

## FOSTERING THE 21ST CENTURY SKILLS IN PROJECT-BASED ESP LEARNING

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## SUMMARY

In recent years, more schools have outlined 21st century skills as the center of learning in which English language teaching (ELT) especially English for specific purposes (ESP) in the postmethod-era teaching and learning approaches together with project-based learning. Therefore, a case study utilising the framework of developing a project in ESP classroom adopted from Stoller's and Patton's work was carried out in a 15-week course of English for Tourism at Ha Tinh University, Vietnam. Of all employed instruments within the study, this paper only reports results from students' questionnaires and interviews. It showed that ICT, creative and critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership and collaborating skills were identified as the most important skills. More significantly, most of them claimed that project work was a useful tool to meaningfully engage them in language and content-based learning as well as foster these identified skills in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** *Project-based Learning (PBL); English language teaching (ELT); English for specific purposes (ESP); English for Tourism; 21st-century skills*

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching ESP has been becoming more important than ever when there has been a high need of highly qualified workforce with intensive professional knowledge and English competence in the 21st century. Therefore, it is necessary to raise students' awareness of essential skills in their study and daily life. After reviewing different approaches to define and classify these skills, the researchers adopted the 7Cs 21st century skill list of Trilling and Fadel (2009) [16] and investigate students' perceptions towards these necessary skills as the first primary research aim. In the meantime, recently, project-based learning in ELT and ESP has been found effective in motivating students to become active learners with essential skills in the 21st century ([2], [8], [12], [10]). In line with others, this case study examines the effectiveness of PBL on 21st century skills in ESP courses by addressing the second research question regarding the impact PBL on fostering the identified skills in the English course for Tourism classroom.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**English for specific purposes in the 21st century**

As one of the core approaches of ELT, English for specific purposes puts learners as the center and focuses on developing communicative competence in a specific discipline such as academics, archeology, tourism and engineering. What makes ESP courses/programs different from general English courses is its own characteristics including being designed to meet specific needs of learners; being related to content (themes and topics) to particular disciplines or occupations; using authentic work-specific documents and materials; promoting cultural awareness and seeks to improve intercultural competence and delivering intermediate and advanced level language training [13].

Despite many benefits ESP may bring about, there are challenges of teaching and learning ESP in the 21st century. Specifically, Bhatia, Anthony and Noguchi (2011) [3] identified some main challenges to ESP practitioners in bridging the gap between the classroom and the world of work and understanding the correlation among ESP classroom discourse,

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professional discourse and professional practice. Moreover, in designing large-scale ESP programs, considerable issues are raised concerning identifying needs, developing materials, and implementing effective teaching practice [3], lack of sufficient administration, misplacement of teachers and chaotic ESP instruction systems among universities and institutions [14]. These findings are significant in that they help open discussions about possible action plans and specific solutions to improve ESP teaching in tertiary contexts in the 21st century.

### **Twenty-first-century skills in learning**

Educational researchers in the Partnership for 21st Century (P21) [9] and The Assessing and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATC21S) have their own perspectives in defining and classifying 21st century skills. However, Trilling and Fadel (2009) [16] outlined a 7Cs skill list as the center of learning in their book: *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times*. It comprises nine skills sets, namely critical thinking and problem solving; creativity and innovation; collaboration; teamwork; leadership; cross-cultural understanding; communication and media literacy; computing and ICT literacy and career and learning self-reliance. These skills set were used as the framework of inquiry which the current study attempts to address.

However, it is worth noting that while reviewing the literature on the 21st century skills, there has been a dearth of research on how to integrate groups of skills into ESP programs.

### **Project-based learning in ELT and ESP in 21st century**

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an innovative student-driven, teacher-facilitated approach to learning. This approach teaches a multitude of strategies critical for success in the twenty-first century. It is defined as a learning model around projects which are complex tasks, challenging questions or problems requiring students to autonomously involve in designing, problem-solving,

decision-making, and/or investigative activities in specific periods of time to come up with realistic products or presentations ([15], [10], [2], [11], [12]) summarised a list of 6 primary characteristics and proposed a 10-step framework of designing a project in teaching ESP courses which is served as the foundation for this current case study [11].

Many potential benefits of PBL in ELT have been found by recent researchers ([6], [7], [4], [5]). In specific contexts of English for specific purposes, a study conducted by Indrasari [8] shows that PBL can stimulate pre-service teachers in English Education in IAIN Raden Intan Lampung in designing, decision making, and creating products in the process of finishing the assigned project: Designing a coursebook of ESP for particular fields. Similarly, Alsamani and Daif-Allah (2016) [1]'s study indicates the effectiveness of the suggested project-based ESP course on developing the English vocabulary on Computer Science and Information Technology for the target subjects and building up new learning habits was increased.

However, apparently, the correlation among Project-based learning, the 21st century skills and ESP teaching and learning has been under-researched. Therefore, the current researchers attempt to investigate learners' perception towards the 21st century skills and the effects on PBL in fostering the 21st century skills in ESP context. To achieve this aim, a case study was undertaken in the 15-week course of English for Tourism at Ha Tinh University, Vietnam to address the following research questions: *a) What are the most essential skills for Vietnamese students in the 21st century, particularly in Hatinh? b) Does Project-based learning have any impact on fostering the identified skills in ESP classroom, particularly in the course of English for Tourism?*

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of 17 English major students who did participate a

15-week course of English for Tourism 2 at Ha Tinh University. The teacher who had had experience of 10 years in ELT and 5 years in ESP at Faculty of Foreign Languages of Ha Tinh University.

### Case study procedure

The case study started with the introduction of the course description of English for Tourism 2, followed by giving some guidance of utilising the revised framework including six specific steps: get an idea, plan and structure the project, gather and select materials for the project, do the project, present the project products and evaluate the project. There were 3 required projects for preparation and presentation in week 5, 10 and 15, namely Drama about Tourism, National/International Tour and Professional Development in Tourism. Students' work was assessed with three criteria: the outcome of 3 projects, language competence and the incorporation of outlined 21st century skills within projects.

### Instruments

To collect the data, the research employed the interview, questionnaire, classroom observation, the English for Tourism course 1's and the post-current course's results. However, due to the space limit, in this paper, we only report results from interviews and questionnaire to address the research questions with the perspective of students. In more details, the questionnaire items designed in forms of multiple choice and checkboxes with the seven-point likert scales focused on the importance of each skills of 21st century, satisfaction level towards project-based learning application in the ESP course and satisfaction level towards the integration/incorporation of identified skills into Project-based ESP learning. Moreover, interviews were designed to triangulate the data in the questionnaire with five questions. While using these instruments, the researchers did cover some ethical considerations such as participants' rights, anonymity and data protection within their research.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This paper aims to report findings with respect of students' perspective toward PBL and 21st century skills in English course for Tourism 2.

### Important skills to students in the 21st century

To address the first question of our study, we asked the participants which skills they found important for their study and daily life in the 21st century in both questionnaires and interviews. As a result, there were 12 skills identified including: ICT, creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, collaboration, communication, self-reliance, cross-cultural understanding, planning and organising, evaluating and assessing, reflecting. In addition, the seven-point Likert scale was employed to explore the respondents' attitude towards the importance of these skills and the result is reported in chart 1.

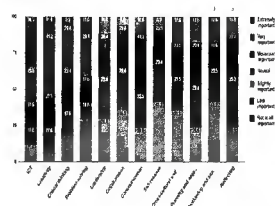


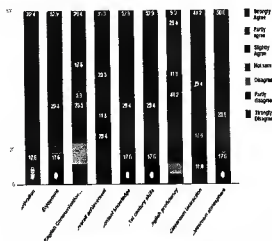
Chart 1. The importance of 21st century skills

From chart 1, more remarkably of all, there were 4 more important skills including ICT, creativity, problem solving and critical thinking with 58.8%, 53%, 41.2%, and 35.3% of participants respectively. The other skills were considered as slightly to moderately important. In addition, 41.2% of students seemed to underestimate the self-reliance ability by marking them as slightly important in the 21st century, which happened as similarly as evaluating and assessing skills. These results reveal that although students were aware of the importance of listed skills

in a different range, they seemed not to pay much attention to intrinsic and metacognitive skills such as reflecting, evaluating and assessing, planning and cross-cultural understanding. Therefore, it may be suggested that teachers should put more emphasis on raising awareness of their students towards the above mentioned skills more comprehensively.

### Effects /impacts of PBL in learning ESP/English for tourism

With two sub-themes to analyse, the students first were required to indicate their agreement to given statements related to positive impacts of project-based learning on specific aspects of their learning English for Tourism. Nine dependent variables including motivation, enjoyment, English communication confidence, content knowledge, 21st-century skills, English proficiency, classroom interaction, classroom atmosphere and overall achievement were analysed and then were reported in chart 2.



**Chart 2. Students' agreement on statements regarding impacts of PBL on English for Tourism learning**

As shown in chart 2, it is evident that students' motivation was enhanced when applying PBL with 82.4% of students strongly agreeing. Moreover, there were 52.9% of students claiming that they have developed their tourism content knowledge and 21st-century skills. This finding shows a

significant evidence for our study that from students' perspective, PBL actually has somehow positive impacts on their ESP learning and 21st-century skill practice. It is quite compatible with students' perception toward improved overall achievement with 70.6% of them on the agreement and only of 29.4% neither agreed nor disagreed. Besides, along with these impacts, clearly the classroom atmosphere and interaction were pushed up within a range from 88.2% to 100%. Interestingly, three of interviewees added that the repeated procedure in project work helped them build up the capacity of long term memorising. However, slightly unexpectedly, participants still did not realise their dramatical improvement in English proficiency and their English communication confidence in their course. Overall, most of the participants showed their agreement on the positive influences of PBL on their ESP learning except for some small portion of confusion to English Communication confidence and their English proficiency. But as a caution, the results also suggest that teachers need to put more emphasis on supporting and empowering their students at mastering their English language competence.

### Effects/impacts of PBL in integrating identified essential skills in the 21st century in ESP classroom

With the second sub-theme of the second and last research question, we conducted analyses examining whether PBL had specific influences on students' integration and practice of the 21st-century skills in learning English for Tourism through their seven-point-of-satisfaction likert scale. The results summarised in chart 3 apparently shows that students were overall dissatisfied with their practice and integration of 4 skills including ICT, Critical thinking, Leadership, and Reflecting with 64.7%, 70.5%, 64.6%, 70.6% of students respectively although students highly perceived the importance of them in previous questions.

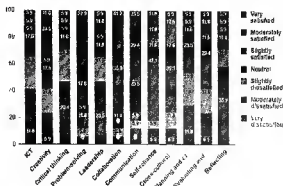


Chart 3. Students' satisfaction to their practice and integration of the 21st century skills

On the other hand, collaboration, problem-solving, and communication were indicated as the most satisfied skills with over 70% of overall satisfaction (including very satisfied, moderately satisfied, and slightly satisfied) of each in integrating 21st century skills. Also, participants still were confused about their satisfaction to their progress of self-reliance, cross-cultural understanding and evaluating & assessing which are shown in the column of neutral value.

What is more, this study uncovered a conflicting relationship between critical thinking and problem-solving meanwhile these two skills theoretically seem to correlate with each other. Specifically, the participants were overall satisfied with their progress in practicing problem solving with 76.45% when summing up three levels of being satisfied. However, the overall dissatisfied percentage of critical thinking application (including slightly dissatisfied, moderately dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied) in some extend accounts for 70.5%. Also, from the interviews, it is clear that students showed positive attitudes to the necessary skills in the 21st century as they were somehow happy and satisfied when having more opportunities to apply and integrate in practicing skill groups in their course of English for Tourism meaningfully to complete tasks or projects. As an extra earning of this study, through the interview we did detect some difficulties the participants dealt with during the English for Tourism course. Firstly, sharing the same

concern with Fragouslis (2009) [4] and Haines (1989) [6], one difficulty is that because of not being familiar with the framework of doing a project work, it was unavoidable from students' confusion and impatience in following steps. This leads to the second problem of time and effort consuming and lack of materials and classroom facilities.

## CONCLUSION

The current paper provided the evidence of significantly positive impacts of PBL in specific aspects of ESP and the incorporation of 21st century skills resulting from participation in 15-week English for Tourism Course, which is relatively compatible with others' studies as above discussed. However, there are several limitations of this study such as a small number of participants to generalise to all students, the course of English for Tourism just as one specific aspects of ESP and most of the findings based on only the responses of students in questionnaires and interviews. Therefore, the study suggests that the potential effects of PBL are likely to be considered as samples with similar characteristics as described in this article and ideally, practical data would be more reliable and triangulated with the teacher's observation and post-course tests. Despite these shortcomings, we conclude with caution and hope that project-based learning is an effective alternative approach of teaching ESP in the 21st century with a call for more studies examining its effects in different courses with different contexts.

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## TÓM TẮT

### NÂNG CAO KỸ NĂNG THỂ KỲ 21 TRONG

### HỌC TIẾNG ANH CHUYÊN NGÀNH THÔNG QUA DỰ ÁN

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Gần đây các trường học đã đưa các kỹ năng cần thiết trong thế kỷ 21 vào trọng tâm của việc học tập và giảng dạy. Trong đó, giảng dạy ngôn ngữ tiếng Anh, đặc biệt là Tiếng Anh chuyên ngành đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong việc kết hợp các kỹ năng này vào các phương pháp dạy học thế kỷ 21 và phương pháp học qua dự án (PBL). Vì vậy, một nghiên cứu tình huống sử dụng các bước thiết kế dự án trong các lớp học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành được chỉnh sửa từ khuôn mẫu của Stoller và Patton đã được tiến hành trong khóa học tiếng Anh Du lịch kéo dài 15 tuần tại trường Đại học Hà Tĩnh, Việt Nam. Trong tất cả các công cụ được sử dụng cho nghiên cứu này, với phạm vi bài báo này, tác giả báo cáo một phần kết quả từ các phiếu điều tra và phỏng vấn sau khóa học đối với sinh viên. Theo quan điểm của người học, trong các kỹ năng được đưa ra, kỹ năng tin học, tư duy phản biện sáng tạo, giải quyết vấn đề, khả năng lãnh đạo và hợp tác được đánh giá có vai trò quan trọng nhất đối với người học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành. Ngoài ra, hầu hết các em nhận định rằng dạy học qua dự án là một công cụ hữu ích giúp các em chủ động tích cực tham gia vào học ngôn ngữ và kiến thức cũng như rèn luyện nâng các kỹ năng cần thiết trong thế kỷ 21.

Từ khóa: dạy học qua dự án, giảng dạy tiếng Anh, tiếng Anh chuyên ngành, tiếng Anh chuyên ngành Du lịch, kỹ năng thế kỷ 21.

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