaching EFL. The figures showed that PBL is different from traditional teaching methods, with the highest mean score of 4,367. This reveals that employing PBL in class instruction is positive, and students perceived that PBL is likely to help them effectively achieve knowledge, confidently express their own perspectives and understand the use of English and communication skills, particularly speaking and writing. This aligns with the idea that PBL is likely to develop learners' linguistic capabilities based on the inclusion of language skills through practical situations that require them to use the four macro language skills during the project (Hammond, 2010; Stoller, 2006).

Figure 5: Questions on PBL Perceptions



Additionally, Figure 6 indicates that students reported high perceptions of the benefits of PBL, with over 75% of “agree” and “strongly agree” for all the questions. The findings emphasise the importance and feasibility of PBL being implemented in EFL classes.

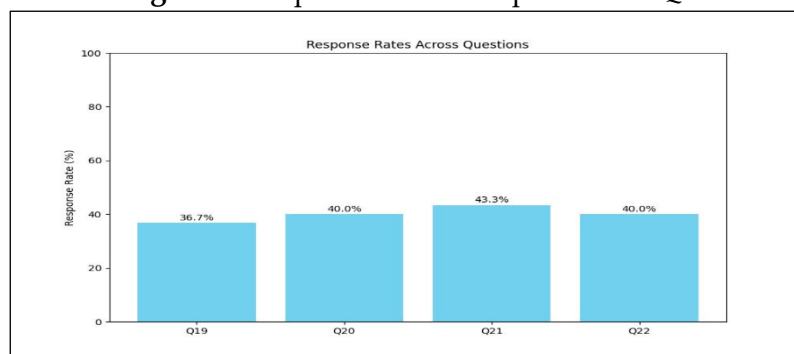
Figure 6: Percentage on PBL Perceptions



6.2 Qualitative Data

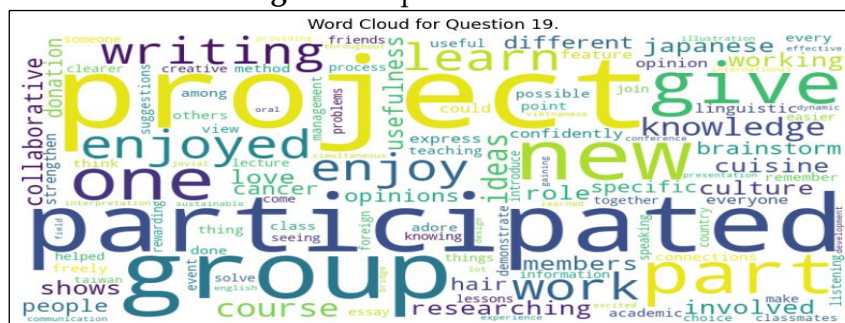
In addition to quantitative data, the questionnaire included several open-ended questions which aimed to provide more in-depth qualitative data to support positive aspects of project-based learning activities. The findings revealed that response rates for open-ended questions accounted for 36.7 to 43.3%. The four open-ended questions were divided into Questions 19 and 20 for students having engaged in PBL and Questions 21 and 22 for students having not participated in EFL.

Figure 7: Response Rates to Open-ended Qs



6.2.1 Experiences on Project-based Learning

Figure 8: Experiences on PBL



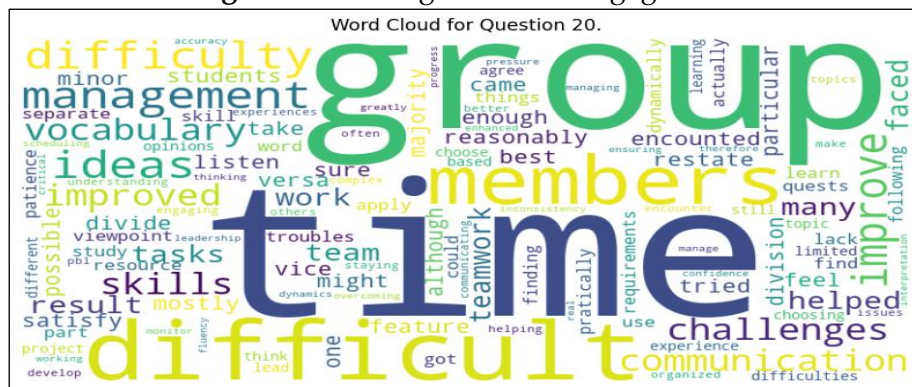
Based on the word cloud for question 19, it is clearly seen that words such as project (5 times), participated (4 times), and group (4 times) were repeated more than

other words. This revealed that engaging in PBL activities encouraged students to work collaboratively and have group interactions. This supports the quantitative data that PBL could foster students' communication and collaboration skills, and these are skills needed in the 21st century (Tindowen et al., 2016). These skills are necessary for citizens living in the 21st century (Kozinsky, 2014), and they are considered key goals of education in this globalised world in which students need to learn and address real-life problems (Beers, 2011).

Research question 3: What challenges do students encounter while engaging in project-based learning activities?

6.2.3 Challenges for PBL Engagement

Figure 9: Challenges for PBL Engagement



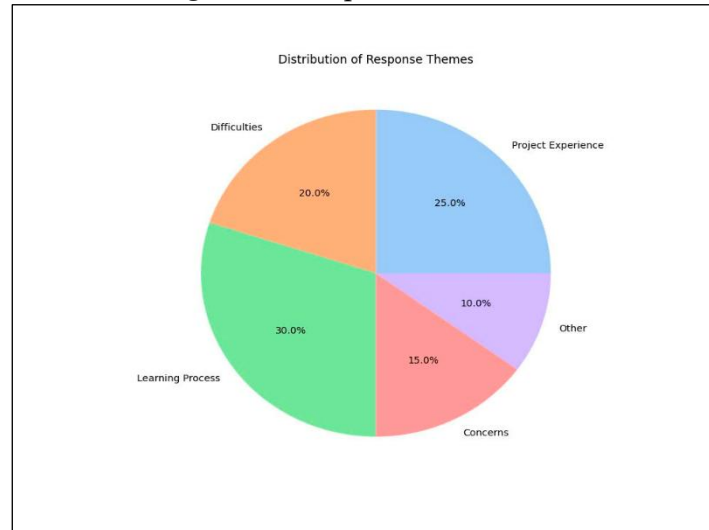
Based on the word cloud for question 20, time (6 times), group (4 times), difficult (4 times), and members (4 times) were repeated more than other words in students' responses. This showed that the main challenges students faced in PBL were time management and group dynamics. This supports the quantitative data that time management should be taken into consideration by the teachers when assigning students PBL activities. Additionally, teachers should provide guidelines and instruct students how to work in groups effectively, particularly on group dynamics.

6.2.4 Understanding of PBL

The word cloud shows that words such as project (16 times), learning (14 times), and based (12 times) were repeated more than other words in students' responses, meaning that students could recognise the benefit of PBL and the difference between traditional teaching methods and project-based learning. This can encourage the employment of PBL in EFL education.

student perspectives, including interests in real-world applications, concerns about workload, and focus on skills development.

Figure 12: Responses of Themes



The research findings revealed that there is an important role of integration of theory and practice. Students who actively engaged in project-based learning activities reported a better understanding of subject matter. Additionally, practical application enabled students to enhance their learning effectiveness. Real-world relevance was consistently mentioned in qualitative responses. It is evident that project-based learning enhances students' engagement in practical learning activities by encouraging them to search for, integrate, and apply theoretical knowledge to complete authentic tasks. Through the findings, collaborative learning benefits were reported. There was a strong correlation between teamwork and learning effectiveness. It is clear that group work through project-based learning activities could enhance learning effectiveness, problem-solving abilities, and development of communication skills. The findings revealed several challenges during the PBL implementation. Findings from qualitative responses showed that time management was the primary concern, meaning that PBL activities should be carefully planned and students should be given sufficient time to complete the tasks. Time is also considered one of the problems that happens during the implementation of PBL (Marx et al., 1997). When assigning students PBL activities, teachers should provide students with enough time. One more challenge is the group dynamics, which require careful attention. Group dynamics refer to group structure, communication patterns, cohesion, leadership, conflict and resolution, and decision making (Oyefusi, 2022). These features should be effectively resolved in group work in order to promote best effectiveness and best practices for project-based learning activities.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, project-based learning (PBL) facilitates effective learning, teamwork and communication skills, and understanding of subject matter. The research findings suggest several practical implications for implementing project-based learning. First, there should be structured time management support. For this kind of assistance, teachers should allocate a time frame for students and set the schedule for offering them advice and guidance during the project implementation. In this phase, students might face difficulties regarding group dynamics or guidelines, and they need immediate and timely support in order to complete the project in time and enhance the effectiveness of this teaching approach. Additionally, it is essential to have clear guidelines for group work, which is of great importance in managing group work and promoting its effectiveness in project-based learning. Unclear guidelines might lead to negative impacts and ruin the nature of PBL, causing several troubles such as group disputes and incompleteness of given tasks. The findings can prove that the integration of practical applications is highly valued and learning by doing enables students to gain knowledge and practical skills more effectively than traditional teaching. Finally, it is necessary to balance guidance and autonomy. Though PBL allows students to be autonomous in doing their task, several limitations exist. Firstly, there should be guidance from teachers so that students can have a clear understanding of the task and requirements. PBL does not mean that students will not be equipped with essential knowledge, but it is just considered an approach that gets students to deeply comprehend the subject matter. Therefore, clear guidance should be provided for PBL activities, while an appropriate balance between teacher support and student autonomy should be maintained. In addition, teachers should provide explicit instructions on time allocation and time management so that students can collaborate effectively through each activity. Teachers should adopt clear strategies for distributing workloads and managing conflicts among group members. Without such support, group work may not function effectively, which can reduce the overall success of PBL activities. Future studies should involve a larger number of participants and include interviews with teachers who regularly implement PBL in their teaching practices.

Acknowledgements

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, as this study was independently planned, conducted, and completed by the author.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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