

METHODS TO INCREASE THE ENGLISH MAGAZINE PROJECT POWER IN THE STUDY OF THE ENGLISH WRITTEN LANGUAGE FOR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES - THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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SUMMARY

This action research first explores the problems faced by both teachers and students at School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University in doing their English Magazine Project, and then examines the effectiveness of the researcher's intervention at her class which was using portfolios to (1) let students take input from their reading to improve their writing and (2) enhance team work skills by means of compulsory group-editing. A combination of qualitative data from class observation and interviews and quantitative ones from questionnaire and writing error calculation was employed among participants. Results revealed that lack of exposure to authentic reading sources and poor group work resulted in poor writings; in addition, portfolios brought in significant improvement in students' articles and more effective team-work although teacher's workload remained unchanged. In general, this study is useful in the context of project-based learning environment in Vietnam in general and in other similar contexts.

Keywords: *English Magazine project, written proficiency, team work skills, portfolios, action research*

INTRODUCTION

Currently, project-based learning (PBL) is applied in a rather large scale of language teaching worldwide and is considered to be a new effective approach to L2 learning and teaching. The types of project can vary according to certain purposes of teaching. Among these, English Magazine project (EMA) is to develop students' four integrated skills but particularly focuses on written English (reading and writing). EMA project has been applied at School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University (SFL-TNU) for approximately nine years. EMA together with other projects aimed at delivering better-trained graduates with a professional attitude. Different from the old methods, this project focuses on students' competencies needed at workplace and takes them to be center of learning.

Taking the role of an instructor for several groups of students working with EMA, the researcher has found some problems that prevent the project from taking its

effectiveness. One of the problems is that students' team work seems to be not quite effective. They rarely do group-editing as required and rely too much on teacher's feedback. Some even commit plagiarism. Another problem is time pressure on the part of teacher to give feedback to all groups of students.

Inspired by those obstacles, ideas for changes were outlined and an action research was done in the researcher's class. A new teaching plan was designed to increase students' activeness and their effectiveness in group work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-based learning and the Magazine project

Thomas (2000) [1] defined projects as "complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision making or investigate activities; give students the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminate in realistic products or presentations." (p.1). Booth (1986) [2] claimed that in a project

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work, at least four types of authenticity are necessarily present: authenticity of language input, authenticity of task, authenticity of event, and authenticity of learner experience.

Regarding the advantages of PBL, Thomas et al (1999) [3] emphasized that PBL could meet the demands of learners who own diversified skill levels and learning styles. In terms of the challenges of PBL, Booth (1986) [2] presents certain problems that teachers may face including organization, monitoring, and personal problems.

The authors of this research would like to state a definition which defines project-based learning as an approach which moves the classroom out into the world by creating internal motivation and giving students products to develop.

In a magazine project, students create their own magazine by designing, writing and applying community involvement and teamwork skills and critical thinking [4]. It is an ideal method to motivate students in learning writing in English.

Portfolios in writing

The development of portfolios in education has been shown in a wide variety of definitions by different researchers. Some considered portfolios simply as a summary of a student's learning accomplishments; others focus on their purposes and features, including the merits of the strategies, their content and their implementation [5], [6], [7].

In the view of portfolios as a part of an assessment program, Arter & Spandel (1992) defined portfolios as "a purposeful collection of student's works that tells the story of student's efforts, progress or achievement." Freeman and Lewis (1998) [8] viewed portfolios as "a collection of materials assembled by students to demonstrate achievement."

Within the scope of our study, we would like to offer a definition for our students' writing portfolios that is *a collection of students' work in which their efforts and process in learning can be seen.*

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

1. What problems do teachers and students face when working with the project?
2. What changes that might help enhancing the project revealed from the problems?
3. Can the teacher's interventions help save her time and improve students' performance in EMA project? If yes, to what extend?

Participants

The subjects of the study were 30 students of English major at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. They have all achieved the intermediate proficiency level after their two years at the college. These 30 students were in the same class and the researcher was the guide of the group during the project work.

Data collection instruments

The full period of data collection covered the whole term. The effect of interventions is viewed via the following instruments: classroom observation, students' journals, a questionnaire and informal interviews with students and teachers

Data analysis

Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Some parts of the questionnaire were converted into statistics, numbers and percentage in the form of tables and charts for the purpose of comparison and analysis. The number of errors in students' writings was also calculated for comparison and contrast. Students and teachers' responses to interviews were collected in the form of notes; extracts from students' journal writings and collected readings were quoted as evidences for the analysis; classroom activities and students' reactions were observed and described by teacher's diary.

Data collection procedures

Initially, informal interviews and a questionnaire were delivered to students and teachers at SFL to see their attitude towards the project and the problems they met during the first four weeks of the course. Students'

articles within the first two weeks were analyzed to find out further problems. After changes were applied in the selected group of students, the interview was repeated among teachers and students. Student's final drafts in their portfolios of the last two weeks were reviewed for comparison.

FINDINGS

Possible problems encountered by students and teachers

Among the problems proposed in the questionnaire and interviews, students' learning competence seemed not satisfying. Their average scores were summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Students' learning competence

	A	B	C	D
Q2	7%	23%	60%	10%
Q3	0%	30%	63%	7%

Q2. Students' GPA score; Q3: Students' competence in academic writing

On average, the majority of students did not have high scores in their study. In terms of their GPA, 70% of the students received a C or a D compared to 30% of those who got an A or a B. Regarding their writing scores of the previous semester, few students had a B and even none of them got an A. The majority (63%) received the average score of 5.5 to 6.9 (mark C). The low language proficiency can be an obstacle to their performance in classroom in general

Another obvious problem was student's lack of exposure to authentic reading sources.

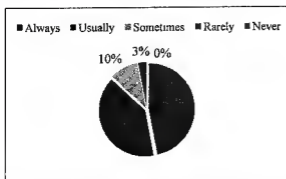


Chart 1. Frequency of troubles with language use

As can be seen from chart 1, over 80% of the participants frequently had problems in

language. In the later interview, students said that they were not familiar to the language of magazine, especially when writing articles with a great number of specialized terms. They were confused in choosing the appropriate words or phrases to express their ideas and sometimes they were not sure whether the terms they used were suitable or not.

In terms of group work, a large percentage of students admitted that they did not have much difficulty working with their group although the actual performance of students had shown the reverse.

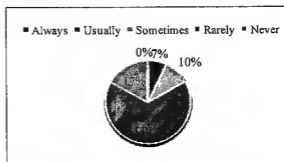


Chart 2. Frequency of troubles with group work

Chart 2 shows that 66% of the students only rarely had troubles with group work and 17% claimed they never had any obstacle in shared tasks. Later on, in the interview, when answering the question of how tasks were assigned among the group members, these students said that they often divided the magazine columns into weekly tasks and one or two students in a group of six would take the responsibility to complete the column of a certain week. And by this way, they cycled the weeks' duty.

The students also admitted not having much group editing before handling in the column for the teacher. What a student did was just taking care of the part he had to finish with little concern to the other members' job. In this manner, the students did not feel that the project was a heavy task to handle.

It is noticeable to see that although the result of the questionnaire indicated students' satisfaction in their cooperation, the way they distributed the work showed their poor skills of group-work.

Students' problems in the two first week magazine columns

Based on the data collected in the first writing collection (collected within the first four weeks), the researcher counted the number of mistakes and divided them into grammar, spelling, sentence (i.e. run-on, fragment, or sentence with problems in parallel structure) and word choice errors which were the most basic. Other problems of writing such as plagiarism or organization were also discussed parallel to the calculated errors. The results were as follows:

Table 2. Common mistakes in students' magazine columns of the first two weeks

Grps	Text length	Types of mistakes				
		Gr	Sp	Sen	wc	Pun
1	130	9	0	4	11	5
2	278	4	5	0	0	0
3	640	24	8	2	19	3
4	144	18	3	4	6	5
5	281	14	10	3	7	3
Total		69	26	13	42	16

(Grps: Groups; Gr: Grammar; Sp: Spelling; Sen: Sentence; wc: word choice; Pun: Punctuation)

It can be seen that students made errors on almost every page of their magazine columns. Of which, a number of errors were proven to come from students' carelessness and lack of proof reading, for example: simple mistakes in spelling and grammar. Wrong word choices were also commonly found in students' articles.

In addition, a serious problem revealed from the analysis was students' laziness and irresponsibility in work. Firstly, the students relied too much on teacher's feedback. They did not spend much effort on their writings. They just brought to class pieces of writing which were their very first drafts filled with mistakes. This proved that there were little or even no group-editing done before class. Moreover, from her class observation, the researcher noticed that while she was giving feedback, only one or two students concentrated in writing the draft.

Another problem found in students' journals is their committing plagiarism. Since the

teacher informed students that any sign of copying sources from professional magazines would be marked zero, the students found another way to plagiarize. They found articles in Vietnamese and translate them word by word into English. The use of language therefore was unnatural. (Group 5: Horoscope; Group 3: Food corner)

Comparison of the students' writing performance before and after using portfolios

At the end of the research, the researcher collected another set of students' writing on quite similar topics and length. The comparison between the students' performance before and after using portfolios was shown in table 3.

Although there were still some problems of style in students' writings, it can be clearly seen that the number of mistakes decreased dramatically and the writing displayed significant progress. The most obvious changes were seen in the areas of grammar, spelling, sentence and punctuation errors found. Compared to those of the first writing collection, the final drafts in students' portfolios showed much fewer mistake.

Table 3. Common mistakes in students' magazine columns of the last two weeks

Grps	Text length	Types of mistakes				
		Gr	Sp	Sen	wc	Pun
1	665	0	2	0	5	1
2	314	3	2	0	4	2
3	558	3	0	0	4	0
4	287	1	1	1	3	1
5	158	1	0	0	0	0
Total		8	5	1	16	4

Compared to the other types of mistakes, the number of problems with word choice seemed to remain higher. Wrong word choice was still common in the writings of the second collection (e.g. In the Food corner column, students used such words like "material" and "method" instead of the more appropriate "ingredients" and "preparation").

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What problems do teachers and students face when working with the project?

One of the objective factors affecting students' performance was their level of proficiency. The reasons may come from the low passed marks at the university entrance exam. Also, students were just at their second year of training at university. And this resulted in the way students committed basic grammar mistakes and sentence errors.

Other troublesome issues rooted from subjective factors. One of which was students' ineffective group work. Students rarely had group meetings and discussion to correct errors in the drafts. Most weekly writings were done by individuals without much concern from the rest of the group. The very simple mistakes that students made could be avoided if peer or group checking was done.

In addition, students' laziness and reliance on teachers' feedback resulted in a number of mistakes as well as plagiarism found in their writings.

Another factor was students' lack of frequent reading and exposure to English magazines. A great number of unsuitable choices of words had proven the fact that students were not familiar to the language of magazine.

Last but not least, teachers' classroom management and assessment seemed not very effective. That the teachers gave no assessment on students' group work and that they did not guide students to find sources to read were partly responsible for students' laziness in group work as well as their confusion in language use.

What changes that might help enhancing the project revealed from the problems?

A part from objective factors which were hard to change, the researcher found the possibility of making useful adjustment for some subjective problems.

At the first point, it is useful to let students work in their group and edit their articles beforehand. This can increase their responsibility to group work and develop their critical reading skill. Moreover, teachers

could save their time and energy. One suggestion is to use portfolios to keep track of students' work. Students would hand in the weekly portfolio which consists of their first draft, revised draft done by the group and the final edited one.

In addition, portfolios, once again, seem to be a good way to help control students' reading at home and familiarize them with the language of magazines. In this research, collections of materials were required continuously. Students were asked to hand in the articles (of similar genres to the ones that they were going to write) they read and their notes on useful language.

This way, learners will feel that they are much involved in the project. Furthermore, when portfolio is a part of their assessment, they will have motivations to work.

Can the teacher's interventions help save her time and improve students' performance in EMA project? If yes, to what extend?

As discussed, students' writing showed good progress regarding the number of mistakes found in their writings. Although there were still some errors existed, it was evident that student's peer and group editing did take effects, resulting in a better presentation of the writings as well as creating a much more comfortable feeling for the teacher while reading.

Among the mistakes, problems with language use seemed to be the most difficult to solve. Although there were signs that the reading helped students with some useful vocabularies, this type of mistakes still existed with a rather frequent occurrence. The possible explanation for this is that the reading input was not adequate to change students' familiar thinking. The issue was also an interesting topic for the researcher to reconsider for further changes in her teaching plan.

In terms of students' skills in group work, there were positive changes. In the second interview, most students claimed that they held group meeting once or twice a week to discuss the way to complete the magazine column of the week and to revise mistakes. They also stated that the ideas from different

members helped them a lot in improving their writing skills.

In addition, all students agreed that portfolios brought them a number of benefits. Each week, each member of a group had herself a collection of useful writings and feedback which helped her avoid similar mistakes. Portfolios also helped increase students' interest and participation in EMA project.

On the part of the teacher, although she saved her time for editing, she put herself into a new situation: revising and marking groups' portfolios which also took her a considerable large amount of time. The good news is that it was far more comfortable for her to see the students' progress than to be tired of their errors.

In sum, despite the fact that there were still some remaining problems, on overall, students made progress in their writings after they participated in the research. The most significant improvement was made regarding the number of grammar and spelling errors which were commonly found in the collection of writings. Moreover, the teacher could prevent herself from the poor quality writings of students and spend the time for more useful guide to the groups of students.

TÓM TẮT

PHƯƠNG PHÁP GIA TĂNG HIỆU QUẢ CỦA ĐỀ ÁN TẠP CHÍ TIẾNG ANH TRONG VIỆC HỌC VIẾT CHO SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI KHOA NGOẠI NGỮ - ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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Nghiên cứu hành động nhằm (1) tìm ra những vấn đề mà sinh viên và giảng viên tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên gặp phải trong khi thực hiện Đề án Tạp chí, (2) kiểm chứng tính hiệu quả việc thay đổi phương pháp của giảng viên qua việc sử dụng hồ sơ học tập giúp sinh viên sử dụng ngữ liệu đọc phục vụ việc viết báo; đồng thời cũng sử dụng hồ sơ để kiểm soát việc sửa bài trong nhóm sinh viên, qua đó tăng hiệu quả hoạt động nhóm. Tác giả sử dụng kết hợp nghiên cứu định tính với dữ liệu từ việc quan sát lớp học và phỏng vấn với nghiên cứu định lượng thông qua bảng câu hỏi điều tra và tính lỗi sai trong bài viết của sinh viên. Kết quả cho thấy việc ít được tiếp cận với các nguồn đọc tạp chí và kỹ năng làm việc nhóm kém đã dẫn đến chất lượng bài viết báo kém; thêm vào đó; việc sử dụng hồ sơ học tập đã mang lại những cải thiện đáng kể về chất lượng bài viết của sinh viên và gia tăng hiệu quả hoạt động nhóm. Tuy nhiên, khối lượng công việc của giảng viên không thay đổi nhiều. Nghiên cứu này nhìn chung hữu ích trong bối cảnh học tập theo đề án, dự án ở Việt Nam cũng như các bối cảnh tương đồng khác.

Từ khóa: Đề án Tạp chí Tiếng Anh; năng lực bút ngữ; kỹ năng làm việc nhóm; hồ sơ học tập; nghiên cứu hành động.

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Therefore, it could be concluded that the research was successful.

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