



VNU Journal of Foreign Studies

Journal homepage: <https://jfs.ulis.vnu.edu.vn/>

## EVALUATION OF A PROJECT-BASED LEARNING MODEL IN EFL LEARNING AT TERTIARY LEVEL: UNDERGRADUATES' VOICES

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Received 13 May 2025

Revised 18 June 2025; Accepted 23 June 2025

**Abstract:** In the context of this study, a project-based learning (PBL) model has been employed to teach EFL students in a university for three years, since 2022, yet no official research has been done to evaluate its effectiveness as well as the suitability of the model. The present study, therefore, aimed to examine EFL students' perceived benefits and challenges of this PBL model at tertiary level. A mixed methodology was applied to collect data through a survey questionnaire and written reflections from a sample of 87 C1 level students after they finished their first semester in a public university in Vietnam. The findings showed that PBL had a positive impact on students' language skills, transferable skills and attributes to a varying extent. The study also revealed certain challenges of PBL implementation including project design and students' competence related ones. These findings are expected to provide preliminary insights into a PBL model employed for EFL teaching at tertiary level and contribute to the literature on this teaching method.

**Keywords:** Project-Based Learning (PBL), EFL students, benefits, challenges

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<https://doi.org/10.63023/2525-2445/jfs.ulis.5518>

# ĐÁNH GIÁ CỦA SINH VIÊN VỀ MỘT MÔ HÌNH HỌC TIẾNG ANH THÔNG QUA DỰ ÁN Ở BẬC ĐẠI HỌC

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Nhận bài ngày 13 tháng 5 năm 2025

Chỉnh sửa ngày 18 tháng 6 năm 2025; Chấp nhận đăng ngày 23 tháng 6 năm 2025

**Tóm tắt:** Trong bối cảnh của nghiên cứu này, một mô hình học tập thông qua dự án (PBL) đã được sử dụng để giảng dạy cho sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học trong ba năm, kể từ năm 2022, tuy nhiên, chưa có nghiên cứu chính thức nào được thực hiện để đánh giá hiệu quả cũng như tính phù hợp của mô hình này. Nghiên cứu này, do đó, nhằm mục đích khảo sát những lợi ích và thách thức mà sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh nhận thấy về mô hình học tập theo dự án ở bậc đại học. Tác giả áp dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp để thu thập dữ liệu thông qua bảng câu hỏi khảo sát và bài viết phản ánh từ 87 sinh viên trình độ C1 sau khi họ hoàn thành học kỳ đầu tiên tại một trường đại học công lập ở Việt Nam. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy phương pháp học tập thông qua dự án có tác động tích cực đến kỹ năng ngôn ngữ, kỹ năng chuyển giao và phẩm chất của sinh viên ở các mức độ khác nhau. Nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra một số thách thức nhất định khi triển khai phương pháp này, bao gồm các thách thức liên quan đến thiết kế dự án và các thách thức liên quan đến năng lực của sinh viên. Các kết quả này cung cấp những nhận định sơ bộ về một mô hình học tiếng Anh thông qua dự án đang được triển khai, đồng thời đóng góp vào nguồn tài liệu tham khảo liên quan đến phương pháp giảng dạy này.

**Từ khóa:** học tập thông qua dự án (PBL), sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh, lợi ích, thách thức

## 1. Introduction

Project-based learning (PBL), though not a novel teaching method as it has been introduced since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is still worth discussing mainly because of its flexibility, which allows PBL to be implemented in different educational contexts (Doppelt, 2003; Kokotsaki et al., 2016). Key variables like PBL model, subjects, learners' characteristics, teachers' roles in a certain educational setting can affect the effectiveness of this method (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Saavedra & Rapaport, 2024; Zhang & Ma, 2023). Therefore, the employment of PBL necessitates a comprehensive evaluation from different perspectives, such as course developers', teachers' and learners'. Among those, learners' viewpoints can be of fundamental importance because PBL is a student-centered instructional approach in which students' reflection is an indispensable component (BIE, 2019; Song et al., 2024).

In Vietnam, this instructional approach has been extensively discussed as an innovative English language teaching methodology since the last decade. Though addressing both benefits and challenges of PBL implementation in several schools and universities, existing research tends to focus on its impact on students' motivation and autonomous learning skills (Nguyen & Duong, 2022; Tran, 2024), teachers' difficulties (Ho & Nguyen, 2022) or lack empirical data (Nguyen, 2011). Centering on not only language skills but also work-related ones, Le and Ho (2021) concluded that PBL implementation in ESP classes brought more benefits to senior students than challenges. However, senior students may demonstrate a higher level of learning autonomy, which facilitates them to be successful in PBL, compared to their inferiors like junior

students, sophomores, and especially freshmen, who are probably more novice and incompetent. Thus, it is obviously crucial to evaluate PBL from freshmen's perspectives so as to determine whether PBL implementation can bring similar positive impacts.

Within this context, the current study adopted a mixed-methods design with data collected from a survey on EFL freshmen and their written reflections to investigate the perceived impacts and challenges that they encountered in PBL implementation. It aimed to seek answers for the following questions:

- a) To what extent can PBL affect EFL students' language skills, transferable skills and attributes?
- b) What challenges did EFL students experience in PBL?

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Project-Based Learning***

PBL was introduced in the United States in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and since then has been widely implemented by teachers and educators in various educational settings as well as extensively discussed among researchers in many subject areas. PBL is a student-centered approach that involves students acquiring knowledge, skills and developing abilities by constructing their own understanding while investigating a real life problem or building a product (Song et al., 2024). This approach can engage students in authentic questions, planning, problem-solving, decision making, investigative activities, and autonomous project processes followed by substantive products or presentations (Jones et al., 1997). In 2019, Buck Institute for Education (BIE) created a comprehensive model for PBL called Gold Standard PBL, suggesting seven essential elements of a project design, including a challenging problem or question, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, and a public product. BIE (2019) also emphasized that at the center of this model were learning goals such as key knowledge, understanding and success skills.

### ***2.2. Language Skills, Transferable Skills and Attributes***

In the field of English language teaching education, language skills are foundational abilities that learners need to acquire so that they can communicate effectively in the language. Richards and Schmidt (2013) characterized language skills as the competencies involving comprehension and production of both spoken and written language for specific communicating purposes. In this sense, language skills broadly cover all four skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. Besides, in the current research, the term language skills also include language knowledge such as lexical, grammatical and phonological knowledge required for demonstrating those competencies.

Transferable skills, or transfer skills refer to the skills developed in one setting yet can be applied effectively in another, particularly across different domains of learning, work and life. These skills are not tied to a specific discipline or task but are valuable across various settings. National Research Council (2012) described transferable skills as 21st-century competencies which are comprised of critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and communication. Robles (2012) added emotional intelligence, teamwork, and leadership to the list of cross-context competences. In this research, transferable skills, therefore, denote essential soft skills that can be adapted and employed in different contexts.

In the field of education, attributes generally refer to the personal qualities and affective

characteristics that influence how students learn and behave in academic settings (Kautz et al., 2014). In this respect, attributes can include learners' socio-emotional skills or non-cognitive skills such as perseverance, motivation, autonomy and self-efficacy. In other words, as adopted in the current research, attributes involve learners' attitudes towards achieving knowledge and skill objectives.

In assessing learners' competences after a training course, Bloom's model of knowledge, skills and attitudes have widely been utilized since the mid-twentieth century. Therefore, these three domains, officially termed "language skills", "transferable skills" and "attributes" are adopted to assess the impact of PBL on students in the current research.

### ***2.3. Project-based Learning in English Language Classrooms***

Research has consistently shown the positive impacts of PBL in teaching and learning many subjects including English language. These positive impacts have been shown in EFL students' language skills, transferable skills and attributes (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009; Le & Ho, 2021; Mariscal-Touzard et al., 2023; Mustamin, 2024; Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen & Duong, 2022; Sedubun & Nurhayati, 2024; Simpson, 2011; Song et al., 2024; Zhang & Ma, 2023).

In terms of language skills, PBL provides an encouraging environment that both supports language acquisition and facilitates language development, primarily by promoting meaningful language use (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009; Le & Ho, 2021; Nguyen, 2011; Sedubun & Nurhayati, 2024; Simpson, 2011; Song et al., 2024). This is attributed to its focus on practical real-world applications through placing students in authentic and communicative situations that require them to apply reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills collaboratively (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Nguyen, 2011). Unlike traditional methods that might often isolate language components, PBL promotes integrative language practice, which enhances accuracy and fluency through real-world tasks. For instance, a study by Simpson (2011) found that learners engaged in English projects, such as creating class newspapers or conducting interviews, demonstrated significant improvement in vocabulary retention and oral proficiency. Furthermore, Fragoulis and Tsiplakides (2009) observed that project-based instruction increased student motivation and participation, particularly among learners with low confidence in speaking English, suggesting that PBL provides a low-anxiety environment conducive to language acquisition. More recent findings by Ho and Le (2021), and Song et al. (2024) confirm that the authenticity nature of PBL promotes EFL learners' linguistic competence by fostering not only vocabulary acquisition but also the development of speaking, writing, listening and reading comprehension in a number of English language classrooms. Therefore, PBL serves as a dynamic and effective approach to enhancing English language skills by promoting meaningful language use and sustained engagement.

Moreover, research has confirmed the efficacy of PBL in developing EFL students' transferable skills including the four key components of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, namely critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication (Le & Ho, 2021; Mariscal-Touzard et al., 2023; Mustamin, 2024; Nguyen & Duong, 2022; Simpson, 2011; Song et al., 2024). For instance, Song et al. (2024) reviewed 48 papers and book chapters on PBL in EFL and TEFL from 2013-2023 and found substantial evidence supporting the increased effectiveness of PBL in fostering learners' critical thinking skills compared to traditional teaching methods. Beside enhancing critical thinking skills, PBL projects had a positive impact on developing EFL students' other work-related skills such as creativity and collaboration (Le & Ho, 2021; Mariscal-Touzard et al., 2023; Simpson, 2011). Studying PBL implementation at secondary

schools in Indonesia and in Vietnam, Mustamin et al. (2024), and Nguyen and Duong (2022) concluded that EFL students developed their collaborative abilities as well as autonomous learning skills such as making plans for project fulfillment, self-overcoming the learning challenges, expressing more ideas, and self-assessing their learning capacity. As further explained by Song et al. (2024), this efficacy roots from the fact that PBL “immerses students in real-world challenges and collaborative learning environments” (p. 407) where they learn to analyze complex information, evaluate situations based on justified evidence and create innovative solutions.

Besides, several studies have outlined the favorable influence of PBL on EFL students’ attributes (Le & Ho, 2021; Sedubun & Nurhayati, 2024; Zhang & Ma, 2023). By engaging in PBL projects, students demonstrated higher learning motivation, stronger sense of responsibility and improved affective attitudes, which in turn not only significantly improved their academic achievement, but also positively contributed to their essential professional qualities.

However, the implementation of PBL in EFL classrooms has been without certain challenges, both subjective and objective ones. For example, Le and Ho (2021) mentioned those related to students such as lack of skills, English proficiency and negative attitudes. Mariscal-Touzard et al. (2023) discussed difficulties caused by lack of access to technology in a public university in Ecuador. Ho and Nguyen (2022) studied EFL teachers’ implementation of PBL in secondary schools and found challenges related to students’ mixed abilities, differences in interests and learning styles, and lack of necessary materials and skills for doing projects. They also pointed out challenges regarding teachers such as adapting project activities, time constraints for student support, and large-sized class management.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Context***

This study was conducted in a public university in Vietnam, renowned for foreign language teaching. The participants were English-language-majored freshmen whose English competence was equivalent to C1 level on the CEFR scale. As part of their bachelor program, they were required to take a course titled English for Contemporary Themes 2, which was a compulsory course designed for students whose proficiency level was around B2 or C1. In this 15-week course, students were asked to do a project called Inquiry Project, which involved them in working in groups of 3-5 to investigate an issue of their choice related to one of the following themes:

- Law, Justice and Human Rights
- Business, Economics and Globalization
- Food, Health and Medication
- Race, Gender and Population
- Tourism, Energy and Transportation
- Arts, Culture, and Architecture

The products of this project included a presentation and an analytical report of around 1,600 words about their investigation. During this process, apart from being an instructor, teachers play a supervisor and a facilitator’s role to provide essential guidelines and consultations to help students complete their projects.

The project procedure was summarized in 11 steps as follows:

- Step 1: Examining and selecting suitable topic for the Inquiry Project
- Step 2: Selecting and classifying suitable information for the chosen topic from listening and reading sources
- Step 3: Summarizing and synthesizing the collected arguments from reading and listening sources
- Step 4: Determining the suitable stakeholders for the Inquiry Project and designing a survey to collect data
- Step 5: Going on a field trip to ask and gather stakeholders' opinions regarding the selected topic
- Step 6: Summarizing and synthesizing the stakeholder's opinions
- Step 7: Reporting and visualizing collected information the field trips
- Step 8: Proposing suggestions and drawing conclusion concerning the issue
- Step 9: Refining the Inquiry Project according to the comments from their peers and lecturer, and preparing a 20-to-25-minute presentation on the selected topic
- Step 10: Delivering a 20-to-25-minute presentation on the issue and answering questions from the audience
- Step 11: Submitting a written report

This course with its aforementioned PBL model has been employed to teach EFL students in the university for three years, since 2022, yet no official research has been done to evaluate its effectiveness as well as the suitability of the model. Therefore, this study was conducted to provide stakeholders with empirical data on students' perceived benefits and challenges in the implementation of the PBL model.

### **3.2. Research Design**

To find out the impact of PBL on EFL students' skill development, a mixed methods design with both quantitative and qualitative tools was employed. Data was collected through a survey questionnaire and written reflections after students completed their projects in 15 weeks. For the survey, participants were asked to rate their language skills, transferable skills and attributes on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 meaning Strongly disagree to 5 meaning Strongly agree. The questionnaire was comprised of 19 items, with items 1-13 corresponding to language knowledge and skills, items 14-17 corresponding to transferable skills, and items 18-19 corresponding to attributes. All the item statements were designed based on the course objectives, which was officially proclaimed in the course guide for both teachers and students. For the written reflection, participants were asked to openly answer the following questions:

- a) What did you value the most in doing the Inquiry Project?
- b) In what ways did the Inquiry project help to improve your English language skills?
- c) In what ways did the Inquiry project help you to learn transferable skills?
- d) What challenges did you experience in doing the Inquiry project? How did you respond to them?
- e) What else do you expect from the Inquiry project, the course English for Contemporary Themes 2, and your teacher?

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, both the survey questionnaire and written reflection questions were reviewed by experts in the field of English language teaching studies before delivered to participants. In addition to that review, Cronbach's alpha coefficient

was calculated to measure the internal consistency of questionnaire items. In this study, the coefficient was at 0.947, suggesting its reliability.

To find out the answer for the first research question on the benefits of PBL, data collected from the survey were then processed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software version 30. Basic descriptive statistics with mean and standard deviation (SD) scores were used to interpret data. Mean scores were interpreted as follows: 1.00-1.80: strongly disagree; 1.81-2.60: disagree; 2.61-3.40: neutral; 3.41-4.20: agree; 4.21-5.00: strongly agree. In the meantime, a thematic analysis method was employed to identify common themes from participants' written reflections. To preserve their confidentiality, they were coded from R1 to R87. Their answers for questions 1-3 were used to triangulate survey data while those for questions 4-5 were utilized to find out the answer for the second research question on the challenges of PBL.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1. Impact of PBL on EFL Students**

#### **4.1.1. Impact of PBL on EFL Students' Language Skills**

As shown in Table 1, the participants perceived that after completing the course, they could enhance their language skills (mean scores ranged from 3.90 to 4.23, and SD scores ranged from 0.754 to 0.915), which suggests that PBL had a positive impact on their language development.

Listening (Item 9: Mean = 4.23; SD = 0.758) and research skills (Item 11: Mean = 4.22; SD = 0.754) were among the skills that students gained the most. They described that they felt more confident in following most lectures, discussions and oral presentations on abstract and complex contemporary topics as a live audience, which was not the case before the course. Likewise, higher-order cognitive skills in language learning such as selecting, summarizing, and synthesizing information from spoken and written input to produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured responses were significantly improved.

Moreover, reading comprehension (Item 10: Mean = 4.17; SD = 0.686) and academic writing (Item 13: Mean = 4.06; SD = 0.753) were reported to develop considerably after students completed the course. This could be explained by the fact that students were granted an opportunity to read and evaluate multiple written texts as they proceeded to find out the answer for their project topic. For example, R22 said that "engaging with diverse resources during research expanded [her] reading and listening comprehension". Similarly, R86 acknowledged that "doing the project required [her] to read and analyze various English sources and survey answers, hence, improving [her] reading and analyzing skills". Regarding their writing skills, it is worth noting that many students described composing a detailed academic report as a "first-time", "never-before" or "completely novel" experience and a "game-changer", which was both challenging and rewarding because they learnt to interpret collected data, organize ideas logically and cite sources properly, all of which were to explain a fact they had found by themselves (R23, R35, R42, R71).

Besides, participants reported that their vocabulary range on contemporary themes had been expanded though the extent slightly varied among different topics (Items 1-6: Mean ranged from 3.90 to 4.10, and SD ranged from 0.793 to 0.869). This lexical expansion was acquired mostly through reading and listening while students did research on those topics specifically by, for instance "watching videos, scrolling through media outlets for articles, or

reading over studies” and “attentively listening to other groups’ presentations” (R3, R46). However, students’ lexical repertoire of their chosen topic tended to be broader compared to other topics as they directly did in-depth research into it.

**Table 1**

*Students’ Self-Evaluation of Language Skills*

<i>After completing the course, I am able to...</i>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
1. develop a broad grammatical and lexical repertoire of the topic Law, Justice and Human rights	3.90	.822
2. develop a broad grammatical and lexical repertoire of the topic Business, Economics and Globalization	3.91	.830
3. develop a broad grammatical and lexical repertoire of the topic Food, Health and Medication	4.10	.793
4. develop a broad grammatical and lexical repertoire of the topic Race, Gender and Population	4.07	.860
5. develop a broad grammatical and lexical repertoire of the topic Tourism, Energy and Transportation	3.97	.869
6. develop a broad grammatical and lexical repertoire of the topic Arts, Culture and Architecture	3.94	.826
7. develop a very good command of phonological processes to interact effectively with complex spoken inputs	3.94	.867
8. follow extended speech on abstract and complex contemporary topics, and analyze the arguments given by the speakers	4.15	.785
9. follow most lectures, discussions and oral presentations on abstract and complex contemporary topics as a live audience with relative ease	4.23	.758
10. understand and critically interpret written language	4.17	.686
11. select, summarize, and synthesize information from spoken and written input to produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured responses	4.22	.754
12. deliver a detailed oral presentation on a case with an effective logical structure	3.98	.915
13. compose a detailed report that presents a case with an effective logical structure	4.06	.753
<b>N = 87</b>		

#### **4.1.2. Impact of PBL on EFL Students’ Transferable Skills**

As illustrated in Table 2, participants strongly agreed that after the course, they could work cooperatively to accomplish assigned tasks (Item 16: Mean = 4.45; SD = 0.789), apply certain technology in learning activities (Item 14: Mean = 4.34; SD = 0.712), and demonstrate their creativity and problem-solving skills (Item 17: Mean = 4.21; SD = 0.823). This indicates that the PBL model had a positive effect on developing students’ transferable skills. Apart from cooperation, technology, creativity and problem-solving skills, students mentioned their improvement on a number of other portable skills such as communication, critical thinking, data analysis, time management, adaptability, conflict resolution, organizational, collaboration and leadership, among which teamwork or collaboration was the most frequent keyword in their reflections. Some participants also acknowledged that the project had encouraged them to “break out of the comfort zone and grow” (R32), which built their confidence, an important attribute in life.



**Table 2***Students' Self-evaluation of Transferable Skills*

<i>After completing the course, I am able to...</i>	Mean	SD
14. apply certain computer softwares in learning activities	4.34	.712
15. design effective visual aids	3.94	.840
16. work cooperatively to accomplish assigned tasks	4.45	.789
17. demonstrate creativity and problem-solving skills in learning activities	4.21	.823
N = 87		

**4.1.3. Impact of PBL on EFL Students' Attributes**

Table 3 shows participants' strong agreement on characteristics constructed after completing the course like professionalism and being ethical (Item 19: Mean = 4.38; SD = 0.766), and commitment and responsibility (Item 18: Mean = 4.30; SD = 0.864). This implies the suitability of PBL in building students' desirable qualities.

**Table 3***Students' Self-evaluation of Attributes*

<i>After completing the course, I am able to...</i>	Mean	SD
18. demonstrate my commitment and responsibility as an effective leader or as a member of collaborative, cooperative and successful teams	4.30	.864
19. apply professional standards, practices, and ethics to my work	4.38	.766
N = 87		

**4.2. Challenges in PBL Implementation**

Though benefiting from PBL, participants encountered certain challenges in doing the project. An in-depth analysis of their written reflections suggested that these challenges could be categorized into two groups: those related to project design and those related to students' competence.

Regarding project design, many students voiced their struggles in selecting a suitable topic, designing opinion-gathering tools, and most frequently claimed, collecting data as well as analyzing collected data. For instance, reflecting on "the obscurity of the direction that [they] should go" (R5), they reported being "clueless on what to do and where to start" (R70) and "overwhelmed to narrow down or brainstorm a relevant topic" (R32). Students supposed that as freshmen, they were inexperienced and "underestimated the effort required for certain tasks" (R86), leading them to opt for "too wide and unmanageable topics" (R58). They also recounted that after having "definitely gone through a lot of trials and errors" (R70) with numerous "lengthy group discussions" (R28) to finalize an appropriate topic, in the subsequent step of designing data collection instruments, they even "had trouble brainstorming the questions, had trouble purging them of potential social desirability biases, and had trouble meeting the number of respondents required" (R42). Furthermore, students described the data-gathering process was "daunting" and "intimidating" (R68, R13) since to collect enough data from respondents, most of whom were "reluctant-to-share-opinions strangers" (R66), they "had to let off [their] shyness" and "spent much time on walking around the campus and streets to test [their] luck" (R68). Finally, because "there was too much information" (R22) that needed synthesizing in "a report of merely 1,600 words" (R82), they struggled in selecting the most meaningful one to

work out a tendency while “ensuring nothing was overlooked” (R78).

In terms of students’ competence, lack of time management and teamwork skills were among the most recurrent keywords participants cited. As further explained by one student, “the project involved multiple stages, including research, analysis, and presentation”, they “initially found it overwhelming to balance these tasks alongside other responsibilities” (R39). In addition to this workload, they discussed difficulties that arose while “collaborating with team members who had different schedules” (R22) as well as mixed abilities and different perspectives. Some participants also pointed to “miscommunication” among group members or “team misunderstandings and conflicts”, and “lack of a group structure” due to no group leader or “inefficient cooperation” (R26, R38, R63, R75).

It should also be noted that despite these challenges, participants both actively and effectively managed to resolve them. For example, to address time management issues, they reported “planning online meetings (often late in the evenings) so everyone [with different schedules] could join”, “making a Google sheet to set deadlines and regularly update each other on [their] progress”, and “creating a detailed schedule, breaking down the project into smaller, manageable tasks with specific deadlines,” “ensuring each task was completed on time” (R22, R39, R82). Similarly, after weekly group meetings especially “offline bonding sessions” which fostered open communication, “breaking down the distance and awkwardness” among team members, they learnt to be more open-minded, “patient” and “honest” (R45, R62, R63, R70). Thanks to this, they began to understand each other better, thereby collaborating more effectively towards their shared project. Concerning the challenges related to project design, students tended to seek support from different sources including other groups, seniors and mostly from their teacher. As one student recounted their entire process, “We tried, failed, got feedback, tried again and failed again, but we didn’t give up and learned from our mistakes and fixed them” (R19). Notably, during this process, students highly appreciated their teacher’s “unwavering support”, “dedication”, “clear instructions”, “attentive listening” as well as “constructive feedback,” which promoted their learning journey and project accomplishment in “a positive and encouraging environment” (R3, R5, R6, R46, R52, R86). This may imply the important role of a teacher as not only an instructor but also a facilitator and a source of encouragement in PBL pathways. Meanwhile, participants proposed “more opportunities for in-depth exploration of contemporary topics by doing interactive activities like workshops or panel discussions” (R3) so that they could build their background knowledge, offering them some suggestions on topics to be chosen for their project. Besides, as students were required to start their project almost immediately at the start of the course, they recommended more step-by-step training on a sample project to boost their confidence before they officially “embarked on [their own] inquiry project” (R35).

### **4.3. Discussion**

Since the findings reveal that PBL had a favorable effect on students’ language proficiency, transferable skills and attributes, they are in line with those reported by Le and Ho (2021), Mariscal-Touzard et al. (2023), Mustamin (2024), Nguyen (2011), Sedubun and Nurhayati (2024), Song et al. (2024), and Zhang and Ma (2023), which were briefly discussed in the literature review. Students’ enhanced grammatical and lexical repertoire of contemporary topics and improved language skills are attributed to the project design, which immerses them in the analysis, evaluation and synthesis of information to produce substantive products both in oral presentation and written report forms. In addition to that language enhancement, the focus on real-world challenges and collaborative learning environment plays a pivotal role in building

students' responsibilities and positive attitudes towards learning, as well as fostering students' collaboration, critical thinking skills, communication, creativity, problem solving skills and many other transferable skills, which are crucial competences for future academic and career opportunities in a globalized world.

However, it is interesting to note that in this study, participants perceived their enhancement in the three abovementioned aspects to a varying extent, with greater degrees in transferable skills and attributes, and a smaller one in language skills. This variation could be explained by the nature of participants. As mentioned earlier, they are freshmen who are more familiar with traditional teaching methodologies, which focus on individual exercise doing and paper testing that straightforwardly quantify learners' outcomes. Nonetheless, with PBL, the predominant learning activities are listening and reading to construct their own knowledge and skills through the process of tackling a complex, real-world problem, in which learning outcomes cannot be frankly decided via such exercises. Consequently, their perception of enhancement might be less vivid compared to their past experiences. Meanwhile, participants confirmed that the collaborative and practical application of PBL is novel to them, so their perception of transferable skills and attributes could be significantly clearer.

Concerning the difficulties they encountered, participants recounted both project design and students' competence related challenges. Though discussing students' lack of skills for doing the project and their mixed abilities like Le and Ho (2021), and Ho and Nguyen (2022), this study did not refer to students' English proficiency, their attitudes, differences in interests and learning styles, and lack of necessary materials as causes for concern. Other issues such as teachers' time constraints for student support, large-sized class and lack of access to technology, as found in Ho and Nguyen (2022), and Mariscal-Touzard et al. (2023) were not acknowledged by participants in this study, either. This indicates that the participants in the current study are highly competent and adaptable. In addition to that, the institutional resources for PBL implementation such as teacher support and technology access are readily available. This availability, in turn, facilitates students' learning. It might also partly help explain why regarding participants' response to these challenges, they could actively manage to resolve them for project fulfilment by accessing available resources, confirming Nguyen and Duong (2022), which proved the potential of PBL in enhancing EFL students' autonomous learning skills.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, the study has shown the following preliminary results of a PBL model implementation for EFL teaching at tertiary level. First, PBL had a positive impact on students' language skills, transferable skills and attributes to a varying extent. Second, students encountered some challenges related to project design and their competence. However, they efficiently managed to overcome these difficulties by actively accessing various available resources like their peers, seniors and mostly their teacher.

In theory, the study has contributed to the existing literature on the PBL method. While providing empirical data to confirm the benefits of the method, it also highlights certain challenges of PBL implementation. In practice, it has provided a first insight into the implementation of a PBL model for EFL teaching at tertiary level, so teachers, course designers and curriculum developers can use it as a reference source for improving students' learning experiences.

Nevertheless, it has left several gaps for future research. First, as the study was limited to a relatively small sample, and most data came from students' perceived opinion, larger scale

studies from different perspectives should be conducted to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the PBL model. Second, though the findings show that participants perceived greater enhancement in transferable skills and attributes, and smaller one in language skills, this variation has not been fully explained. Considering the fact that this PBL model is implemented for teaching both B2 and C1 level EFL students with different needs for developing language proficiency, further studies should delve into this variation to tailor the model for each group of learners.

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