



8th Graders' Attitude Toward the Implementation of Project-Based Learning Method in Teaching English Reading Skills. A Case Study at Public Secondary School in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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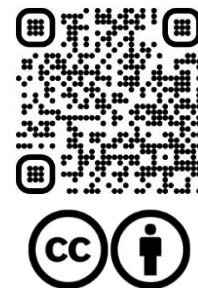
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Abstract— Teaching English reading skills in the Vietnamese educational context traditionally emphasizes direct-teaching methods, which often limit students' active involvement and real-world application of knowledge. This study aimed to explore a different pedagogical approach, Project-Based Learning (PBL), to teach English reading skills, with an objective to understand students' attitudes toward this innovative method. The research was conducted at a public secondary school in District 7, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The participants comprised of 50 eighth graders aged 14-15 years, offering a diverse group of English learners for the study. A mixed-methods research design was employed, using both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to collect data. The questionnaire, featuring 24 items across cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains, was designed to gauge students' perceptions and experiences with PBL in their English reading classes. Semi-structured interviews provided qualitative insights into these experiences, offering a richer understanding of student attitudes. The results revealed that implementing PBL in teaching English reading skills significantly improved students' engagement and learning outcomes. Cognitively, students reported enhanced understanding and retention of new English vocabulary, increased ability to infer meanings of unknown words, and better analytical skills. Behaviorally, PBL encouraged active participation, greater collaboration, and increased English reading beyond the classroom. Affectively, students felt more confident and accomplished, with reduced anxiety and a more positive attitude towards English reading. Nevertheless, certain challenges were reported, including initial project ambiguity and unequal group contribution. These findings suggest that PBL can be an effective strategy for teaching English reading skills, promoting active learning, and fostering positive learning experiences in the Vietnamese context. Future research could focus on optimizing PBL implementation, addressing reported challenges, and exploring its long-term impacts on English reading proficiency. This study hopefully contributes to the broader literature on PBL in English language learning and provides practical insights for educators aiming to enhance English reading skills among secondary school students.

Keywords— Project-Based Learning, English Reading Skills, Student Attitudes, Cognitive, Behavioral, Affective, Vietnamese Context.



I. INTRODUCTION

The mastery of English reading skills has been widely recognized as an essential tool for academic success and socio-economic advancement, especially in the age of

globalization (Grabe & Stoller, 2013). The teaching and learning of these skills, however, vary significantly across cultural and geographical contexts.

In Vietnam, English language education, including the development of reading skills, has been traditionally rooted in direct-teaching methods, often characterized by teacher-centered pedagogies (Le, 2017). This model tends to prioritize grammar and vocabulary acquisition through rote memorization, which often leads to lower student engagement and minimal opportunities for critical thinking and creativity (Nguyen, 2011). Despite efforts to transform English language teaching in Vietnam, such traditional pedagogies remain prevalent, posing potential limitations on the effectiveness of English reading skills instruction (Pham, 2020).

In light of these challenges, innovative teaching methods such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) have been proposed to stimulate learner autonomy, foster critical thinking, and enhance language skills, including reading (Stoller, 2006). PBL, characterized by active learning through realistic projects, allows students to apply their knowledge and skills in a practical context, thereby potentially enhancing their motivation and understanding of the language (Thomas, 2000). However, while PBL has been increasingly recognized worldwide, its application to English language teaching, particularly reading skills, in the Vietnamese context remains largely unexplored.

Given the scarcity of research on this topic, this study aims to fill the gap by implementing a Project-Based Learning method in the teaching of English reading skills in Vietnam and investigating students' attitudes towards this innovative pedagogical approach. The researcher believes that such an endeavor not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge but also offers valuable insights for English language education in Vietnam and similar contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 English Reading skills

English reading skills involve a complex set of proficiencies that enable individuals to comprehend, interpret, and critically evaluate text in the English language (Grabe, 2009). Reading skills are typically divided into two broad categories: lower-level processing skills and higher-level processing skills.

Lower-level processing skills, often termed as 'decoding' skills, encompass basic cognitive abilities such as recognizing words, understanding their meaning, and grasping sentence structure (Perfetti, 1985). These foundational skills are vital for understanding the surface meaning of a text.

Higher-level processing skills, also known as 'comprehension' skills, involve more complex cognitive tasks. These include making inferences, understanding

arguments, evaluating statements, and integrating information from different parts of the text or from prior knowledge (Grabe & Stoller, 2013). These skills are critical for deeper comprehension and critical engagement with the text.

The acquisition of English reading skills, especially in a foreign language context, involves not only the mastery of these lower and higher-level processing skills but also the development of metacognitive strategies. These strategies, such as predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing, help learners monitor and control their reading process to improve comprehension and learning (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

In the context of second or foreign language learning, English reading skills also require an understanding of cultural nuances and background knowledge relevant to the English-speaking world (Nuttall, 2005). This cultural competence enables learners to understand and interpret texts in their socio-cultural context, enhancing comprehension and engagement with the text.

In summary, English reading skills comprise a wide range of cognitive abilities, metacognitive strategies, and cultural knowledge. The teaching and learning of these skills, especially in a foreign language context like Vietnam, present a complex pedagogical challenge that our study aims to address.

2.2 Project-based learning

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an instructional methodology that encourages students to learn and apply knowledge and skills through an engaging project (Thomas, 2000). Unlike traditional instruction, PBL is student-centered, allowing learners to investigate and respond to authentic, engaging, and complex questions or challenges over an extended period (Bell, 2010).

PBL promotes a deep understanding of concepts, broader knowledge base, improved communication and interpersonal/social skills, enhanced leadership skills, increased creativity, and improved writing skills (Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009). Furthermore, it provides a platform for learners to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Helle, Tynjälä, & Olkinuora, 2006).

For language learning, PBL provides a meaningful context that can enhance students' motivation and involvement, which are crucial for successful language acquisition (Beckett, 2002). Stoller (2006) noted that PBL in language education promotes language skills integration, critical thinking, and learner autonomy while offering opportunities for meaningful language use.

Despite these benefits, PBL's adoption in English language teaching, particularly in non-Western contexts like Vietnam, has been slow and faced numerous challenges. These challenges include the perceived

complexity of project work, lack of teacher training, and constraints related to curriculum and assessment (Fried-Booth, 2002).

In conclusion, PBL represents a pedagogical approach that can potentially revolutionize English language teaching by fostering a deeper, more engaging learning experience. The present study explores the implementation of this innovative approach in the Vietnamese context, filling a notable gap in the literature.

2.3 Attitude

Attitude, a fundamental concept in psychology, refers to an individual's positive or negative evaluation of people, objects, events, or ideas (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). It is generally understood to comprise three main components: cognitive, behavioral, and affective (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960).

The cognitive component of attitude relates to an individual's beliefs, thoughts, and attributes about an object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). For instance, in the context of this study, the cognitive component would include students' beliefs about Project-Based Learning, such as its effectiveness or relevance to their English reading skill development.

The behavioral component of attitude pertains to the way one intends to act or behaves towards an object (Ajzen, 1991). In our context, this could refer to students' actual engagement and participation in the Project-Based Learning tasks.

The affective component of attitude refers to an individual's feelings or emotional reactions towards an object (Zanna & Rempel, 1988). In the context of Project-Based Learning, this might include feelings of enjoyment, interest, or frustration that students might experience during the project work.

The tripartite model of attitude emphasizes that these three components interact to shape an individual's overall attitude towards an object or a concept (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Understanding these components is crucial as they can provide insights into how attitudes form, change, and influence behavior. In the current study, we seek to examine students' cognitive, behavioral, and affective responses to Project-Based Learning in the teaching of English reading skills in Vietnam.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research site

The research was conducted at a public secondary school located in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Established in 1996, this vibrant academic institution caters to over 2300 students from grades 6 to 9. The school offers a comprehensive curriculum that spans across various

departments, including mathematics, literature, physics, chemistry, and foreign languages.

The English department at the school currently employs the "Access" series by Evan & Dooley (2008) as the primary instructional material. This English language teaching series combines course content, language skills, and learner values to facilitate a holistic learning experience.

3.2. Participant

The participants for this study were 50 eighth-grade students, predominantly aged 14 years (89.5%), with a smaller proportion aged 15 years (10.5%). The selection of this age group was purposeful for a number of reasons. Firstly, this age group is typically marked by a heightened cognitive development stage, which is well suited to the application of Project-Based Learning methods (Blumenfeld et al., 1991).

Secondly, at this stage, students are not only capable of expressing their opinions through questionnaires and interviews, but their responses often provide nuanced insights into their attitudes towards learning (Denscombe, 2010).

Thirdly, previous research indicates that younger learners often show more positive attitudes towards innovative, active learning methodologies, such as Project-Based Learning, compared to traditional learning methods (Liu & Chen, 2013). Thus, the choice of this age group not only aligns with the pedagogical focus of the study but also aims to facilitate a robust exploration of student attitudes towards Project-Based Learning.

3.3. Research instrument

3.3.1. Questionnaire

The primary instrument for data collection in this study was a questionnaire designed to measure students' attitudes towards Project-Based Learning (PBL) in the context of English reading skills instruction. The questionnaire, a popular instrument for attitude measurement due to its efficiency and statistical utility (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006), consisted of 24 items divided into three sections, corresponding to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of attitudes, with 8 items allocated for each aspect.

To ensure the quality and reliability of the questionnaire, it was piloted with five students. Feedback from this pilot study was used to refine the questionnaire items to avoid double-barreled, vague, and irrelevant questions, a common practice to improve the validity and reliability of research instruments (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005). These five students were excluded from the final survey.

The questionnaire demonstrated high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.802, a measure indicative of strong internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Cronbach's alpha for the individual components were also high, with scores of 0.947 for the cognitive aspect, 0.948 for the affective aspect, and 0.928 for the behavioral aspect.

3.3.2 Interview

To complement the quantitative data from the questionnaire and to gather more nuanced insights, an interview protocol was also employed (Creswell, 2013). The interview consisted of 9 items, divided evenly among the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of attitudes. A sample of 10 participants from the larger student group were selected for the interviews, providing additional qualitative data for the study.

3.4 Data collecting procedure

3.4.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered to the participants during regular class time. According to Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009), for a questionnaire with 24 items like the one used in this study, an estimated completion time of approximately 25 minutes is ideal to ensure participants' attention and thoughtful responses. Therefore, this time frame was maintained for the data collection process. The students completed the questionnaires in the classroom setting and handed them back to the teacher immediately after completion to ensure timely and effective data collection.

3.4.2 Interview

The interviews were conducted individually with each of the 10 selected students. Each interview session lasted approximately 20 minutes, a timeframe deemed appropriate for maintaining the comfort and attention of the interviewee (Kvale, 2007). The responses were noted verbatim, and with the interviewees' consent, the sessions were also audio-recorded to ensure data accuracy. The confidentiality of the participants was guaranteed, and the data was anonymized to protect their identities. All the data collected from the interviews will be used strictly for research purposes and will be stored securely to maintain privacy.

3.5 Data analysis procedure

3.5.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire responses, structured on a 5-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree), were subjected to quantitative analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. To facilitate interpretation of the mean scores, an interval coefficient was calculated, creating three intervals across the four points on the Likert scale. The range for each interval was computed as 0.8 (4/5), resulting in the following categories: M = 1.00–1.80 (strongly disagree); M = 1.81–2.60 (disagree); M = 2.61–3.40 (neutral); M = 3.41–4.20 (agree); M = 4.21–5.00 (strongly agree). This procedure ensured a nuanced understanding of students' attitudes on a continuum from strong disagreement to strong agreement (Norman, 2010).

3.5.2 Interview

For the qualitative data collected through interviews, the process began with transcribing the recorded interviews verbatim. The researcher then immersed himself in the data to familiarize with the information and context of the interviewees' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was then coded according to each student (i.e., S1 to S10), and these coded data were categorized based on the three components of attitude - cognitive, affective, and behavioral.

Upon categorization, a thorough analysis was conducted to identify patterns, trends, and key themes in students' attitudes towards Project-Based Learning. To ensure the validity of the findings and interpretations, a member check was carried out by providing the participants with a written summary of the findings to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Cognitive aspect

The mean scores of the questionnaire items related to the cognitive aspect ranged from 4.20 to 4.62, indicating a high level of agreement among the respondents about the positive impact of Project-Based Learning (PBL) on their cognitive skills in reading English texts (See Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Cognitive Aspect

No	Items	N	Mean	St. D
1	Project-based learning helps me to understand new English words better.	45	4.20	.592
2	I can easily remember the meanings of English words learned during the project.	45	4.58	.499
3	I can better understand the context of English passages through project-based learning.	45	4.58	.498
4	Project-based learning has improved my ability to infer the meanings of unknown English words.	45	4.53	.588

5	I feel that my analytical skills in understanding English passages have increased with project-based learning.	45	4.56	.546
6	Project-based learning has enhanced my critical thinking in reading English texts.	45	4.62	.490
7	I have improved my ability to summarize English texts because of project-based learning.	45	4.58	.499
8	Project-based learning has increased my interest in learning English reading.	45	4.60	.495

In the interviews, students (S1, S3, S6, S10) described project-based learning as:

"An approach where we, the students, learn through engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects. In our English reading classes, this may involve analyzing a novel and creating a multimedia presentation about it."

Students expressed that PBL enhances their reading skills by pushing them to fully immerse themselves in the text (S1, S4, S10, S7). They highlighted that:

"It promotes active reading, as I have to constantly analyze and interpret information to complete my project."

Furthermore, students (S4, S6, S9) reported that project-based learning:

"Fosters a more active understanding of the text. Unlike traditional methods where the focus may be on memorizing facts, this approach encourages me to delve deeper and apply the concepts to real-world situations."

These responses align with the literature suggesting that PBL can have a significant positive impact on students' cognitive skills, especially in the context of English language learning (Stoller, 2002). It provides a more engaging, practical, and comprehensive learning

experience that promotes understanding, memory retention, analytical skills, and interest in the subject matter.

The students' positive attitudes towards the cognitive benefits of PBL, as evidenced by both the questionnaire and interview data, suggest that implementing this approach in English reading instruction could be an effective way to enhance students' cognitive skills, improve their reading comprehension, and stimulate their interest in learning English.

However, future research could delve deeper into understanding which specific components of PBL are most effective for enhancing these cognitive aspects, and how PBL can be best implemented in different English reading instruction contexts.

4.2 Behavioral aspect

The results relating to the behavioral aspect of the questionnaire indicated a strong tendency towards the positive, with mean scores ranging from 4.18 to 4.42. These results demonstrate a high level of engagement and active participation in PBL among the participants (See Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Behavioral Aspect

No	Items	N	Mean	St. D
1	I actively participate in project-based English learning activities.	45	4.18	.490
2	I prefer project-based learning over traditional ways of learning English reading.	45	4.42	.499
3	I feel more engaged when English reading is taught through project-based learning.	45	4.42	.499
4	I find myself reading more English texts outside of class due to project-based learning.	45	4.36	.484
5	I take contributing ideas during project-based learning activities.	45	4.38	.614
6	I collaborate well with my classmates during project-based learning activities.	45	4.36	.489
7	I find it easy to apply what I learned from project-based learning in my daily life.	45	4.38	.490
8	I am motivated to complete the tasks assigned in project-based English learning.	45	4.33	.603

When discussing their behaviors during PBL tasks in the interviews, students highlighted their active participation in these activities. They described a systematic approach to tackling projects: reading and understanding the requirements, brainstorming ideas, and dividing the tasks among team members if it was a group project (S5, S9, S7).

This indicates a high level of engagement and effort in the learning process.

Students also reported a willingness to take on leadership roles and contribute ideas during PBL activities. For example, student S2 commented:

"I make it a point to contribute ideas in every project. I take up a leadership role occasionally, especially when the project aligns well with my skills and interests."

This aligns with the high mean score for the questionnaire item related to contribution and collaboration in PBL activities. Furthermore, students also described how PBL motivated them to learn beyond the classroom. For instance, student S4 shared:

"After we completed a project on dystopian literature, I found the genre so fascinating that I started reading more dystopian novels outside the classroom."

This demonstrates that PBL can stimulate learners' interest and motivate them to independently pursue further knowledge. These findings confirm the notion that PBL encourages active participation, fosters a sense of ownership of learning, and motivates students to learn

beyond the classroom, as noted in previous studies (Bell, 2010; Grant, 2002).

It's important to note that although PBL has proven to be effective in fostering positive behavioral changes in students, the role of the teacher is critical in guiding the students, scaffolding their learning, and creating a supportive learning environment that encourages active participation and engagement.

4.3 Affective aspect

The affective aspect of the questionnaire displayed a positive trend as well, with mean scores ranging from 4.07 to 4.38 (See Table 3). This suggests that participants had positive feelings and attitudes towards PBL, including enjoyment, confidence, and a sense of accomplishment.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Affective Aspect

No	Items	N	Mean	St. D
1	I feel confident in my English reading skills because of project-based learning.	45	4.07	.495
2	I enjoy English reading more when it involves project-based learning.	45	4.38	.490
3	I feel less anxious about reading in English due to project-based learning.	45	4.36	.484
4	I feel a sense of accomplishment after completing an English project-based learning activity.	45	4.36	.484
5	Project-based learning makes me feel more positive about English reading.	45	4.31	.596
6	I am proud of the work I produce in project-based learning activities.	45	4.33	.477
7	Project-based learning in English reading has boosted my self-confidence when I present my project.	45	4.29	.589
8	I am more enthusiastic about English classes that utilize project-based learning.	45	4.27	.618

During the interviews, when asked about their feelings when learning through PBL, students expressed a range of positive emotions. They reported feeling engaged, motivated, intrigued, and actively part of the learning process (S4, S7, S10, S8). This aligns well with the high mean scores for the items on enjoyment and reduced anxiety in PBL.

On discussing moments of excitement or happiness in PBL, students pointed out instances where they felt a sense of achievement or received positive feedback. For instance, S1 shared,

"I remember feeling particularly excited when our group successfully completed a complex project on analyzing the theme of a novel."

These findings are consistent with the high mean score for the item related to feeling a sense of accomplishment in PBL.

However, students also reported some moments of discomfort or frustration during PBL, often relating to the initial ambiguity of projects or unbalanced group dynamics.

Despite these challenges, many students recognized these moments as part of the learning process. It is worth noting that while PBL can cultivate positive feelings and attitudes towards learning, educators must be mindful of potential areas of discomfort and address them promptly to ensure a conducive learning environment.

Overall, these findings echo previous studies suggesting that PBL can enhance students' affective outcomes, such as increased enjoyment, engagement, and confidence (Han, Capraro, & Capraro, 2014; Lam, Cheng, & Ma, 2009). These affective outcomes are critical as they can contribute to students' motivation and persistence in learning (Pekrun, 2006).

V. CONCLUSION

The current research provides compelling evidence that Project-based Learning (PBL) positively impacts students' English reading proficiency, particularly in cognitive, behavioral, and affective aspects. The

quantitative data collected showed that students perceived PBL as a beneficial approach to improving their English reading skills, and they expressed a strong preference for this approach over traditional methods of learning. The positive mean scores for all three dimensions -- cognitive, behavioral, and affective -- provide robust statistical support for these findings.

In terms of the cognitive aspect, students reported that PBL helped them understand new English words better, infer meanings of unknown words, and enhance their critical reading skills. The findings align with previous research demonstrating that PBL facilitates deeper understanding and critical thinking skills (Bell, 2010).

Behaviorally, students indicated active participation, better collaboration, and increased reading outside of class due to PBL. This aligns with Bell's (2010) assertion that PBL encourages students' active involvement and fosters collaboration among peers.

Regarding the affective aspect, PBL was found to boost students' confidence in their English reading skills and evoke feelings of enjoyment, less anxiety, and accomplishment. These outcomes resonate with studies that have found PBL to foster intrinsic motivation and enjoyment in learning (Han, Capraro, & Capraro, 2014; Lam, Cheng, & Ma, 2009).

Despite the observed benefits, some students reported instances of discomfort or frustration, often due to initial ambiguity of projects or unbalanced group dynamics. This indicates a need for educators to provide clear guidelines at the beginning of projects and encourage fair contribution from all group members.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that educators consider integrating PBL into their English reading curriculum to enhance students' reading proficiency. Future research could further explore how to optimize PBL implementation to minimize student discomfort or frustration and to maximize its benefits. Longitudinal studies might also investigate the long-term impacts of PBL on students' English reading proficiency and overall language development.

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