

Exploring Vietnamese Students' Attitude Towards Project Works in Enhancing Autonomous Learning in English Speaking Class

Truong Thi Thanh Canh

Vien Dong College, Vietnam
Thanhcanhdhv@gmail.com

Abstract The study was conducted with two objectives: (1) to investigate students' attitude towards the use of project works (PWs) to enhance their autonomous learning in an English speaking class; and (2) to figure out to what extent students believe that using PW can enhance their autonomous learning. Involved in this study were 81 conveniently selected students from Vien Dong college, Vietnam. An open-ended questionnaire, semi-structured interview and class observation were employed as research instruments for the quantitative and qualitative data collection. Descriptive statistics as mean score (M) and percentages were used to analyze and explain the data. The results revealed that the students have positive attitudes towards project work implementation in an English speaking class that may have enhanced their autonomous learning. Nonetheless, using project works' evaluation as one of the criteria for course assessment is a controversial issue among these students. In addition, students' interest in utilizing information technology devices is remarked as one of the significant findings in this study.

Keywords: autonomous learning, project works, students' attitude

Introduction

The requirements of 21st century have placed a renewed emphasis on enhancing students' autonomous learning experience. They need to learn how to learn and think autonomously. Holec (1981, p.3) claims that students need to have "the ability to take charge of their learning." Thus, it is believed that one of the key factors for students to be successful in this challenging society is their learning autonomy. Nonetheless, fostering students' autonomous learning is not an easy issue, especially in countries, which have been strongly affected by Confucian heritage like Vietnam. The students from these countries are generally viewed as typically passive, unwilling to ask questions or speak up in class and often rely on memorizing rather than understanding knowledge delivered by teachers (Nguyen et al. 2005).

For centuries, Vietnamese students have been educated with the passive learning style along with the teacher-centered belief (Nguyen, 2014). Furthermore, they tend to believe that sitting in classes will give them the information they need to continue in "spoon-feeding" culture, which "in the long run, teaches nothing but the shape of the spoon" (Halonen, 2002, p.56).

At Vien Dong College, the students are no exceptions. With the author's two year teaching experience at this College, she comes to a conclusion that the lack of autonomy in learning has been a serious problem among students, especially with those who belong to Foreign Language Department. Similar viewpoint is shared by her five colleagues. They agreed that students are passive and they are afraid of being asked or are unwilling to ask about the lessons.

With the practical teaching experience and her desire to improve the recent teaching and learning situation at her workplace, the proponent utilized Project-based Learning (PBL) as a new method to motivate students to study English and encourage their autonomous learning.

Project-Based Learning

According to the Buck Institute for Education (BIE, 2015), Project-based Learning involves an in-depth learning process with systematic learning management to get useful and applicable results, to motivate, and to reinforce necessary living skills. To define this method more specially, BIE (2015) commends the elements to be included in a project, which are known as Gold Standard PBL.

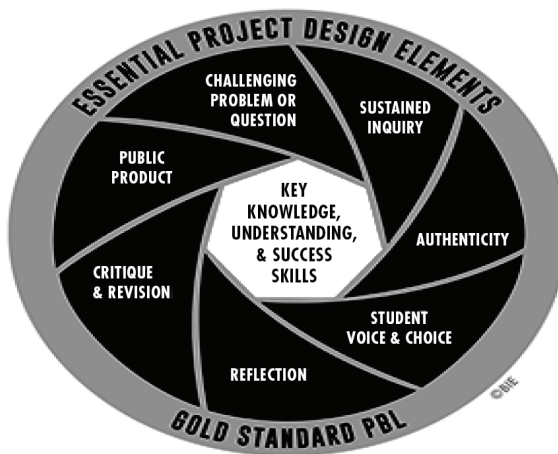


Diagram 1. Gold Standard PBL.

BIE (2015)

In this Gold Standard PBL, all the features of Project-based Learning theory mentioned by previous scholars are fully described. However, its outstanding point is recognized by drawing on the language conception of learning that matches the requirements of the 21st

century that students need. Thus, the author would take this definition as the fundamental theory for this research paper, which emphasizes on the crucial elements of PBL such as: Key Knowledge, Understanding & Key Success Skills, Challenging Problem or Question, Sustained Inquiry, Authenticity, Student Voice & Choice, Reflection, Critique and Revision and Public Product.

Features of PBL-Integrated Classroom

To highlight the difference between traditional classrooms (grammar- translation) and PBL-integrated ones, McCarthy (2010) gives the comparison as presented in the Table 1:

Table 1. The Difference between Traditional and PBL-Integrated Classrooms

Traditional classroom	PBL-integrated classroom
Structured learning situations	Students have more “freedom”
Teachers are expected to have all the answers	Students seek, gather, and check information
The teacher uses academic language	Students engage in authentic interaction with the teacher
Teachers are respected and seen as authority figures inside and outside the classroom	Teachers help students seek information and share opinions with them
Students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving	Students are encouraged to learn by doing
Repetition and memorization techniques are used	Students use a self-discovery approach to solve problems
Examination content pre-decided by the Ministry of education as a crucial part of education	Students choose from a variety of alternatives or decide on their own theme as a complement to set curriculum
Extrinsically motivated due to fear of failure	Students are intrinsically motivated
Students are dependent on the teacher for learning	Students are held accountable to each other and to the teacher

Poster Designing and Video Making Projects as Instances of PBL in English Speaking Class

Dewey (1938) claims that a project work (PW) does not present topics as verbal formulations to be memorized, but brings conditions when pupils try their resourcefulness and ability to make right decisions and activities. Years later, Thomas (2000) developed Dewey's theory and provided a more detailed explanation. He claims that a PW is defined as a complex tasks based on problems encountered by students, conducted during certain period of time and culminated in realistic products that might be in the form of presentation, exhibition, publications, and etc. Bell's (2010) idea should not be left out when he claims that PW is student-centered method and driven by the need to create an end-product. Thus, in this study, PW is defined as the correlation between learning and practice (Dewey, 1938), as a complex task based on problems that students need to tackle to create realistic products (Thomas, 2010), and the need to create an end-product (Bell, 2010). Nonetheless, the types of PW vary due to different scholars' perspectives. Haine (1989) considers the ways that final production for a project is reported and suggests three types of project work: production projects, performance projects and organizational projects. Among them, Poster designing and Video making projects which are production projects are launched for the students to conduct in this study.

Firstly, Poster designing project which is mentioned by Tal and Rishpi (1998) as can enhance community involvement, team work skills and critical thinking skill. Motivation is also a key factor that the author expects this project can inspire students. When students work on designing their Poster in group, they need to manage a lot of factors such as responsibility, and creativity. At the final stage, they have to orally present their products in front of

the class. Accordingly, poster designing project enforces students' team work, critical thinking skill, motivation and English speaking skill.

Secondly, Video making project is expected to bring up many benefits for students. Patrick et al. (2008) strongly emphasized that "student-produced video has always been an excellent EFL language learning activity that requires learner participation in a variety of ways." He also added that digital video recording, editing, and DVD authoring enables students to see their own second language-speaking persona and share it with others. Therefore, using Video making project is assumed to increase students' learning motivation as well as improve their speaking skill components such as pronunciation, intercultural awareness and identify formation, etc. As a consequence, students can improve their autonomous learning.

Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning is believed to play a key role in students' success, both in academic and in career life. Little (1991) defines learning autonomy as a capacity of detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. He emphasizes that the capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts, which then is illustrated into learning characteristics suggested in DeLong (2009). He claims that students realize their autonomous learning when they pursue their personal values as being responsible for their study, learning how to learn, discovering new information by themselves, learning how to cooperate with others and being independent.

As suggested by the literature, learning with PWs as instances of PBL can be considered as a teaching

method that centers on students and helps them build their characteristics such as responsibility, self-study, dependence and cooperation, which gradually lead to improve their autonomous learning. Thus, this study focuses on evaluating students' attitudes towards the PW implementation in promoting their learning autonomy.

Purposes of the Research

According to the author's reading pane, a large number of research has been done to investigate the PBL issue, however, few of them focus on exploring students' attitudes towards the PBL implication in enhancing their learning autonomy, especially in Vietnamese context. Additionally, a majority of the previous studies mostly require students to conduct only one type of PW such as CALL Project (Smith, 2005; Raveewan & Karnchanoke 2015), which leads to the fragmented picture of researches on students' attitudes toward project works.

Therefore, this paper aims to fill the gaps by examining students' attitudes towards the PW implementation to promote their autonomous learning towards their English speaking class via Poster designing and Video making projects.

To achieve these research purposes, two main questions were raised:

1. What are the students' attitudes towards project works implementation in an English Speaking II course to enhance autonomous learning?
2. To what extent do students believe that the employment of project works affects their autonomous learning?

Methodology

Research Design

With the aim to investigate students' attitude towards the use of project works as instances of PBL in an English speaking class to enhance their autonomous learning, the author conducted a descriptive research.

Participants

The study included 81 freshmen who were conveniently selected from English Speaking II (09TA3C and 09TA4C) classes, studying English for the second semester in the academic year 2016. All participants aged from 18 to 21 years old.

Instruments

Questionnaire

The author adapted the questionnaire designed by Raveewan and Karnchanoke (2015) and made some adjustments. The final version of 35-item questionnaire includes three parts: part A was to find out the participants' demographic information, part B was to identify students' attitude towards PW implementation towards enhancing their autonomous learning and part C was to investigate their difficulties while doing PWs. All the items follow five Likert-scale format so as students can conveniently choose their options. To ascertain the validity and reliability of this instrument, the author ran Cronbach's Alpha to all three groups of 35 items questionnaire ($\alpha = 0.854$, $\alpha = 0.787$, and $\alpha = 0.883$ ($\alpha > 0.6$). Then, three of her colleagues and her supervisor previewed the questionnaire. In addition, before delivering this questionnaire to the participants, she piloted it with other group of students (English Speaking II-09TA2C).

Student Semi-Structured Interview

The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the course to get in-depth data. Interviews were recorded with an agreement of interviewees consent and were conducted using Vietnamese (students' native language). All the questions in the interview part were prepared under the supervision of the author's supervisor to ensure the validity. Two main questions used in the interview part are:

1. What are your feelings in general towards doing the projects for English Speaking II course?
2. Do you think that you can become more autonomous in learning English while studying via doing projects?

Class Observation Protocol

This instrument is a semi-structured-observational protocol with part I for check list and part II for open space where the author could make notes on the issues that she had not anticipated. Then, she asked for help from her colleagues' comments and her supervisor's consultation to have the final version of observation protocol.

Data Collection

Pre-Intervention

Prior to the PW implementation, the teacher introduced PBL, PWs as instance of PBL, and steps to conduct PWs so that students had the understanding of the projects that they were going to do. Then, she asked them to form groups of 6 or 7 due to the large number of students in each class.

Intervention

During the time of the two project implementation, the teacher and students (Table 1) followed a 10-step project

making process suggested by Stoller (2002) as cited in Phan (2015).

Table 2. Developing a Project in Language classroom
(Stoller, 2002, as cited in Phan, 2015)

Steps	Activities	Teachers (✓)	Students (✓)
1	Agree on a theme for the project	✓	✓
2	Determine the final outcome	✓	✓
3	Structure the project	✓	✓
4	Prepare students for the language demands of Step V	✓	
5	Gather information		✓
6	Prepare students for the language demands of Step VII	✓	
7	Compile and analyze information	✓	✓
8	Prepare students for the language demands of Step IX	✓	
9	Present final product		✓
10	Evaluate the project	✓	✓

The Table 3 below illustrates the intervention procedure in detail.

Table 3. Summary of the PW Intervention

Week	Date	Procedure	Note
1	22 nd -27 th February, 2016	- Giving introduction of PBL; steps to carry out projects, - Grouping students	Class observation
2	29 th Feb- 5 th March, 2016	- Implementing Poster designing project	Class observation
3	7 th -12 th March, 2016	- Submitting students' draft plan with content for teacher to revise	
4	14 th -19 th March, 2016	- Having groups discussion together to finish their projects	Class observation

5	21 st -26 th March, 2016	- Presenting and getting feedback from teacher as well as classmates	Class observation
6	28 th March- 2 nd April, 2016	- Implementing Video making project	
7	4 th -9 th April, 2016	- Submitting students' draft plan with content for teacher to revise	
10	25 th -30 th April, 2016	- Having groups discussion together to finish their projects	
12	9 th -14 th May, 2016	- Having groups discussion together to finish their projects	
13	16 th -21 st May, 2016	- Presenting and getting feedback from teacher as well as classmates	Class observation

During this intervention period, the author, as a participant observer, conducted five class observations to collect data on students attitudes explicated via their spoken language and their behaviours.

Post-Intervention

On the last day of the course, the questionnaire was administered to the students. Eighty four questionnaires were handed in, however, 3 of them were not counted because the participants did not complete the list of questionnaires. Accordingly, eighty one questionnaires were analyzed.

The interview section was conducted when the course had ended and students had known their scores for the final test. Based on students' different ranges of scores, the teacher chose three groups of students to participate in the interview part. These interviewees were coded as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15 (S1 = Student 1).

Data Analysis

Due to the mixed method used in the present study, the types of data used in data analysis consisted of experimental statistic data, descriptive statistic data, and textual data. Firstly, Mean scores were computed to describe students' attitudes from the data collected in the questionnaire. Then, they were sorted out into different level categorized into "very low", "low", "moderate", "high" and "very high" according to Oxford's range (1990)

Table 4. Evaluation criteria of the questionnaire

1.00-1.40	The positive attitude towards PWs is very low.
1.50-2.40	The positive attitude towards PWs is low.
2.50-3.40	The positive attitude towards the PWs is moderate.
3.50-4.40	The positive attitude towards the PWs is high.
4.50-5.00	The positive attitude towards PWs is very high.

Then, percentages were utilized in analyzing results from class observation checklists. For the qualitative data, dominant themes were indentified.

Results and Discussion

Students' Attitudes Towards Project Work Implementation in English Speaking Course II in Enhancing Eutononomous Learning

To find out students' attitudes towards PW implementation in improving their autonomous learning, five sub-issues were investigated: *students' attitudes towards the use of PW: (1) to enforce students' creativity; (2) to increase learning motivation; (3) to improve learning skills; (4) to affect on*

English speaking lessons and (5) to be an important activity in their learning course.

Table 5. Students' Attitudes Towards the Use of PWs in English Speaking Class

Statements	Mean
The use of PWs to enforce students' creativity	3.9
Students' opinions about the use of PW to increase their learning motivation	3.9
Students' opinions about the use of PWs in English Speaking class	3.9
Students' opinions about the use of PW improve their learning skills	3.7
Learners' willingness on using PW as a part of English speaking course	3.5

Table 5 shows that the mean scores for all mentioned statements are at high evaluation, which implicates that participants had positive attitude towards using PWs in their English speaking class. A majority of students believe that PW implementation helps enforce their creativity (M=3.9) and increase their motivation (M= 3.9). Therefore, they think that PW engages them to join English class actively (M=3.9). The result of the interview was in line with this survey. Here are some of the excerpts from the interview:

Vietnamese version:

“Em nghĩ rằng em và các bạn mình đã cố gắng sử dụng sự sáng tạo của mình để làm sao cho posters của mình đặc biệt nhất và nổi bật nhất. Tụi em chọn cách viết tay, vẽ trang trí và tự tạo ra các đồ vật trang trí dễ thương để gắn lên tâm poster của nhóm” (Stated by S10)

English translation:

“I think that my friends and I were made to use our creativity to make our groups’ projects more special and outstanding. I chose to use hand writing, drawing and hand-made stuff to decorate our Poster project”. (Stated by S10)

In addition, with mean score of 3.7, the respondents expressed their support to the PW implementation in improving their learning skills such as English listening, English speaking and computer skills. Nonetheless, their priority of recommendation goes for the improvement of listening and speaking skills due to opportunities to communicate with English native speakers.

Vietnamese version:

“ Em có thể giao tiếp với người nước ngoài, luyện tập kỹ năng nghe và nói” (Stated by S1)

English translation:

“I can communicate with foreigners, practice listening and speaking skills” (Stated by S1)

As indicated in the preceding table, while students consider the effect of PW implementation on their creativity, their motivation and learning skills with a high evaluation of mean score, their willingness to use PW as a part of English speaking course obtained a lower mean score. In detail, many students hesitate to use PW evaluation as a mean of assessment to reduce the ratio of midterm and final tests.

In sum the respondents expressed their positive attitudes towards the use of PW as a beneficial activity in their lesson because they believe that it is an appropriate way of learning. Many of them even wanted to have more projects to do. Nonetheless, using PW evaluation to be one of the criteria for assessment needs further consideration.

***Students' Belief in the Project Works' Effect
on their Autonomous Learning***

According to DeLong (2009) and Karnchanoke and Raveewan's (2015), learning autonomy happens under conditions that students are (1) responsible for their study, (2) learn how to learn by doing, (3) discover new information by themselves, (4) learn how to cooperate with others and be independent. The result is presented in the Table 6.

Table 6. Students' Attitudes Towards Autonomous Learning

Statement	Mean
Students' attitude to their learning responsibility	3.9
Students' attitude to their practical learning	3.8
Students' attitude on their ability in self-discovering new information	3.8
Students' attitude on their self-evaluation ability	3.8
Students' attitude on their independence on teachers	3.5
Students' attitude on teamwork	4.3

As gleaned from Table 6, the majority of participants express their positive responses towards the use of PWs in their English class because this method brings up many benefits for them. The highest evaluation is on students' attitude on teamwork with a mean score of 4.3. The aspects of teamwork sprung from cooperating with others as a team to exchange knowledge, work together and make decisions to solve problem. Furthermore, they become aware of their English ability from their friends' suggestions while doing project. This finding sparks an idea that students favor to study and cooperate with friends as members in groups. Then, the second position in students' evaluation is on learning responsibility (M=3.9), in self-discovering ability (M=3.8), self-evaluation (M=3.8) and to practical learning (M=3.8). Some following excerpts from the interview give explanation for students' evaluation.

Vietnamese version:

“ Để hoàn thành hai dự án, em phải tìm kiếm rất nhiều thông tin. Nhóm của em phải tìm thông tin từ nhiều nguồn, mà hầu hết là những thông tin đó đều viết bằng tiếng Anh, hoặc có một số thông tin thì viết bằng tiếng Việt. Sau đó, tụi em phải dịch lại tiếng Anh để viết trên tấm poster. Còn về dự án Video, tụi em phải viết kịch bản trước và suy nghĩ cách để phỏng vấn và giao tiếp một cách lịch sự.” (S14)

English translation:

“To finish two projects, I had to search a lot of information. My group had to get the information from many resources that were written in English, or translated from Vietnamese into English to present in the poster project. For the video project, we had to create the script in advance, find ways to communicate politely” (S14)

The third rank of evaluation falls on students' opinion about their independence on teachers (M=3.5). As stated by Raveewan and Karnchanoke (2015), “if students' autonomy is one side of a coin, students' independence on teachers can be compared to the other side.” With the score at 3.5, students seem to still need the support of their teachers because they believe that teachers' advice is necessary. In a nutshell, to some extent, students are still in need of their teachers' guidance and support to do high quality projects.

The observation protocol was designed in a semi-structured form to explore students' attitude and learning engagement.

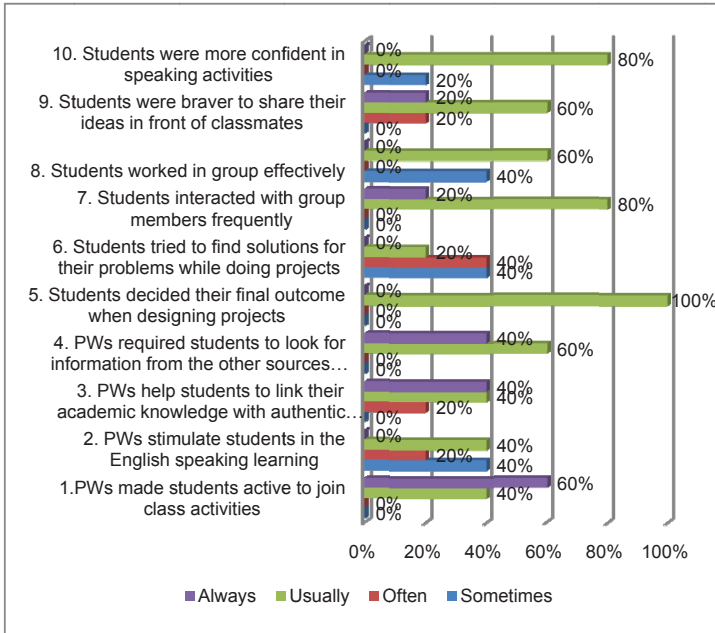


Figure 1. Student’s attitudes towards the use of PW in English speaking class from the observation.

Figure 1 illustrates that learners responded positively to the use of PWs in stimulating students’ autonomous learning in speaking class. At first glance, it is clear that the highest frequency of appearance is “usually” while the second position is for “always” and “sometimes” and the third one is for “often” option. Specifically, during the five times of observation (accounting for 100%), the author realized that students usually decided their final outcome when designing the two required projects. She also noted that the “Lazy group” was the last one who reached their final decision in designing Poster project due to conflict among different members’ opinions. Then, the frequency of option “usually” accounts from 60% to 80% in other items of observation checklist, which indicates that students interact with group member frequently, and become more confident in speaking

activities. In addition, they can be braver to share their ideas in front of their classmates, work in groups effectively and were motivated to look for information from other source such as Internet. It is understandable from the notes taken by the author that students had to work on their project to create their own products which were not available. Therefore, they had to discuss, find out information and organize them logically. For instance, in the second project, namely, Video making project, students even had to plan out their group drama under the form of interviewing like Banana group. The second position of the frequency in appearing is the option of “always” that makes up from 20% to 60% out of the five observations. The author noted that PWs made students actively join in class activities.

In a nutshell, the results from the observations indicate that a majority of students have positive attitude towards PW intervention in enhancing their autonomous learning. Students agreed that the use of PWs helped them to be autonomous learners because these PWs increase their learning responsibility, self- discovery, self-evaluation, independence from teachers, team spirit and practical application via learning by doing. Accordingly, it might be said that the majority of respondents in this current study believe in PWs implication to increase their learning autonomy.

In this section, the study results are discussed to clarify the research questions that were raised from the beginning of the paper. Firstly, the analyzed data from research questionnaires, semi-structured interview and class observation reveal students’ positive attitude towards the PW implementation, indicate that PW is a suitable means of enhancing students’ autonomous learning in an English speaking class. Specifically, 84% of students believed that PWs helped them increase their creativity and self-regulated

learning insofar as leading to their increasing motivation in learning. Therefore, they actively participated in class, felt braver to open up and were more confident whilst studying. In addition, some interviewees said that they were excited when doing projects because they had more space to be themselves and decided their learning process. All of these elements upsurge participants' positive attitude toward the use of project works. This finding may make a meaningful twist in the current learning and teaching of English at Vien Dong College, where students are seeking for a learning method that can encourage them to study communicative skills autonomously.

Secondly, even though the respondents stated that they were motivated, had positive attitude towards the use of PBL in class and expressed their desire to have more projects to do, they still hesitated in using PW's evaluation as course assessment. This finding interestingly surprised the author. It raised the opposite idea to the one claimed by Raveewan and Karnchanoke (2015). In their study conducted in one of technology institution in Thailand, they claimed that the students voice their preference of the project over taking tests. This interesting finding can be explained in three ways: (1) the first reason may link to the students' learning habit that they have had for a long time. The author also mentioned to the "spoon feeding" situation (E.M Foster) where students learn nothing except the shape of a spoon. Students are familiar with their traditional learning style, which enforces them to finish final tests as means of grading or evaluation. This finding illustrates the reality of the current Vietnamese education, especially in higher education. Even though, the educators have spent a lot of effort on creating education reform, not much change has been observed; (2) the second reason may come from their problem with time management. As one of the interviewees said that they did not have a lot of time to be outside the College. Their schedules were filled

with other subjects during weekdays. They just had time over the weekend to handle project works together. Thus, they were afraid that if they did not have enough time to spend on projects, the results would not be that good. The other reason may fall on the validity and reliability of the evaluation. Both of the two project works are groups' products. In one group, there are some students who are more interested and who performed better than others. Thus, they prefer the traditional test taking administered and taken individually to get equal and correct assessment.

Thirdly, the finding from the questionnaire and interview revealed that most of the participants strongly believe that using project works in learning English speaking skill can help to enhance their autonomous learning. This idea is supported by the benefits of using project works. When students are involved in project works, firstly, they need to be aware of their responsibility, then, try their best to fulfill the given tasks. Because the two given projects are under semi-structure projects, they themselves are the main characters in their own stories. In this case, lecturer just plays role of a facilitator, thus, the students need to work with group members to dig out more information outside classroom and accordingly they "need to take charge of their learning;" "can collaborate with peers, adopt more metacognitive strategies such as organizing materials, carrying out the tasks, choosing criteria for evaluation (Thanasoulas, 2000). As a consequence, students gradually become more autonomous in learning.

In the context of Vietnamese education and Vien Dong College is a case, the application of project works as a new method for both lecturers and students. Currently, most students are familiar with the traditional teaching and learning method where teacher is a information provider. Thus, a larger portion of them are "passive, less autonomous and inactive" (Interview- S2). With the application of project works, students can be "more open and brave to express their

idea,” they feel “relax and confident to speak up” in class. These changes bring up an idea that students are autonomous in learning because they feel interested in their lessons.

Fourthly, students’ interest in information technology is another interesting finding that was found in this study. In the Video making project, a majority of students had their effort in employing the application of softwares such as Camtasia, Film making Viva, etc., to design their projects. This finding surprised the author because as far as she knows the above softwares are not listed in the teaching curriculum of Information technology subject in the college.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, learners have carried out two types of PW, namely Poster designing and Video making project during eight weeks of studying. The conclusion of this study is threefold: (1) a majority of students have positive attitude towards the use of PWs as instances of PBL in their English speaking class; (2) these students have strong belief on the effect of PW implementation in enhancing their autonomous learning; (3) even though many students state that they prefer to do PWs and have positive belief in its effect on motivating them to be more autonomous in learning, they still hesitate to use the PW evaluation as a part in their final academic record.

Based on the findings, some recommendations are made. Firstly, it is advisable that learning with PWs as instances of PBL should be integrated in teaching curriculum of the college so that students have more chances to approach this method and take its advantage for their learning. Then, both teachers and students need to collaborate to get over the difficulties that they may encounter during the time of conducting projects. Last but not least, students themselves should be aware that learning is a long life process; they need to learn how to learn so as to become autonomous learners.

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