EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES REGARDING THE TEACHER ROLES IN PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	18/10/2023	The study aims at examining EFL teachers' perceptions on their roles
Revised:	24/11/2023	and how they occupy these roles in project-based learning at a Vietnamese state university. Narrative interviews were employed to
Published:	24/11/2023	collect qualitative data with the participation of five teachers at the
		Faculty of Foreign Languages at Ho Chi Minh City University of
KEYWORDS		Technology and Education. The results revealed that the teachers were
Project-based learning		not fully aware of their roles while implementing the project strategy and the reality of playing their roles was parallel to their perceptions.
Teacher roles		The role as a project organizer was the most well-identified and well-
Perceptions		practiced, followed by the role as a project evaluator. However, the roles as a facilitator and an advisor were less noticed and neglected in
Practices EFL teachers		their instruction practice. The research findings have contributed to
		shed some light on teachers' understanding and practices regarding
		their roles in applying project work in teaching English as a foreign
		language in the context of Vietnam, which emphasizes the call for the
		educational administrators' attention to the support of teacher

NHẬN THỰC VÀ THỰC TIỄN THỰC HIỆN VAI TRÒ CỦA GIÁO VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ TRONG DẠY HỌC DỰ ÁN

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Thực tiễn

Giáo viên chuyên ngữ

giáo viên trong dạy học dự án tại một trường đại học công lập Việt Nam. Bài phỏng vấn tường thuật được dùng để thu thập dữ liệu định tính với sự tham gia của năm giáo viên tại khoa Ngoại ngữ trường Đại học Sư phạm Kỹ thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. Kết quả thu được cho thấy các giáo viên chưa nhận thức đầy đủ vai trò của mình khi áp dụng dạy học dự án, và thực tiễn giáo viên thực hiện vai trò của mình tương ứng với những gì họ nhận thức. Trong đó, vai trò của người thiết kế dự án được hiểu và thực hiện tốt nhất, tiếp đến là vai trò như người đánh giá dự án. Tuy nhiên, vai trò như người hướng dẫn và người cố vấn cho dự án học tập chưa được nhận thức sâu sắc và được thực hiện qua loa trong thực tế giảng dạy. Kết quả nghiên cứu đóng góp vào việc hiểu rõ hơn nhận thức và thực tiễn thực hiện vai trò của giáo viên trong dạy học dự án trong bối cảnh giảng dạy ngoại ngữ ở Việt Nam, từ đó kêu gọi sự chú ý hơn của các nhà quản lí giáo dục đến việc hỗ trợ phát

triển chuyên môn cho giáo viên nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả giảng dạy

Bài báo nhằm tìm hiểu nhận thức và thực tiễn thực hiện vai trò của

professional development to boost teaching effectiveness in the future.

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1. Introduction

In the age of today's global integration, equipping students with 21st century skills to cope with the competitive labor markets is one of the crucial objectives of the current education system in Vietnam. The 2011-2020 education development strategy, accompanied with Decision No. 711/QD-TTg (June 13, 2012) issued by the Prime Minister of Vietnam asserted the need to achieve a comprehensive high-quality education, which stimulates students' creativity, self-learning capacity, independent thinking, etc. [1]. To meet these innovation requirements, project-based learning has been increasingly applied in the EFL setting and proven to be rewarding for promoting students' autonomous learning, cooperative skills, language development and self-confidence [2] - [5].

In the context of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education, innovative instruction has always been inspired. Funds will be allocated to those applying project-based learning. Several teachers have already used projects in their classes but they had not received any formal training in implementing projects. Meanwhile, project-based learning is quite new in the EFL setting in Vietnam and requires teachers to vary their roles greatly. This issue raises the questions to the author about whether teachers are fully aware of their roles and how efficient their practice is. The paper, therefore, was carried out to investigate EFL teachers' understanding of their roles and the roles occupied in project-based learning, which hopes to have a clearer comprehension of the project implementation at the faculty.

An array of studies have been conducted to examine diverse dimensions of project-based learning, such as the impact of project work on students' autonomy [2], [6], English language and soft skills development [3], [5], [7], and EFL teachers' and students' attitudes towards project work [8], [9]. There are also some studies directly related to teacher roles in project-based learning, e.g., Madoyan [10], Pan et al. [11], and Zhumakhanovna [12]. However, the aspect of how teachers comprehend their roles, and how they accompany students during the process, particularly in the EFL context in Vietnam, has been still under-examined so far. To fill this gap, hence, the paper was conducted to examine how EFL teachers perceive their roles in project-based learning and how they played these roles in practice inside and outside the classrooms. To achieve these research objectives, the study attempts to find out the answers to the research questions as follows:

- 1. How are EFL teachers aware of their roles in project-based learning?
- 2. How do EFL teachers play their roles inside and outside the classroom in project-based learning?
- 3. How do EFL teachers self-assess the effectiveness of their instruction in project-based learning?

The findings of the study hope to be beneficial to other teachers who are interested in applying projects in their classrooms in the future. For the participants, these findings may raise their awareness of conducting the project more effectively in the upcoming times as well as highlight the necessary training for teachers' professional development. Ultimately, the paper will contribute to the research body regarding teacher roles in project-based learning, which is still limited in the EFL context in Vietnam.

The study continues with Research Methodology section, which entails research setting and participants, research design, data collection instrument and data analysis. Then findings and discussion will be presented, followed by conclusion to finish the paper.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research setting and participants

The research was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education where innovative instructions have been increasingly

implemented. Project-based learning has been applied in English classrooms but the number is limited. A total of seven EFL teachers at the faculty were invited to partake in the interview, but two refused for certain personal reasons. They all obtained master's degree, 04 females and 01 males, ages ranging from 25 to 45. Most of them already had experiences of using projects to teach English language skills and linguistics subjects. Project work was used as a supplementary exercise or assignment and as part of on-going assessment. Among of them, only one female lecturer had officially attended workshop on project-based learning at tertiary level before the present study was conducted.

2.2. Research design

The study employed a qualitative approach, particularly narrative research because of the small number of the participants which was not appropriate for questionnaire surveys to achieve reliable results. Moreover, the objective of the paper was to examine EFL teachers' perceptions and practices regarding their roles in using projects in their classrooms. Their personal teaching stories were conveyed to explore their perceptions and their teaching experiences. As stated by Connelly & Clandinin [13], narrative research focuses on people's stories and the exploration of meaning portrayed through their stories, which helps the researcher better understand their thoughts and behaviours.

2.3. Data collection instrument

The paper used semi-structured interviews, entailing three parts, namely (1) the teachers' perceptions on the teacher's roles in project work, (2) the teachers' teaching realities in playing their roles while carrying out the projects, and (3) the teachers' self-reflection on the effectiveness of their instruction in project-based learning. The interview occurred face-to-face, individually, in Vietnamese or English which depends on each interviewee's choice, for approximately twenty-five minutes, and was recorded with the consent of the participants.

2.4. Data analysis

Each participant was coded, e.g., interviewee No.1, No.2 were coded as T1, T2. The "content analysis" was used to analyze data. The data collected were transcribed and translated into English. After the transcription was finished, the author read all of the data to gain a sense of the whole. Afterwards, the data were organized into the segments relevant to the three research questions, and then were read carefully several times to identify the meaningful themes, which were compared later to find out the relationships between them. When the major, unique and leftover topics appeared, their meanings were interpreted to be considered EFL teachers' perceptions and reality of occupying their roles in the project implementation both inside and outside the classrooms.

The author also invited another colleague to explain the data and review the findings to ensure the consistency of the data interpretation or identify the gaps in the author's missed arguments. Moreover, the final script was sent to the interviewees for confirmation. It is expected to draw a sound and reasonable conclusion for the research paper.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. EFL teachers' awareness of their roles in conducting project-based learning

Each of the five interviewees expressed their own voices on the teacher roles in the project implementation. They all appreciated the significance of teachers in this teaching and learning strategy. More specifically, T1 and T3 claimed that "Although this method is learner-centered, teachers still set up and determine project theme, guide students to follow up correct directions in different stages of the project". T2 added that "Clearly, without teachers, project does not exist. A successful project is closely tied with teacher support and guidance".

All of the participants were fully aware of their roles as an organizer. They all supposed that teachers should have authentic themes for the class project to motivate students and the project objectives must be relevant to the learning outcomes. From the outset, all requirements and expectations, like marking criteria, and final outcomes should be clearly explained. Especially, T2 thought that providing a project template for students to have an overview of a project format is paramount. T5 presumed that inviting students to construct the assessment rubrics and determine the final product format was necessary to give them a sense of authority for their own study.

In terms of other roles, nevertheless, most of the teachers merely superficially mentioned. They all agreed to let students choose their partners freely. They assess students' final products based on the marking criteria. They disclosed briefly that "teachers guide and consult students to choose topics, plan outline, and recommend material resources. Certainly, teachers should remind students to ensure their work as scheduled". Particularly, T5 suggested that teachers elicited the samples of potential conflicts and possible solutions to conflict resolution for students at the beginning of the project. He also pointed out that teachers as advisors should often ask students the questions related to their project to provoke their curiosity.

It seems that all of the participants were fully cognizant of the teacher role as an organizer. However, they did not have a systematic overview of teachers' other roles in project-based learning.

3.2. EFL teachers' practices in playing their roles inside and outside the classrooms in project-based learning

When asked about their teaching reality as a project organizer, all teachers expressed that they introduced the students to requirements, timelines, and marking criteria as much clearly and detailed as possible so that the students can have a deep grasp of their work. T3 and T5 had their own ways in the orientation session. T3 collaborated with other teachers of the same subject in the same semester to refine the criteria and requirements in the syllabus to make them more specific and relevant to the project. As she said, "Other teachers and I who teach Grammar courses discuss to determine objectives, grammar and writing level (B1), mistake identification and correction, sentence types to prepare knowledge for paragraph writing in the next course. We also agree on the grading rates for each member in group contribution, organization, content, and time to start and finish the project as well as the day for presenting all groups' final products. We discuss the prize for the best group as well". Meanwhile, T5 invited the students to construct the assessment criteria and discuss to decide on the possible final products to give them a sense of belonging. He also took time for "Questions and Answers" session in which "students were inspired to raise their concerns. Teachers should successfully communicate and accommodate students' needs, making them confident in taking up the next steps". Additionally, he presented a sample of the previously completed project for students to visualize the future products. It can be said that all teachers launched their project well, presenting the related aspects clearly.

In terms of the role as an advisor, all the teachers advised their students to choose appropriate project topics, except T4 having an available topic bank for students to select. These topics were authentic, equivalent to the given theme suggested by teachers and the course objectives. They also provided feedback on students' project outlines. Whereas other teachers neglected to instruct students to approach reliable sources, only T2 introduced the students to the learning material resources as she appreciated the value of the official sources "I use projects in reading courses. So, I would like to direct students to read the sources for native speakers for the sake of students' achievement of native-like vocabulary and language styles. Honestly, not all students are able to use keywords to search for necessary information. I have to suggest to them the sources as well as what and how to navigate the information". Most of the participants merely gave constructive feedback on students' topic choice and outline, then they simply asked the groups' progress and answered students' questions when students had difficulties and raised questions in class. They did not have any specific strategies to keep track of students' participation in groups and their

work progress to provide timely and efficient feedback. T4 and T5, nonetheless, had their own methods. T4 interacted with students both face-to-face in class and through Zalo outside the class. She used a form for students to report their work weekly, which helped her better comprehend students' problems and conflicts so that she could provide students with well-timed assistance. She also commented and corrected students' projects periodically as scheduled to ensure students' high-quality products. In another way, T5 trained the group leaders right from the start of the project to monitor the group progress and report the results to the teacher once every two weeks. Like T4, he also used Zalo to connect with the groups beyond the class since "Zalo could help teachers significantly be aware of what is happening outside the classroom, ensuring that students are on the right track and enable them to achieve the desired goals of the projects".

Regarding the role of facilitator, all the teachers let the students freely form groups, usually choosing their close friends as T1 revealed that "I let them choose their own team members so that their preferences and freedom can be best exploited. Since students will feel at ease when collaborating with their preferred mates". They frequently reminded students of important timelines orally. Furthermore, they resolved the group conflicts and answered student questions when students asked them and mainly in the classrooms. Most of the interviewees merely used students' oral reports without checking their products or having any evidence to track the students' progress except T4 and T5 with individual's weekly report form and group leaders' report.

Moving on to the role as an evaluator, five teachers used marking criteria to assess students' final products concerning delivery, content, organization, answering questions but their assessment was likely to be subjective since they had no rubrics. Even though T3 cooperated with other teachers responsible for the same subject of the same course, a detailed rubric list was not well-established. Besides, T1 and T5 combined individual reports in which students self-reflected their learning process, the advantages and disadvantages they encountered; or T2, T3, T4 used peer-evaluation in which students evaluated their partners' contribution and involvement during the project. While T1, T3, T4, and T5 stopped at commenting and grading students' presentations, only T2 noticed the improved product. After the presentation, the students had to revise and improve their project according to the teacher's feedback so that the students could gain deeper insights of the issue they were examining, and this revised product was later graded again as another marking part of their total project grades.

3.3. Teachers' self-evaluation of the roles they play

When asked to assess the roles they occupied, five participants shared their fascinating opinions. T1's instructional practices were self-evaluated just above the average level. She thought her guidelines were clear since students could accomplish their projects and met teachers' requirements. However, she desired to have more time to check students' learning progress and correct their products more frequently and carefully. She also thought that she would state the project purposes more clearly next time as well as build marking criteria with detailed rubrics as some students still undervalued project work. Furthermore, T2, T3 and T4 felt that their instructions were effective as the project reflected the course objectives and achieved the learning outcomes and the students accomplished their projects creatively. They agreed that students improved group-work skills, communication skill, presentation skills, creating posters, power point, and problem-solving skills. Notwithstanding, they all confessed that they could not cover all students' problems to suggest solutions, especially outside the classroom. They often got stuck in finding the best way to guarantee students' equal participation or to check their work in a process as scheduled due to time constraint and heavy workload. Designing a motivational project was also another challenge for them. T5, meanwhile, considered his instruction was both effective to some extent and still limited in another aspect. He claimed that "I created something new for my students and they were highly motivated to take part in the project. They were excited about the projects, based on their

feedback at the end of the course". Yet, he admitted that he should introduce the learning materials to students, assisting them to assess the reliable resources. He was unable to ensure students' even work distribution or to hold students accountable for their contributions to group projects, and some students may rely on others to do the work. Project assessment is another real problem as it may be difficult to measure the quality of a project objectively.

The present paper examines EFL teachers' perceptions and practices regarding the roles they occupy in project-based learning. The results unveil that the interviewed teachers appreciated the significance of teacher roles in project-based learning. According to Asma and Sabrina [14], teachers' various and flexible roles during the project process determine students' product quality. Even so, all of them were not fully aware of their roles in implementing projects in their classrooms. This finding echoes the one in the study by Pasi et al. [15]. The most well-aware role is project organizer and the next one is evaluator whereas the roles as advisor and facilitator are shallowly portrayed. Concerning their instruction reality, the study uncovers that teachers play multiple parts from designing projects, facilitating and consulting students, evaluating students' learning performance, which is relevant to teachers' roles in project-based learning examined by Pan et al. [11] as designer, champion, facilitator, and manager. Although the roles are differently named, their detailed descriptions are similar at a certain level. Teachers' perceptions have a close connection with their behaviours in classrooms [16], [17]. Accordingly, their teaching practices are matched to their perceptions. The projects are well-designed at the outset and adequately evaluated at the end, yet the middle stages of the project are not thoroughly effective. As project organizer, the teachers explain requirements for and objectives of the projects clearly, determine timelines, marking criteria, introduce project template and sample, or have "questions and answers" session. These are in line with the role as project designer and champion described by Pan et al. [11]. Nevertheless, Pan et al. [11] further explain that teachers clarify teacher's and students' roles in project-based learning so that students can understand their duties clearly, explicitly stating the significance of the tasks to boost students' inspiration, as well as apparently revealing expectations for students' accountability and success. As project advisor, the interviewees often consult students to choose topics and plan outlines for their projects, plus answer students' questions related to the projects directly both inside and outside the classroom through Zalo. However, they cannot track students' progress, except two teachers using team leaders and weekly report form. This finding is opposite to the one in a research by Grossman et al. [18] in which the teachers monitor students' progress by using shared documents between teacher and groups (Google docs) so that teachers can follow students' work progression and students can receive teacher feedback instantly. They also suggest that teachers ask students probing questions and suggest material resources for students to solve the problems on their own instead of giving them direct answers. In this way, students are encouraged to inquire and construct new knowledge actively by themselves. Regarding the role as evaluator, the current study asserts that teachers assess students' final product presentation using marking criteria, combined with peer-assessment on group members' participation and contribution. Nevertheless, they all concede that achieving equal and objective assessment is problematic since they have no specific grading rubrics. This result conflicts with Pan et al.'s finding [11] which insists on the importance of detailed rubrics for teachers' consistent and reliable assessment. Moreover, Grossman et al. [18] find that teachers create opportunities for students to give and receive peerfeedback, combined with carefully training them to use feedback from their peers effectively by modelling what good feedback is and commenting on students' feedback. It is likely that most of the teacher participants in the current study neglect to support students to reflect on their learning activities and revise their final products.

In brief, the teachers are not fully aware of their roles in conducting the projects in their classrooms. Accordingly, their instruction in reality is not as fully satisfying as expected to some extent although they all make their best efforts to guide and support students.

4. Conclusion

The present study has provided evidence about EFL teachers' perceptions on their roles in project-based learning and their practices of occupying these roles in their classrooms in the EFL context in Vietnam. Although they perceive teacher's multiple roles, they do not have a deep insight into this issue. Consequently, when applying this teaching and learning strategy in practice, they can not play their roles completely well. They cannot provide the students with timely support as well as keep a track of the students' progress. The findings from the study imply that teachers should explain teacher's and students' roles from the outset to ensure students' accountability clarity, introduce material resources as well as guide students where to find and how to use them effectively. Moreover, teachers should monitor students' engagement and work process more closely, e.g., commenting on students' drafts more frequently, assessing how their drafts change over time so that students can clearly monitor their progress. It is also noted that project assessment should include revised products to assist students to have a deep insight into their explored issues and detailed rubrics for objective assessment.

To address the issue mentioned above, therefore, it is necessary to have seminars or workshops for teachers to share their knowledge and experience related to project-based learning, along with the reports of the possible outcomes, shortcomings and challenges teachers face during their project implementation. Furthermore, formal training, e.g., meeting specialists or attending short-term courses, should be provided to teachers so that they can deeply understand the essence and core issues of project-based learning. More importantly, teachers themselves can collaborate with the others to establish a well-planned project for their classes, coupled with self-reflecting and redefining their teaching practices in order to evaluate the achievement and shortcomings for future adjustment.

The current paper still has its own limitations that should be taken into consideration. The research sample size is very small, which can not be generalized to represent the perceptions and practices of all EFL teachers who conduct project-based learning. In addition, the research focus is just from teachers' voices, which cannot help understand the entire picture of teachers' role effectiveness in the project implementation. Further research, hence, may be conducted on more participants and on students' perspectives to get more comprehensive results.

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