

# The influence of project-based learning on promoting students' self-confidence and learning motivation in Nguyen Tat Thanh University English language classes

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## Abstract

As Nguyen Tat Thanh University in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, has recently implemented project-based learning for non-English majors for the first time, this research desired to discover the perceptions of students on the method as well as whether project-based learning is effective to enhance students' motivation and self-confidence. The study was conducted with the implementation of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Data were collected through questionnaires with the participation of 100 non-English major freshmen at Nguyen Tat Thanh University and semi-structured interviews carried out with a total of 3 English lecturers and 15 students in the same English class. The findings showed that there was an increase in both students' confidence and motivation level during the project-based learning class. In addition, the research indicated positive feedback and perception of the students to the experience of PBL implementation in developing their language skills and proficiency.

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Motivation,  
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## 1 Introduction

The purpose of learning English for twenty-first century's learners is not only limited to language knowledge and academic examinations, it also has to meet a more crucial and practical goal, which is to communicate, to express themselves and to develop skills. Project-based learning (PBL) has been regarded as one of the innovative teaching methods for Vietnamese students, which stimulates the development of learners' capacity by combining theory and social practice and the ultimate purpose of the method is to benefit society, demonstrating that the educational process improves the efficiency of training human resources for society [1]. In addition, PBL has emerged as a promising method to foster learner's deeper understanding, critical thinking skills and engagement among learners. Due to being a "new"

teaching strategy in Vietnamese language classrooms, there hasn't been much research on the effectiveness of project-based learning in learners' learning experiences and performances, especially in university contexts. In addition, through her observation in the students and their learning, the author found that the majority of non-English majors at Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU) often encounter difficulties in learning Speaking skill in particular due to their lack of confidence. Whereas self-confidence and second language acquisition is very intrinsically connected with each other [2], the correlation between confidence and learning outcomes is undeniable. In addition to confidence, motivation is also an aspect that needs to be improved in students' learning. Motivation plays a pivotal role in the process of gaining knowledge and skills of any learners, as without motivation, learners may not start the act of learning at all and for those who

have started to learn, they may not be able to maintain their learning once they face hardships in the process [3-5]. Hence, the author decides to investigate the influence of PBL on these two crucial factors in order to obtain an in-depth insight into PBL itself as well as to provide a reference for NTTU English teachers to acknowledge students' perspectives on the method and the effectiveness of the method on students' confidence and motivation.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Confidence in English Language Learning

Confidence, or self-confidence, is defined as a kind of inner force that allows people to work spontaneously and the result of one's belief of accomplishing the specific task [3]. Learners with high self-confidence can acquire a second language or L2 faster than those who have lack of self-confidence [4]. Self-confidence also significantly contributes to the learner's willingness to communicate in a foreign language. In order to be a native like speaker in a foreign language, self-confidence is one of the keys that unlocks some important communication barriers; therefore, it is extremely important to find ways to build up ESL learners' confidence in their language learning so that they can achieve their optimal aims in English communication [5].

### 2.2 Motivation in English Language Learning

Motivation is defined as a trait to enhance the working for a specific task and show more willingness to do it dedicatedly [6]. As motivation is a key to success in any activity, students' learning motivation in English language classes is considered one of the most significant deciding factors in their learning achievement. Learning a foreign or second language effectively, efficiently, and speedily is highly dependent on the desirable level of motivation [7]. Some of the motivation strategies that can be used for ESL students include triggering interest, encouraging activity methods and language experience outside ESL classrooms [8].

### 2.3 Project-based Learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is a method of teaching and learning in which students work in groups to create a product, which is usually a hands-on one, during the course using knowledge and skills they acquire throughout the course. Another definition for PBL is

that it is an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop [9]. There are usually five main stages in a formalized PBL process, which are (1) Project presentation & identification, (2) individual/team research, (3) design development, (4) building & testing & evaluation and (5) project delivery [10]. The goal of PBL is to motivate the students' actions to achieve and the language learning journey becomes more "fruitful" for students. The implementation of PBL also provides opportunities to trigger students' collaboration and critical thinking skills through experience solving real-life problems. PBL offers chances for learners to improve their confidence and independence, as they have to work both in groups and individually to stand for their voice, their thoughts and their personal perspectives.

### 2.4 Previous Research on the Effectiveness of Project-Based Learning

A case study on student's engagement and motivation in the classroom environment using PBL in a third grade classroom in USA showed that there was an increase in students' intrinsic motivation [11]. In the year of 2018, a study assessed the impact of project-based learning on students' learning motivation and ability [12]. The results showed that the project-based learning method had a positive impact on improving students' learning motivation and team-working skills. In addition, feedback from the students showed that they had positive attitudes towards PBL. Similarly, a study was carried out on improving students' communication skills through the application of PBL [13]. The results confirmed that PBL improved the learner's communication skills, especially communication and interaction skills among learners. At the same time, students also felt "safe and comfortable" in expressing their views and sharing their opinions, according to the survey. In Vietnamese research contexts, a group of researchers in 2016 conducted research on the topic of Vietnamese students' awareness of the learning environment using PBL method [14]. The results obtained showed that Vietnamese students were completely capable of effectively acquiring the criteria of this learning method.



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Site

NTTU in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam was chosen for this study as PBL has just been implemented for the first time for first-year non-English major students in the academic year of 2023-2024. Therefore, the author wanted to explore the attitudes of both teachers and students towards this teaching method and the benefits it brings to the students' learning experience as well as any problems or challenges it may cause during the implementation. Regarding the scope of the research, the author chose to research the impact of project-based learning directly on improving students' confidence and motivation to learn English because of her own teaching experience in English classes in NTTU.

#### 3.2 Participants

The participants of the research were 3 full-time lecturers in English at Foreign Language Center, NTTU and 100 students in the same English 1 level class. The lecturers taught different levels of English classes and were all unfamiliar with the implementation of project-based teaching method and activities in ESL contexts. The students were all freshmen, aged ranging from 18 to 20, taking different majors and classes, namely Medicine, Nursing and Hospitality. Of all the students, females were in the majority with 80 % and males accounted for the other 20 %. For the students' interviews, 15 out of the 100 students were chosen randomly to attend the survey, in which there were 12 females and 3 males; seven of them were from Medicine, 6 were from Nursing and the other 2 were from Hospitality.

#### 3.3 Description of the Project-Based Learning Approach at NTTU

The research class was on level 1 of General English for K23 non-English major students with the use of the coursebook *Personal Best* (A2A). The course consisted of 18 sessions in total with 14 face-to-face sessions on campus and 4 online. Students were asked to accomplish the project named "A Social Club Presentation", in which they were required to give a final presentation as a on a hobby/ study group they could think of, providing listeners with detailed information about the club's name, focus, purpose, strategies, requirements, activities and meeting schedules. The presentation was delivered orally with the illustration and support of visual aids such as

powerpoint slides, photos, video clips, leaflets, flyers or posters. The final product's marking criteria were based on 6 categories: (1) Content, (2) Grammar & Vocabulary, (3) Pronunciation, (4) Fluency & Coherence, (5) Presentation skills, and (6) Collaboration. The participation of the students in the online class activities was recorded carefully session-by-session.

#### 3.4 Research Instruments

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were two data collection instruments utilized in the study. At the beginning of the course, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire in order to provide the researcher with their background information and their prior English learning experiences before taking the class.. The second questionnaire, on the other hand, aimed to get students' perspectives on PBL after experiencing the method from the course and measure the degree of influence PBL had on their English speaking proficiency, confidence and motivation. The main section of the questionnaire was divided into four categories: (A) - Performance, (B) - Confidence, (C) - Motivation, and (D) - Challenges, with a total number of 36 items. The students then had to mark the response according to the 5-point Likert scale, in which '1' for Strongly Disagree (SD), '2' for Disagree (D), '3' for Neutral (N), '4' for Agree (A) and '5' for Strongly Agree (SA) to reflect their perspectives and reflection on the implementation of PBL in the classroom. The Cronbach's alpha score of the questionnaire was 0.786 so the instrument was strongly reliable. In the final part of the questionnaire, there was an open-ended question for the students to recommend any improvements they would like to make in implementing PBL in English classrooms. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students separately. Each one-on-one interview lasted about 30 minutes with open-ended questions concerning their detailed perspectives and reflection on the application of PBL in the English class after the course.

#### 3.5 Data Collection

The data of the first questionnaire were collected at the beginning of the course in the second semester of the school year 2023-2024, which took place in February; the second questionnaire and both of the semi-structured interviews' data collection were conducted at the end of the course in April. Before and during the

questionnaire taking, the researcher was willing to clarify, explain and provide adequate guidance to the students so that they could give the most accurate responses to the survey. There were 200 hard copies of the questionnaires sent to the participants and all of the 200 copies were returned with valid responses. The interviews, on the other hand, were conducted one-on-one with one individual student or teacher and the researcher at a time with proper explanation of the interview's purpose at the beginning. The quantitative data collected through the questionnaires were organized, coded and analyzed with the employment of SPSS. Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were recorded, translated and transcribed for later analysis. Qualitative responses gathered from the final open-ended question in the second questionnaire were also transcribed and coded for further analysis.

#### 4 Findings and Discussion

From the first questionnaire's data, the majority of participants had never taken any English classes using PBL (84 out of 100) and the remaining 16 students all experienced the method for less than a year. Therefore, it can be considered that this particular English course was the participants' first-time involvement in PBL. Out of the four English language skills, Listening and Speaking were the most challenging and worrisome skills for students in their learning process with 34 voted for Listening and 49 picked Speaking as their weakest language skill. Similarly, the responses from the students' interviews also indicated that most of them found speaking in front of the class difficult: *Whenever the teacher asked me something, like answering a question from the lesson or stating my perspectives on a topic, I would be so scared... that I had to be frozen for a few seconds, like, I didn't know where I was and didn't know what to do next. My head was totally empty and I needed to calm down or ask for my friends' support...*

Besides the lack of confidence in the English learning environment, another challenge in both the learning and teaching experience in the classroom is lack of motivation. During the interviews, the teachers admitted that it was "difficult" for them to make their students concentrate on the lessons and activities. One of the interviewed teachers expressed

her concerns regarding students' English learning concentration and motivation:

*Well, through my English classes here, I realized that many students try to focus on the learning activities, but sometimes, it's hard for them to pay their full attention to what is happening in the classroom... Usually after the break, they tend to be tired and unmotivated, many of them do other personal stuff or be very lost. This can be a very dangerous scenario when these students can affect others' learning atmosphere and learning flow.*

According to the teachers, some of the reasons for the lack of concentration in English classes were due to the lesson topics, students' tight schedules and their lack of motivation. The teachers agreed that learning motivation played a vital role in deciding whether a student would be a successful language learner or not, as high motivation will alleviate other challenging factors and obstacles in the learning process with determination and consistency.

**Table 1** Top three most voted aspects students found most challenging in learning speaking skills

Aspects students found most challenging in learning speaking skills	Percentage of students
Vocabulary	68
Ideas	54
Confidence	50

**Table 2** Top three most voted reasons for students' lack of confidence

Reasons for students' lack of confidence	Percentage of students
Fear of making mistakes	73
Inability to follow class activities	52
Lack of communication with other students	37

**Table 3** Top three most voted stimuli to foster students' English learning motivation

Stimuli to foster students' English learning motivation	Percentage of students
Ability to apply in real life situations	76
Interesting topics	59
Career development	40

The responses from the interviews revealed significant positive perceptions of both teachers and students on project-based learning in the classroom. Most of the students claimed that they felt "supported" and "encouraged" during the steps when the teacher and



their group members were always willing to provide them with sufficient aid and feedback. Some of them stated that due to the large amount of group work during the course, they had better chances to get to know each other, to share their thoughts, opinions and perspectives on different aspects of the project topic, and also to cooperate to establish a common work, which enabled them to feel more “comfortable and confident” with their classmates. As a result, all of the students asked said that they weren’t afraid to talk in front of others after a couple of sessions:

*At first, I was anxious that I would screw things up as I was not good at presenting or speaking in front of others. During the sessions, I was so afraid whenever the teacher came to me and asked for my progress. But then she provided me with a lot of advice and directions. After a couple of days practicing and rehearsing alone, within my group and in front of the*

*class, I felt speaking in front of others is actually not as scary as I thought it would be...*

According to the teachers, the beginning of the course was “a little bit tough” when both them and the students were not prepared and familiar with the new approach. However, step-by-step group reports enabled them to keep track of the students’ progress easily and provide them with proper feedback when possible. The online sessions were vital opportunities for them to observe the students’ work individually and in groups, as these are “perfect chances” for students to discuss and work in their groups without the interruption or distraction from the other groups or external conditions.

In the first category of the second questionnaire ‘Performance’, six items were stated to assess the students’ speaking ability development throughout the PBL activities and stages in the classroom.

**Table 4** Students’ questionnaire responses on their speaking performance in the course.

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I am able to use English to discuss with my group members about the topic.	100	4.488	0.594
2. I am able to use English to express my own ideas with others.	100	4.416	0.588
3. I am able to use English to express my concerns and ask for teacher’s assistance in class.	100	4.802	0.449
4. I am able to use the language learned to present my own project.	100	4.026	0.573
5. I am able to use English to show my opinions and give feedback to my classmates’ work.	100	3.883	1.073
6. I am able to use English to raise questions to other students about their work.	100	3.952	1.057

The results revealed that most of the students were able to produce basic communicative English language during the discussion and project work with support of their teacher. The two factors that were mostly agreed by cstudents are their ability to ‘express concerns and ask for teacher’s assistance’ and to ‘discuss with group members’, with all the responses ranging from 4 to 5 (‘Agree’ to ‘Strongly agree’). These findings indicated that students gained confidence in using the target language to interact with other peers and teacher, as well as that the teacher provided them with adequate topical language items and structures to state their own opinions and perspectives on the issue. In addition, it can be concluded that the teacher established a friendly and open learning environment so that students were willing to speak their minds:

*The supportive learning environment in the class enabled me to talk more about myself with other students. I even stated some of my personal experiences and perspectives on the topic to discuss with my friends and it was fantastic. Regular group work encouraged me to feel at ease and more confident to speak. Nothing to be embarrassed about...*

The last two items, which were the ability to use English to ‘show opinions and give feedback to classmates’ work’ and ‘raise questions to other students about their work’, were rated lower than the others by the participants. The standard deviation of these two items’ data was also higher than 1, so there were differences among students’ experiences during the peer feedback stage: while most students were confident to state their opinions and feedback to the fellow students, some of them still struggled to deliver

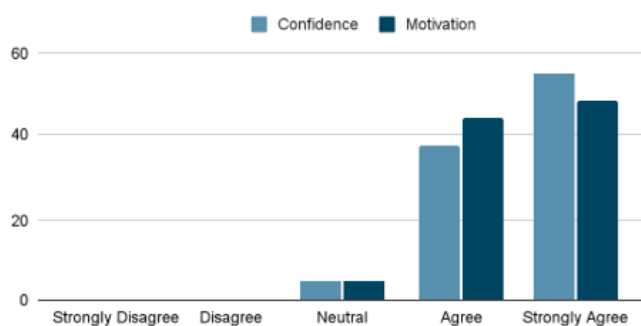


the language in doing so. Regarding students' learning motivation throughout the process, PBL offered students chances to freely talk about their preferences and learning interests:

*I think the topic of the product (hobbies) was quite interesting as it is something we can possibly think of in our real lives. You know what... I am actually into reading books in my spare time, so it is not very hard to find different book genres and titles for our presentation. It was so fun and exciting to work with my classmates, share my thoughts and learn from the teacher how to talk about what I like most, reading!*

The teachers from the interviews also acknowledged that there were significant changes in the students' initiative and proactivity as every one of them wanted to try their best to accomplish the best results for their group, which actually enhanced students' learning motivation:

*The difference between PBL and traditional teaching methods is that I can recognize the involvement and engagement of students in the learning process. I mean... although they did pay attention to the learning in the English classroom before, their participation and effort in the PBL classroom was much more noticeable... They did the information research, they discussed, they brainstormed, they raised questions and they did many other things! It was actually very motivating and rewarding to me.*



**Fig 1** Students' responses for 'Confidence' and 'Motivation' items from the questionnaire

The data from the second questionnaire revealed a positive correlation between PBL and the level of students' confidence and motivation in the classroom, as the number of students marking 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' for these two categories is significantly high, with an average of 58.5 and 38.1 out

of 100 for 10 'confidence' items and 51.2 and 42.7 out of 100 for 10 'motivation' items (Fig. 1). With no students stating their disagreement towards the items listed, it is most likely that the students were content with their PBL experience and willing to be involved in this learning method in their future classes.

There were still challenges in implementing this teaching and learning approach. Firstly, students found it difficult to manage their group's project work flow and product making when other students were from different faculties or major classes, which often led them to miscommunication throughout the course. On the other hand, online sessions sometimes prevented them from interacting or understanding one another, as it was more difficult to follow the teacher's instructions and other members' discussions effectively than face-to-face classroom settings. Other external factors such as noises, slow Internet connection or technical problems might also be some obstacles for students to participate in the learning process. With an array of different activities, sometimes teachers found it difficult to ensure that every student completed their roles and achieved the optimal attention. Equality among members in the project evaluation is another significant issue that the students have brought up in the interviews and questionnaires. While this final stage of the project is considered as an important part when the teacher has a deeper understanding and reflection on the product, the performance of these particular students is overwhelmingly vital to decide the result of their group's work. Hence, other factors of the project conducted by other members might be forgotten or underestimated by the teacher, which can lead them to have lower results if the oral presentation is not adequate.

## 5 Conclusion

The implementation of PBL provided students opportunities to play the active role in the classroom and their language learning process, with the increase of activity participation and language practices. The findings imply that the students can utilize English for many everyday-life purposes, such as showing personal opinions, discussing, asking for clarity or giving feedback. The interest of students in teamwork and other collaboration activities can enhance the connection among learners and create a welcoming

learning environment which strengthens their learning motivation and confidence.

The positive influence of PBL on students' confidence and motivation indicates that integrating project-based approaches into the curriculum could significantly benefit the student outcomes. Educators should consider incorporating more PBL activities to foster a learning environment where students engage in real-world problem-solving, which can lead to increased self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. This approach allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios, thereby reinforcing their understanding and boosting their confidence in their abilities.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence of the efficacy of project-based learning in enhancing students' motivation and

self-confidence in English language learning at the university level. During the implementation of PBL, it is advisable that teachers should provide students with sufficient feedback language that students at different levels would have the ability to produce their own analysis, evaluation and commentary. Giving students a checklist of criteria for assessing the product's quality and presentation is also a good way to help them gain a clear understanding of how to evaluate and raise questions for their classmates' work. Training programs should focus on equipping educators with the skills and knowledge needed to design and facilitate meaningful projects. Professional development should also include strategies for assessing students' progress in project-based learning contexts and providing support to students who may struggle with this approach.

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## Tác động của phương pháp học tập theo dự án trong việc đẩy mạnh sự tự tin và động lực học của sinh viên tại các lớp tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành

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**Tóm tắt** Học tập theo dự án được coi là một phương pháp giảng dạy đột phá với mục đích phát triển các kỹ năng thế kỷ 21 cho người học ngoại ngữ, bên cạnh việc nâng cao trình độ thông thạo ngôn ngữ. Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, Việt Nam, lần đầu tiên triển khai phương pháp này cho các sinh viên không chuyên ngành tiếng Anh, nghiên cứu này mong muốn khám phá thái độ của sinh viên về phương pháp cũng như kiểm định xem phương pháp có giúp nâng cao sự tự tin và động lực học tập của người học hay không. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện bằng phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính và định lượng. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua bảng câu hỏi khảo sát với sự tham gia của 100 sinh viên năm nhất không chuyên tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành và các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với tổng số 3 giảng viên tiếng Anh và 15 sinh viên trong cùng một lớp. Kết quả thu được cho thấy tác động tích cực của việc học theo dự án đến sự tự tin và động lực học của học sinh. Ngoài ra, nghiên cứu còn đưa ra một số góc nhìn về mong muốn học tập tiếng Anh của sinh viên và những hạn chế trong quá trình thực hiện phương pháp học theo dự án.

**Từ khóa** phương pháp học tập theo dự án, động lực, sự tự tin, học tiếng Anh, sinh viên đại học

