

LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS A VIGNETTE WRITING PROJECT**Le Thi Khanh Linh***, **Nguyen Thi Minh Loan***TNU - School of Foreign Languages*

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 06/4/2023	For foreign language learners often have difficulty writing a story in the target language, a five-week vignette project in which participants were asked to write incomplete narratives was conducted. This paper aims at examining the participants' attitudes towards the project, specifically in terms of their cognition, affect and behaviors. Two data collection instruments in the research included a five-point Likert scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, both of which were administered to the participants at the end of the project. The results suggest that the participants had positive perceptions towards the project by acknowledging its impacts on their language, skills, and feelings and stating their willingness to partake in other similar projects. Furthermore, several recommendations were also made by the participants in order to better the upcoming activities. It is hoped that the findings would allow teachers, students and those who are concerned with vignette writing to recognize its potential applications in language teaching and learning.
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KEYWORDS

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THÁI ĐỘ CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC ĐỐI VỚI MỘT DỰ ÁN VIẾT VIGNETTE**Lê Thị Khánh Linh***, **Nguyễn Thị Minh Loan***Trường Ngoại ngữ – ĐH Thái Nguyên*

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 06/4/2023	Người học ngoại ngữ thường gặp khó khăn khi viết một câu chuyện bằng ngôn ngữ đích; do đó, một dự án kéo dài năm tuần đã được thực hiện trong đó người học sẽ viết vignette – những câu chuyện chưa hoàn chỉnh. Mục đích của bài viết này là tìm hiểu thái độ của người tham gia đối với dự án, cụ thể là về nhận thức, tình cảm và hành vi. Nghiên cứu sử dụng hai công cụ thu thập dữ liệu là bảng câu hỏi khảo sát và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc được thực hiện cuối dự án. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy người tham gia có thái độ tích cực với dự án khi cho rằng dự án có tác động tích cực tới ngôn ngữ, kỹ năng, cảm xúc của mình và họ sẵn lòng tham gia các hoạt động tương tự. Thêm vào đó, người tham gia cũng đề xuất một số ý kiến để cải thiện các dự án tiếp theo. Hy vọng rằng các kết quả này sẽ giúp giáo viên, người học và những ai quan tâm nhận thức được tiềm năng trong việc sử dụng vignette trong hoạt động dạy và học ngoại ngữ.
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TỪ KHÓA

Vignette
Dự án
Viết
Người học
Thái độ

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1. Introduction

Short stories have secured an important position in the practice of English language teaching thanks to their obvious merits in linguistics, socio-culture, personal attributes, emotions and cognition compared to other literary genres [1]. A number of studies have been conducted to illuminate the effectiveness of short stories and suggest different approaches to integrate the stories in English classrooms [2]. However, the literature of short story application in language classes has demonstrated the inclination of using stories as an authentic input for various class activities, with a focus on reading skills and vocabulary retention. One possible justification for the limited utilization of short stories in writing classes is the intimidation of constructing the whole story with a clear point. To encourage language learners' participation in writing short stories, assigning them to produce "vignettes" instead of a complete story appears to be a more feasible idea.

The term "vignettes", metaphoricalized from the French *vignette* meaning the magnificently-ornamented items, refers to impressive and exemplary descriptions [3]. Therefore, vignettes are considered condensed narratives capturing poignant moments, and often aim at reconstructing the personal experience rather than the event itself [4]. Vignettes, in other words, can be seen as snapshots of life where people express how they hear, smell, see, taste and feel the world in their own perspective [3]. Similarly, another definition of vignettes suggests that they can recollect and retell a memory or an episode in your life evocatively [5]. It can be seen that vignettes, as often categorized in the short story genre, narrate writers' or speakers' experiences and express their perceptions upon the events [3], [6]. However, they are characterized by a number of features contrasting them with other short stories. First, vignettes are relatively short, which is frequently described as "condense" or "concise" in several definitions [3], [7]. Deemed as snapshots of moments rather than the complete story, vignettes do not concentrate on recalling what has happened but describing meticulously the character, the scene or the place [5]. In literature, vignettes are a useful device, functioning as a pause in the plot that informs readers of descriptive details and enables them to visualize the world in the story. Hence, vignette writing is not constrained by traditional structure of short stories, including exposition (introduction), complication, climax, falling action and (resolution) as quoted by Liu (2009) [8]. The essence of vignettes implies that individuals experiencing the same situation could interpret it in distinct ways, resulting from different perspectives and preferences.

As concluded by Ammann (2018), vignettes have been utilized in a number of research projects investigating experiences of learning and proved to be significant in phenomenology oriented studies [9]. Vignettes, produced by researchers and participants, are meaningful descriptive sources of data for qualitative analysis [4], [10], [11]. Despite the widespread acknowledgement and application of vignettes as a research method, little has been done to reveal their role as a class writing activity. The potentials of learner-generated vignettes in writing lessons have given rise to our vignette writing project and the current paper aims at reporting major findings related to the participants' perceptions on the project. Motivated by the question "*What are the participants' attitudes towards the vignette writing project?*", the paper explores how the participants evaluate the project effects with regard to their cognition, affect and behaviors. Hopefully, the findings would address the research gap and offer an approach for teachers and learners to exploit vignettes in language classrooms.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The project involved 289 second-year English majors and six teachers of English at School of Foreign Languages. Due to the scope of the current paper, only student participants' attitudes towards the project were investigated. It is reported that the students were aged 19-21, and there

were 249 females and 40 males. At the time of the project, they had learnt to write paragraphs of different kinds, and were learning writing personal emails and letters. It can be seen that the students have been exposed to some writing genres and they were expected to achieve intermediate level or above in English. Their informal sharing, nonetheless, has elicited that writing held relatively little interest to them and they had to struggle with creative writing.

2.2. The vignette writing project

Project-based learning has been proved to be an effective approach in language classrooms as it is believed to increase autonomous learning, develop higher order thinking skills and motivate learners in mixed-ability classes [12]. The following project procedure with six major steps was revised from the ten-step process in “maximizing the benefits of project work in foreign language classrooms” suggested by Alan and Stoller (2005) [13].

Step 1: The theme was discussed and the final outcomes were agreed to be vignettes of learners’ school and daily life.

Step 2: Teachers and learners negotiated how the project was structured: (1) participants would work in groups of 10 or 11 members and choose an event they experienced together; (2) their personal vignettes would be produced; and (3) the vignettes would be shared in groups and two or three elected to be displayed in the final presentation. When the vignettes were discussed in groups, teachers and student members could offer support for writers’ language use. Negotiations for steps 1 and 2 were made in one class session.

Step 3: In the following week, participants were instructed about vignette writing so as that they were fully aware of their tasks through instructional activities.

Step 4: The project was carried out in groups in the next two weeks. After group meetings and discussions, two or three personal vignettes were selected to be written on A0 papers.

Step 5: Student participants presented their final products in a gallery walk attended by students of various cohorts, teachers from different universities and educational institutions, and several foreign experts.

Step 6: Participants evaluated the project through a survey and semi-structured interviews. They reflected how they perceived the project regarding different aspects.

2.3. Data collection instruments

The paper employed two major instruments, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, which provided quantitative and qualitative data for the further analysis.

2.3.1. Questionnaire

Questionnaires are widely known as a source of insightful and satisfying data, especially when the research deals with a large number of respondents [14]. Administered to the participants after the final presentation, the questionnaire focuses on learners’ attitudes towards the project process. As one of fundamental psychological concepts, attitudes refer to general and enduring evaluation, which can be positive or negative, of people, objects or issues [15], [16]. In the current paper, the tripartite theory of attitudes structured with cognitive, affective and behavioral factors was applied to design the three-part questionnaire of 30 closed-ended items in total [15]. The first part, which included 14 questions, targeted at the students’ cognitive attitudes towards the project impacts on their language use and various skills. The cognitive aspect appertains to one’s beliefs or opinions or attributes of the attitude object. The affective basis of an attitude, constructed with feelings, moods and emotions, was investigated through ten items in the second questionnaire section. Also, six items in the final part were hoped to uncover the behavioral factor - how the participants respond towards the objects [15]. The participants indicated how much they were in favor or against the given statements by selecting the five-point scale options (1) *Strongly disagree*, (2) *Disagree*, (3) *Neutral*, (4) *Agree*, and (5) *Strongly agree*. Though the questionnaire

was delivered to all student participants through Google Forms, not all of them submitted their answers. It was reported that 275 responses were submitted, accounting for 95.16% of the total number of the project participants. The submissions were subsequently coded and analyzed using Microsoft Excel for their mean (M) and standard deviation (S.D). The means of items indicate the tendency towards positive or negative perceptions by the participants and are classified into 1-1.80 (strongly disagree), 1.81-2.60 (disagree), 2.61-3.40 (neutral), 3.41-4.20 (agree), and 4.21-5.00 (strongly agree).

2.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit the students' further thoughts on the projects. In approximately ten minutes of in-person meeting for each of twelve voluntary participants, the interviews delved into their personal comments on what went well and what should have been better during the project. Also, the interviewees were encouraged to share their recommendations so that the future projects could run more smoothly to facilitate their academic performance. The interviews were audio recorded upon the participants' permission and based on the edited transcriptions, data were subsequently sorted into different categories for more convenient analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

The data collected from the two instruments depict that the participants had positive view to the project. As displayed in Table 1, the mean score for the attitudes towards the project in general is relatively high (M=3.98; S.D=.77). When it comes to the three components, affect was perceived as the most positive aspect (M=4.06; S.D=.78), closely followed by behavior (M=3.99; S.D=.74) and cognition (M=3.93; S.D=.76). The participants also shared that they did enjoy the project in the semi-structured interviews.

Table 1. Participants' general attitudes towards the project

	M	S.D
The whole project	3.98	.77
Cognitive factors	3.93	.76
Affective factors	4.06	.78
Behavioral factors	3.99	.74

3.1. Cognitive attitudes

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviation of different attributes in cognitive attitudes. It is evident that the participants generally advocated the benefits of the project since the mean scores for specific factors are in a positive range, from 3.69 to 4.27. In terms of language use, the participants particularly valued the impacts of the project on their ability to communicate ideas in writing (M=4.27; S.D=.70) and the expansion of their vocabulary (M=4.18; S.D=.70). These figures are meaningful because the project aimed at improving learners' writing performance. In the interviews, the participants shared that the project encouraged them to express what they experienced clearly and confidently as they were aware that their writings would be read by various readers. Another sharing is that the learners felt less worried when writing vignettes, compared to writing complete narratives. Particularly, some interviewees claimed that they attempted to search for specific words or expressions to describe their feelings or emotions which might differ from their peers' even though they attended the same event.

It is interesting that in such writing project, the students acknowledged the improvement in their speaking competence, indicated by the mean score of 4.17 (S.D=0.66) for this aspect. The participants specified in the interviews that they did try to speak English during the project procedure and the final product presentation offered them a great opportunity to communicate orally with the other people. Some mentioned the presentation as the first time they could

introduce their products in front of so many audience, especially the foreign ones. Obviously, the project-based approach has promoted the improvement of different language skills, not just the targeted one.

"I had thought that I could make a lot of mistakes when talking with the foreigners and they couldn't understand me. However, the presentation has encouraged me to speak more confidently. When I speak, I can convey something to the others, despite the mistakes. If I just keep silent, I can communicate nothing but my lack of confidence."

Student #1 [Reconstructed from the transcriptions]

Besides, the project appears to have enabled the development of learners' number of skills. Notably, many of the participants agreed with the statement that the project allowed them to perform in groups more effectively (M=4.08, S.D=.78). This finding is validated via the fact that all interviewees emphasized the benefits of face-to-face group meetings in solving problems and strengthening members' understanding of each other. This is significant for these students as they had to experience the limited interactions from Internet-based classes in previous terms.

Table 2. Participants' cognitive attitudes towards the project

The project has helped me to ...	M	S.D
correct grammatical errors I used to make.	3.69	.74
learn new grammatical structures.	3.96	.69
correct lexical errors I used to make.	3.86	.67
expand my vocabulary.	4.18	.70
convey my ideas in writing better.	4.27	.70
understand and apply writing steps.	3.88	.72
improve my speaking competence.	4.17	.66
enhance my presentation skill.	3.78	.74
assess my own learning process.	3.92	.70
assess my peers' production.	3.74	.82
improve my communication skills.	3.79	.89
improve my team work skills.	4.08	.78
improve my critical thinking.	3.73	.84
improve my creativity skills.	3.94	.70

3.2. Affective attitudes

In order to discover the learners' affective attitudes, the questionnaire included ten items concerning project aspects that might influence their emotions. Data from Table 3 reveal that the students indicated considerably positive feelings towards the project.

Table 3. Participants' affective attitudes towards the project

Statements	M	S.D
I find it exciting to compare my ideas with other group members'.	4.24	.58
I find it interesting to discover my peers have different interpretations of the same events.	4.09	.71
I find it enjoyable to present my writing ideas with other people.	4.29	.81
I feel excited when people read my product or my group's products.	4.04	.83
I feel excited when chatting with readers about my own or my group's products.	4.34	.73
I feel excited when I can talk with other students about their products.	3.99	.69
I feel more responsible for my work.	3.89	.64
I feel proud of my product or my group's products.	4.22	.69
I find the project timeline appropriate.	3.59	.82
I am satisfied with the teachers' guidance and support.	3.94	.88

The first point to consider is that the participants generally found it exciting when they dealt with their own or their groups' products. For instance, discussing their own or their groups' vignettes and presenting the products with the audience were likely to be their most favored activities in the presentation (M=4.34, S.D=.73 and M=4.29, S.D=.81 respectively), followed by

the excitements when comparing ideas with other group members' ($M=4.24$, $S.D=.81$) and the pride in their work ($M=4.22$, $S.D=.69$). It can be observed that the more involvement the participants gained with the project, the more positive affection they showed. Likewise, the interviewees showed their interest and joy when sharing their product and contribution to the project. They highlighted the excitement as they realized that their vignettes differed from their partners even though they experienced the same event. These distinctions in the vignettes could trigger further discussions and justifications, creating favorable conditions for the writers to understand each other and themselves. Some said that they would be more confident to build the whole story after writing these "snapshots".

Among all factors investigated, the feasibility of the project timeline was the least appreciated, demonstrated by the mean of 3.59 ($S.D=.82$). In the interviews, some of the participants mentioned time allocation as the most challenging part of the project. They clarified that in this extra-curricular activity, the group meetings might conflict with the members' personal schedules and they had to complete the project under time pressure. Fortunately, they claimed that the project was demanding but rewarding and they were totally satisfied with what they had done.

3.3. Behavioral attitudes

The final part of the questionnaire aims at illuminating the participants' past behaviors and intentions to commit future behaviors. In general, they informed that they did actively participate in the project by spending sufficient effort for it ($M=3.78$, $S.D=.63$), doing more self-study ($M=3.84$, $S.D=.87$), supporting their group members ($M=3.91$, $S.D=.81$) and being critical to the shared experience ($M=3.92$, $S.D=.76$). Moreover, they stated that their applications of various skills, both academic and transferable, facilitated them to accomplish their group project ($M=4.08$, $S.D=.63$). Especially, when asked if they would like to take another similar project in the future, the participants expressed their absolute agreement with the mean score of 4.4 ($S.D=.49$), which was the highest among all the questioned items. This figure corresponds with the interviewees' sharing as most of them revealed their hope for future projects to be organized at the school. The students also offered some recommendations to help possible upcoming projects run more smoothly. For example, it was suggested that the project duration should be longer so that the participants could allocate more time to peer-checking and revising their products. Another suggestion is related to the final presentation where attendees could vote for the products they find the most interesting. Whatever the ideas were, it is a healthy sign that the participants seriously assessed the project procedure and are eager to contribute to activities that can foster their academic and personal development.

4. Conclusion

In short, while the learners posed generally positive attitudes towards the vignette project, their affective attitudes have been reported to be the most impacted. That means attending the project has offered the participants enjoyable moments, especially when it comes to the products they created or contributed to. Additionally, the project has been proved to interest and facilitate the participants in their language improvement and skill enhancement. It can be safely concluded that the project has fulfilled its primary goal, that is to develop the students' writing performance, typically in idea expression and vocabulary expansion. One noticeable finding is that the students' considerable acknowledgement of the project effects on their ability to interact orally in such a writing project. Among a wide range of skills investigated, team work is perceived as the skill with the biggest improvement. Moreover, the majority of participants expressed that they would be willing to join other projects which could assist their study and skills.

As the project has shed light on the advantages of vignettes in educational settings, the participants should consider their use in a number of ways. For example, the students are encouraged to have their narratives unravel with distinct details from their own experiences and

perspectives, rather than with a plain sequence of events. Also, they need to learn to respect the others' ideas which might be different or even contrasting from theirs. Regarding the teaching practice by the lecturers, it is advisable to flexibly assign vignettes and complete stories in order to lessen learners' pressure of writing the whole narratives and help them become more skillful in creative writing.

Furthermore, the findings also pose several recommendations for future projects such as more consideration of time allocation and in attendees' participation in the product presentation. It is also suggested that more extra-curricular activities should be organized so as to provide learners opportunities to step out of the traditional classrooms and apply what they have been taught.

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