

## **Implementing Project Work in Teaching English at High School: The Case of Vietnam**

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### **Abstract**

Research on using project work in teaching various disciplines has pointed out a number of challenges facing teachers. Similar research in the EFL classroom, however, has been under-researched. This study aimed to fill the gap with a report on the Vietnamese high school teachers' challenges in implementing project-based learning in the setting of curricular innovation in English instruction nationwide. The participants of the study were thirty-three EFL teachers from sixteen high schools in both rural and urban areas of the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. With a questionnaire and an in-depth interview, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Data analysis indicated that the teachers faced major challenges in time management, adaptation of project activities, student support, and project assessment. These results provide useful implications for how innovative approaches can be successfully implemented, especially with respect to the kind of support EFL teachers need to make project-based learning more feasible in the Vietnamese educational context and similar ones.

**Keywords:** Project-based learning, EFL, high school teachers, challenges

### **Introduction**

Modern educational approaches which encourage student-centered learning aim to help students develop lifelong skills and recognize their individual differences. One of such approaches is constructivism advocated and developed by many scholars such as Dewey (1916), Bruner (1966), Piaget (1969), Vygotsky (1978) and vonGlaserfeld (1989). Rooted in this approach, project-based learning (PBL) has been used in various disciplines to engage students in learning target knowledge and develop skills by doing project work. In language learning, PBL is potential for developing both students' communicative competence and their life skills (Thomas, 2000) since it provides students with opportunities to actively use their target language while doing a project (Hutchinson, 1991).

In Vietnam, an attempt has been made to renovate English instruction by integrating project work into the curriculum. The Vietnamese Government approved of the implementation of Vietnam's National Foreign Languages 2020 Project, aiming to improve teaching and learning foreign languages within the national educational system in the period 2008-2020. The ultimate goal of this Project is to enable Vietnamese students to use a foreign language, including English, confidently in studying, communicating and working. Accordingly, the Vietnamese six-level scale of English Language Proficiency was developed by adapting the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) as a proficiency framework for language curriculum and assessment. High school students in Vietnam are required to reach the English level 3, an equivalent to CEFR-B1. In order to achieve this goal, a new ten-year English curriculum was designed; new textbooks were published in 2012 and piloted in many high schools upon the issue of Document No. 3702 in 2013 (MOET, 2013). One of the remarkable differences between the traditional and

new curriculum is that project work is integrated into each unit. These project tasks aim to give students the opportunity to develop their English ability, creativity, collaborative skills, critical thinking and lifelong learning skills.

In such a context, research related to using projects in teaching English has been conducted at different levels and settings such as university (Nguyen, 2014; Pham, 2017), high school (Pham, 2014; Le, 2017), and foreign language center (Tran, 2012). These studies, however, aimed to highlight the influences of PBL on students' life skills, academic achievement, and learning motivation as well as teachers' and students' attitudes towards learning through project work. While abundant research around the world points out teacher challenges in various disciplines, scant research in Vietnam (e.g., Hoang, 2017) has been conducted about the implementation of project work in teaching English at high school, especially considering the difficulties the teachers encountered in reality. This study was conducted to fill this gap and to provide further evidence regarding the sociocultural effects on EFL teaching innovations, specifically PBL, from which realistic implications can be drawn.

### **Research Questions**

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

Q1. What challenges do the Vietnamese EFL secondary school teachers face in implementing project activities in their classrooms?

Q2. Do they differ in the challenges faced with regards to educational level, teaching experience, and project-based learning implementation experience?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Conceptualizing Project-based Learning and Project Work**

Project-based learning (PBL) is learning through doing projects which are designed to guide learners to construct their knowledge of a discipline. The uniqueness of PBL has been characterized in terms of five discrete features by Thomas (2000, p.3-4). First, in PBL, projects are central, not peripheral to the curriculum where the use of projects is to learn curricular contents. Second, there should be a driving question in PBL; learning is concentrated on questions or problems centered on themes which drive learners to learn the central concepts of a discipline. Third, PBL must involve learners in a constructive inquiry into an open-ended question. Learners are asked to investigate the answers to problems instead of being transmitted knowledge by the teacher. Fourth, projects are student-driven to some extent. To complete the projects, students must work in group to make decisions and solve problems. Therefore, they need to have responsibility for their own learning process and communication with their group members. In this manner, they actively engage in the learning process to master the knowledge on their own. Finally, in PBL, projects are realistic, not school-like, carrying the features of authenticity. In other words, projects are developed from reality-based ideas and problems instead of academic exercises. These characteristics may involve the topic, the task, learner roles, or the final product. PBL requires diverse forms of assessment such as teacher assessment, peer assessment and self- assessment.

Projects may be used alongside the conventional approach to instruction as a peripheral task like ones designed in the English curriculum for Vietnamese high school students. In this case, a project is used to provide opportunities for students to practice the target language learned as well as develop study skills. Whether peripheral or centralized in a curriculum, a project is a complex activity “based on challenging questions or problems, that involve students in designing, problem-solving, decision making, or investigating activities; give students the opportunity to

work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminate in realistic products or presentations” (Thomas, 2000, p.1). Beckett (2002) added that a project includes cooperative tasks in developing a research plan, implementing the plan by doing document research and reporting data. To Haines (1989), a project is multi-skill activity focusing on topical content instead of specific language targets. Specific language goals are not defined since students focus attention on content, but project work provides students with opportunities to recycle known language and skills in a nearly natural context. This means that project work integrates more than one skill, and students may use whatever language they can muster to achieve a set goal. Hedge (1993) views projects as authentic English language tasks concentrating on student-centered experience instead of teacher-directed work, which gives students accountability for planning, accomplishing and showing their projects. According to Willis (1996), a project involves creativity, tends to have more stages than the usual classroom tasks, and can involve a combination of task types such as listing, ordering, sorting, comparing, and problem solving. The end product and group work are important in getting the project done.

In general, the characterization above indicates that a project is an extended creative activity which contains a question for inquiry and may include completion of a series of various sub-tasks to achieve an outcome. In this study, the project under examination has the features of an extended activity or task conducted by a small group of students where they devise a work plan, gather, analyze, and synthesize information, make a decision in reporting the research results in a particular format.

### **Project Implementation Procedure and Teacher Challenges**

The structure and implementation of a project will be dependent on a number of variables such as time, resources, student level of language proficiency, class size, age, and so on. A popular methodological model is the ten-step procedure for implementing project-based learning proposed by Stoller (2002). This model guides teachers and students in implementing successful projects that facilitate content learning and provide opportunities for explicit language instruction at critical moments in the project. The steps can be briefly described as follows.

Step 1: Agree on a topic for the project, discussing and activating background knowledge, dividing groups

Step 2: Determine the final outcome of the project, basing on the goal set.

Step 3: Structure the project body, deciding on what information students need, and how to find them, and agreeing on assessment criteria.

Step 4: Prepare students for the language demands of information gathering.

Step 5: Gather information with teacher support regarding sources.

Step 6: Prepare students for compiling and analyzing the information.

Step 7: Analyze and synthesize the information and decide on reports.

Step 8: Prepare students for the presentation of their project products.

Step 9: Present the final product in front of the class.

Step 10: Evaluate the projects.

The literature reviewed below shows that teachers of different subjects in reality have encountered significant challenges associated with implementing PBL in various contexts.

#### ***Time pressure***

Firstly, time to implement project activities is a considerable challenge for teachers. Pursuant to Krajcik, Blumenfeld, Marx, Bass, Fredricks, and Soloway (1998) and Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik, and Soloway (1997), PBL requires teachers to spend more time than typical

lessons on both long-term and short-time bases. Bell (2010) further claimed that teachers have the time pressure to plan, set assessment criteria, and develop guidelines for a project. Graham (2010) likewise noted that this type of work demands significant amounts of time to design lessons, implement, and support students, and teachers have difficulty in securing this from their own schedule and that of their colleagues. In terms of responding to and instructing students to complete the project, Krajcik, Blumenfeld, Marx, and Soloway (1994) found that teachers worried about time management as project activities overran classes and deadlines.

### ***Group work management***

By the same token, group project management can be a significant challenge of teachers. PBL demands teachers to determine the best groupings and meet the readiness levels of all students' experiences. Specifically, Markham, Mergendoller, Lerner, and Ravitz (2003) focus on the challenges of meeting accountability standards, building structure, and managing groups and the project itself (pp.8-11). In connection with balancing the role of each team member, Krajcik *et al.* (1998) and Marx *et al.* (1997) found that teachers had to balance student autonomy with order. Similarly, Okolo and Ferretti (2001) found that when integrating PBL in social studies, some teachers were under-prepared to manage the goals and needs of student groups for engaging them in individual learning activities, which can lead to chaotic and negative student behavior. For Kolodner, Camp, Crismond, Fasse, Gray, Holbrook, and Ryan (2003), teachers must have the ability to maintain the engagement of all students, balance between the investigative aspects of the project and reflection activities in large classes. Simpson (2011) further indicated that teachers found it impossible to manage large classes of more than 100 students as they could not manage to provide weekly constructive feedback. In terms of motivating students to carry out project activities, teachers are challenged in creating an environment that promotes motivation, inquiry, risk taking, and thoughtfulness by focusing student attention on learning, not performance. Research has shown that creating motivation by enhancing interest and value does not necessarily translate into greater cognitive engagement unless teachers employ instructional practices which press for active learning on the part of students, holding students accountable for their understanding (Blumenfeld, 1992; Blumenfeld, Puro, & Mergendoller, 1992).

### ***Project design and adaptation***

Designing and/or adapting project activities for students seemed to be a major challenge for teachers as well. Railsback (2002) suggests that teachers cover the basics before embarking on projects; then they should consider which parts of curriculum could be easily handled by the textbook, which parts require more depth and identify those topics that reflect the most important ideas and concepts in the curriculum and incorporate those topics into projects. To Marx *et al.* (1997) and Krajcik *et al.* (1998), teachers need to focus on the driving question and link concepts and diverse activities, helping the students to construct their own knowledge rather than didactically teaching single subjects. But developing a driving question could be an enormous challenge for teachers as well. Teachers faced difficulties in intensive focuses on developing a driving question, and associating the concepts of the lesson (Bell, 2010). Du, Su and Liu (2013) raised a concern about knowledge support for teachers in PBL. It was also found that teachers refused using PBL as they were not familiar to the new approach, not knowing how to provide guidance to support students complete a project (Baysura, Altun, & Toy, 2016).

### ***Student support***

Teachers are further faced with problems in supporting and encouraging students during the project process. One of the problems is developing teamwork skills. Kapp (2009) described the ability of students to work together as the most difficult aspect of PBL which teachers need to support. Kolodner *et al.* (2003) further pointed to the creation of a collaborative classroom culture where students feel responsible for helping each other, and where they expect to make mistakes and learn from them. Similarly, Du, Su and Liu (2013) mentioned that cultural factors may influence team dynamics, reporting the use of PBL in China where group members were reluctant to admit to problems or to openly critique peers. In this regard, Meyer, Turner, and Spencer (1997) emphasized the essential role of teachers in creating a classroom environment that develops a constructive view of error, since students may not achieve the learning goals of the project if they worry about failure. They added that with collaboration, students could generate ideas with their classmates and learn from each other's mistakes. As a result, collaboration is a vital element of PBL which teachers need to encourage and ensure in terms of producing a positive and rewarding experience. It can be concluded that lacking the skills or confidence in creating a collaborative environment may cause teachers a problem in implementing PBL.

In English teaching, Farooqui (2007) identified the challenge regarding students' skills in spoken English. They noted that it is the education system of Bangladesh that has made the students incapable of thinking for themselves and dealing with strange situations. Most of the teachers blamed this educational system for making the students timid in using English. For this reason, they faced a radical challenge in enhancing presentation skills for students. Hoang (2017) identified Vietnamese school students lacked the ability to use English and work independently, which hindered the success of PBL implementation.

Moreover, teachers find technical support for students another challenge. Edelson, Gordon, and Pea (1999) reported teacher difficulties associated with secondary school students' ability to access the technology necessary to conduct a systematic inquiry in science, and with guiding students to use technological devices as cognitive tools. Other studies also found that teachers have a problem in helping students find and process information for the project (Spronken-Smith & Kingham, 2009; Graham, 2010).

### ***Project assessment***

Last but not least, assessment presents an enormous challenge which influences the success in project activities. PBL requires alternative forms of evaluating students' knowledge and skills. In order to effectively overcome these complexities, teachers must make profound changes in the way they teach and assess. Barron, Schwartz, Vye, Moore, Petrosino, Zech, and Bransford (1998) concluded that PBL curricula "require simultaneous changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices, changes that are often foreign to the students as well as the teachers" (p.271). Graham (2010) reported on the lack of staff confidence in choice and implementation of appropriate assessment methods, particularly formative assessment, which sometimes means a focus on summative assessment and consequently creates a heavy workload for students and staff. Teachers also have to deal with many aspects of evaluation during the class, the purpose and requirements of new ways of assessment (i.e., developing rubric for assessment including students' self-evaluation and reflection on their own work on "projects, efforts, motivations, internets and productivity" (Bell, 2010, p.39-43). Finally, formative assessment can be subjective, which challenges teachers who are most comfortable with determining grades based on objective tests and worksheets (Laboy-Rush, 2011). Other literature has identified the school assessment of PBL as a challenge for some teachers because the learning

experience is associated with the group-based, cross-curricular and multifaceted nature of PBL (Colley, 2008; Bell, 2010, Bender, 2012).

From the literature review above, it can be concluded that teachers face a number of difficulties in implementing project-based learning. Despite the fact that the current study focuses on project implementation as part of the high school English curriculum in Vietnam only, the question is whether EFL teachers face similar difficulties as presented so far. It could be hypothesized that these difficulties recur in the teaching of English as a foreign language at high school.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

The study uses a descriptive approach, specifically combining both quantitative and qualitative data collected through a questionnaire and interview. The case under investigation is a capital city in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, consisting of 33 high schools. Purposeful sampling was used, but selection criteria were employed to ensure the samples collected represented the population. These include the areas where the teachers work, their teaching experience, and especially their experience in using PBL. In particular, sixteen high schools located in both district and central areas of the city were involved. Each school has approximately ten English teachers, but two teachers on average from each school were involved in teaching the pilot curriculum, which included implementing project work.

### **Participants**

As mentioned, project activities were integrated in the new English curriculum, particularly at the end of each unit, and the class time allocated to instruction of each project is 45 minutes per unit. The projects were designed by MOET, and are characteristic of the common features described in the literature reviewed so far. The projects aim to give students the opportunity for using English and developing learning skills, where they apply what they have learned in each unit and whatever resources they can muster. Each project focuses on a topic relevant to the unit theme, a required product, and a set of guiding questions which engage students in an investigation to find out an answer, solve a problem, or design a product such as a travel brochure, a cookbook and so on. Although the topics are set, students are encouraged to have flexibility in designing, organizing their own projects concerning material and ways to present their products. Accordingly, these projects are pre-determined and semi-structured (Henry, 2012).

The profile of the high school EFL teachers participating in the study revealed a variety of characteristics. They came from 16 high schools in central city in the Mekong Delta which had been engaging in piloting the new curriculum and textbook, including the project component. The number of female teachers was 25 (75.8%), outweighing that of male teachers which was 8 (24.2 %). Thirteen teachers had the teaching experience from 1 to 5 years (39.4%), three teachers between 6 to 10 years (9.1%), three teachers from 11 to 15 years (9.1%), nine teachers from 16 to 20 years (27.3 %), and five teachers over 20 years (15.1 %). Of the total, eleven teachers taught less than the required number of 17 class periods per week, five of them taught 17 periods, and seventeen teachers taught more than 17 periods per week. Among 33 teachers, twenty-four had a bachelor's degree, and nine had a master's degree.

Ten of the participating teachers volunteered to respond to the interview, including two males and eight females. Four of them were teaching in central city schools, and six from district

schools. Three of these teachers were currently also leaders of the English division at their schools.

### **Instruments**

The study used a questionnaire to obtain quantitative data, and an interview to gain in-depth understanding. The questionnaire contains a demographics part, and the main section which has 16 items employed to elicit the teachers' report on their opinion on the challenges as reviewed in the literature by rating a five-point scale. These challenges were grouped into five clusters. Cluster 1 consisted of 2 items regarding time pressure; cluster 2 included 4 items concerning group work management; cluster 3 involved 3 items about project adaptation; cluster 4 contained 4 items with reference to student support, and cluster 5 was composed of 3 items about project assessment. The five-point scale was coded as 1 for 'strongly disagree', 2 for 'disagree', 3 for 'neutral', 4 for 'agree', and 5 for 'strongly agree'

The interview was a semi-structured one, devised to focus on similar issues to gain deeper understanding of the participants' responses to the challenges. Probing was used to encourage the participants to explain or comment further.

### **Procedures**

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the questionnaire was piloted before its actual administration (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). Prior to piloting the questionnaire, both English and Vietnamese versions were devised and sent for feedback from an experienced educator and one high school teacher who had experienced nearly five years of implementing project activities. The questionnaire was then revised for better intelligibility of items and format. The Vietnamese version was then piloted on 20 EFL teachers from high schools which have a similar context with the ones where the study took place. The Statistics Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 20.0 was used to analyze the Cronbach's Alpha reliability. The result showed a high alpha coefficient ( $\alpha=.926$ ,  $N=16$ ). Therefore, the questionnaire was reliable enough and was subsequently administered delivered via Google Form to the teachers from sixteen schools where project work was being implemented. The result of reliability analysis gained for the official version was .876.

To guarantee the reliability of interviews, the questions were open-ended and prompts were used to elicit issues related to challenges in implementing project work. To ensure the intelligibility of interview questions, Vietnamese was used in the interviews conducted face-to-face with the teachers after the questionnaire administration. Each interview lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

We adopted a descriptive approach, so the data was analysed with descriptive measures, using the SPSS software. In particular, means and standard deviations were calculated for clusters to find trends in the data. Percentages were calculated for each item to pinpoint in detail the particular challenges. Interview data was transcribed and thematically analysed, drawing on the similar challenges reviewed in the literature to delve into details.

### **Results**

Both the quantitative and qualitative data have revealed the various challenges faced by the Vietnamese high school EFL teachers.

## Quantitative Results

Quantitatively, as shown in Table 1, the overall mean score of the participants' agreement on challenges in implementing project work in their context was relatively high ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = .546$ ). This sample mean score was not significantly different from the 'agree' score of 4.0 ( $t = 0.717$ ;  $df = 32$ ,  $p = .478 > .05$ ), confirming the assumption that the EFL high school teachers faced the challenges arising in PBL implementation as reviewed in the literature.

**Table 1.** Mean scores of EFL teachers' challenges in implementing project activities

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
<b>Group work management</b>	33	2.25	5.00	3.79	.727
<b>Time pressure</b>	33	2.00	5.00	3.95	.823
<b>Project adaptation</b>	33	2.00	5.00	4.12	.739
<b>Project assessment</b>	33	1.00	5.00	4.18	.897
<b>Student support</b>	33	2.75	5.00	4.27	.591
<b>Average</b>				<b>4.06</b>	<b>.546</b>

The mean scores of five clusters of challenges are all over the average of the five-point scale. They found group work management ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = .727$ ) and time pressure ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = .823$ ) less challenging than project adaptation ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = .739$ ), project assessment ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = .897$ ), and student support ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = .591$ ).

To check whether the EFL teachers who hold different qualifications differed in the extent and type of challenges faced, the Independent Sample T-Test was run on the mean scores of the Bachelor and Master groups at the significance level of  $p = .05$ . The result showed that there was no difference between the two groups in the challenges faced ( $t = .612$ ,  $p = .778$ ). Likewise, to identify whether the teachers with different teaching experience differ in the challenges faced, the One-Way ANOVA indicated that no difference was observed across four groups: (1) 1 to 5 years, (2) from 6 to 15 years, (3) from 15 to 20 years and (4) more than 20 years ( $p > .05$ ).

Experience in conducting project activities also makes a difference; the less PBL experienced teachers found it harder to adapt existing projects than the experienced ones ( $p < .05$ ).

**Table 2.** Teacher challenges in implementing project activities by percentage

Clusters	Items	SD (%)	DA (%)	Neu. (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
<b>Time pressure</b>	1. More time to plan them than the typical lessons.	0	12.1	15.2	33.3	39.4
	2. Lack of time for instructing and responding to students	0	9.1	21.2	39.4	30.3
<b>Group work management</b>	3. Dividing of student groups	0	24.2	24.2	24.2	27.3
	4. Balancing the role of each team member.	0	15.2	21.2	36.4	27.3
	5. Managing project activities for large classes.	0	9.1	24.2	48.5	18.2
<b>Project Adaption</b>	6. Motivating students to carry out projects.	0	9.1	12.1	36.4	42.4
	7. Adjusting topics of project activities to achieve the curriculum objectives students' interests.	0	6.1	12.1	45.5	36.4
	8. Designing project activities for students to implement.	0	6.1	21.2	30.3	42.4
	9. Developing driving and guiding questions to help students implement the project.	0	3.0	12.1	51.5	33.3



<b>Student Support</b>	10. Developing teamwork skills for students.	0	0	9.1	33.3	57.6
	11. Helping students find and process information for the project.	0	6.1	6.1	60.6	27.3
	12. Improving presentation skills for students.	0	3.0	3.0	42.4	51.5
	13. Helping students use software (PowerPoint, word, mp3, video, recording).	3.0	3.0	21.2	27.3	45.5
<b>Project Assessment</b>	14. Using the appropriate form to evaluate.	3.0	6.1	6.1	39.4	45.5
	15. Developing evaluation scale in project activities.	3.0	3.0	3.0	54.5	36.4
	16. Ensuring objectivity in evaluating students' performance.	3.0	3.0	12.1	36.4	45.5

As further described in Table 2, the majority of teachers were concerned about the time budget (72.7% tended to agree). A bigger proportion also found it most difficult to motivate students to work together (78.8% tended to agree). In terms of methodology, devising a driving question and guiding questions was most challenging for the teachers (84.8%); followed by adjusting the topics to suit the students' background (81.9% tended to agree). With respect to student support, high school students were not acquainted with making presentations, which posed the teachers challenges in improving their presentation skills (93%). Developing other necessary skills for them such as finding and processing information, teamwork skills, and technical skills also caused the teachers great difficulty (over 85% respondents agreed). Moreover, 90.9% of the participants tended to agree with the challenge in developing evaluation rubrics for assessment.

### Qualitative Results

The semi-structured interviews provide further qualitative data that provide further insight into the participants' challenges. The interview content focuses and elaborates on the similar issues and presented in themes as below.

#### (1) Group work management

As part of group work management, motivating students was really a challenge for the teachers. Nine out of ten interviewees acknowledged a challenge with students' learning styles in addition to their study pressure. Especially, it was the students' mindset regarding learning to pass exams that constituted a major hindrance. Alongside with this was the heavy workload, i.e. students had to study many subjects. Two teachers from a rural school stressed:

The students in rural areas have an inclination to study for overcoming examinations rather than using English; especially, they follow my requirements to get scores. Besides, objective multiple choice testing has become the most common type of evaluation. For that reason, they do not focus on speaking or the language output as intended in project doing. (Teacher 1, working in an urban school)

My students have much pressure of learning because they have to study 13 subjects at high school. In particular, they must deal with lots of exercises, teachers and parents' requests, examinations and so on. (Teacher 3, working in rural school)

#### (2) Time pressure

Apart from and related to motivating students to work is the time pressure. Eight out of ten interviewees agreed that time posed a significant challenge. The project activities took much

time because they required the teachers to prepare and complete many things from planning the project, checking students' progress, supporting students, to assessing products. Besides, adapting project work to students every year also took much time. The following teacher's report represents this challenge.

From my perspective, time is a radical challenge when project activities are implemented. I haven't had enough time to implement carefully each step such as making a plan, controlling students' working progress, supporting students when they need and assessing their final products. In fact, the project activity occupies a small part of each unit, but they require the teacher to do many things. (Teacher 8, working in urban school)

However, two of the interviewees disagreed that time pressure was a challenge for two main reasons. They believed that with a specific plan made at the beginning of the school year, each group would follow easily. Besides, projects were implemented in supplementary class periods based on their school regulations. As a result, they had enough time for the project instruction.

### **(3) Knowledge related to project implementation**

The interviewees said that they had participated in training to teach the new English textbooks. During the meeting, they were introduced the content of all parts in the new version as well as the teaching methods. Nonetheless, no training session was delivered on how to implement the project work in the new books. As a result, they lacked knowledge and skills in how to adapt projects, and guide students to work on the projects. One interviewee with over 11 years of experience from an urban school reported:

I have not had any opportunities to be trained in PBL. As a consequence, I learn the way to implement projects from my experienced colleagues. Hence, I had a challenge in the early period. Likewise, another challenge is my limited knowledge related to the content of projects, so I tried to search more on the Internet, or consult my colleagues before guiding my students.

One young teacher from a rural school, who reported having no opportunity to be trained about PBL, despite being introduced about Communicative Language Teaching embedded in the textbooks, acknowledged, "I cannot understand exactly how to implement project activities although I have taught these textbooks for 2 years."

In contrast, two interviewees who had been trained in implementing project activities believed they could implement the project work effectively without difficulty. One of them from an urban school with 4 years of implementing project work stated, "I have learned the procedure for project implementation in the class organized in Singapore, so my process of carrying out project activities is effective."

### **(4) Student support**

As to presentation skills, all of interviewees admitted facing problems in improving these skills for students because the students were nervous, afraid of speaking in the public, and never had experience in making presentations. In respect of building teamwork skills for students, although most of the interviewees reported they had no challenge since their students had a close relationship in cooperating to complete project activities, three of them reported that they had a considerable challenge in helping students be familiar with group work. One teacher working in a rural area explained:

Students have been acquainted with working in pair or individually rather than working in groups to complete projects. Accordingly, I faced challenges to encourage teamwork process of my students at the beginning of school year.

For information technology skills, one of the interviewees from a rural school faced difficulty in improving and guiding students to use technical tools. She confirmed that their students had not experienced in using PowerPoint for presenting their work. Another teacher from a rural school said that she had to deal with a remarkable challenge in guiding her students to use software to edit a video clip or audio file.

### **(5) Project assessment**

With regard to project assessment, three out of ten interviewees agreed that they had a challenge in evaluating students' projects because they lacked experience in selecting the appropriate evaluation criteria and their students had different levels of language competence. A teacher working in a rural school had a problem with balancing and weighing assessment criteria. Another teacher from an urban school reported having a problem measuring exactly the contribution as well as the capability of each student.

### **Discussion**

It is clear that the results of the interview are quite consistent with and elaborate on responses from the questionnaire. Both sources revealed that the Vietnamese EFL high school teachers were faced with difficulty in time management, designing and adapting project, student support, and project assessment in implementing projects.

Such results are consistent with the previous research as synthesized in the literature review. Further discussion is made in relation to studies which either focus on or include a focus on foreign language teaching. Firstly, this study showed that supporting students during project work was the biggest challenge while Harris (2014) concluded that time was the biggest challenge for teachers. More specifically, according to Harris (ibid.), teachers spent more time on projects than typical lessons and thus lacked time to implement projects within their school schedule. Intykbekov (2017) also conclude that PBL required teachers to spend extra time, specifically, their own time which should be devoted to other important aspects of life such as family and hobbies. This is also a common situation faced by most Vietnamese EFL teachers in high schools who have a heavy workload apart from their extra classes at home. However, time was reported by the teachers in the study to be less of a challenge than other factors. Instead, supporting necessary skills for students to implement a project was the greatest challenge. This is because their students had no experience of making presentations and working in group. Most of the teachers were also not well-equipped with knowledge of PBL as well as technical skills to guide their students. This could be the reason why teachers often attribute difficulty to their students' ability as well as time pressure as previously reported in the literature (e.g., Hoang, 2017). In fact, the study revealed evidence that those teachers who received training did not face a similar challenge.

Another big challenge was project assessment. In fact, teachers would have trouble if they did not discuss and reach an agreement with their students about the criteria and grading scale. The teachers' challenge related to project assessment in the current study is also in line with the previous finding that grading a project was perceived a challenge (Harris, 2014). This finding implies a relationship between project assessment and how PBL would be performed effectively. Implementing a new method implies a shift in pedagogical beliefs including assessment beliefs. It could also be the case that the teachers faced the time pressure in following the project process and giving timely feedback to students.

The challenge of EFL high school teachers regarding their skills in making a project relevant to students is also in line with previous research. Intykbekov (2017) concluded that

teachers who have inadequate appropriate knowledge and experience of PBL face certain challenges in implementing different steps of PBL, like choosing the right topics, posing correct driving questions, helping students collect and analyze data. In the current study, the teachers who had experience in PBL found no problems. Besides, consonant with both Harris (2014) and Freshwater (2009), this study found that the teachers faced a minor challenge in establishing teamwork skills or collaboration skills although the students were acquainted with working alone at lower educational levels.

### Conclusions

Findings of current research are meaningful considering the implementation of project-based learning activities in teaching and learning English as a foreign language in the Asian context such as Vietnam. It is evident that like teachers of other disciplines in the world, the Vietnamese EFL school teachers faced many challenges in implementing the new teaching method, which seems to be a matter of fact in any innovation. However, findings from the study imply that PBL in general and using project work alongside the face-to-face instruction in particular demands so much of the teacher in reality (Du, Su, & Liu, 2013) while sufficient support is lacking so that they can make effective changes in their teaching. Theoretically, the pedagogical principles underlying PBL are contextually and conceptually challenged by teacher beliefs and traditional practice, and hence require adaptation and accommodation. The value and feasibility of project work requires consideration with regards to contextual features such as the level to which it should be integrated, time constraints, and student support (Loi, 2017). Translating a set project into practice requires that teachers be equipped with skills to make adjustments. The study suggests that the Vietnamese EFL school teachers are in need of continuous support in terms of knowledge and skills in adapting, handling, and assessing project tasks in such a way that mediates with their students' levels, time pressure and high workload. Time allocation to learning activities in a curriculum should be appropriately stipulated to allow for more quality instruction that could impact students' learning. Although experience will teach, in order to undertake an innovation fruitfully, more vigilant preparation and support for teachers should be provided. Future research could delve into how pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher development programs can support teachers to implement PBL effectively and practically.

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