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DONG THAP UNIVERSITY TESOL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT OF USING THE PROJECT-BASED METHOD IN BLENDED LEARNING

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Abstract

This study examines the use of the project-based (PB) method in blended learning (BL) or the PBBL model assessed by postgraduate students in a TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) course at Dong Thap University. The PBBL model combines face-to-face instruction with digital tools and aims to promote student-centered learning, autonomy, collaboration, and the practical application of knowledge. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the present study involved 47 TESOL postgraduate students, with eight of them participating in in-depth interviews to gather qualitative data. The quantitative data collected from surveys revealed that these postgraduate students experienced significant improvements in learning activities and soft skills (collaboration, flexibility in problem-solving, and task management). Additionally, they reported increased learner autonomy and motivation, driven by the interactive and flexible nature of the PBBL model. Qualitative findings further corroborated these results, highlighting the development of soft skills and career orientations. Despite these positive outcomes, challenges such as group collaboration, coursework overload, technical issues, and insufficient institutional support were identified. The study concludes with recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of this approach, including sustained institutional support, comprehensive teacher training, and digital facility investment. Additionally, pointers for future research on the concerned topic are outlined.

Keywords: *Blended learning, learning activities, project-based learning, PBBL, soft skills.*

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HỌC VIÊN CAO HỌC CHUYÊN NGÀNH GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐỒNG THÁP ĐÁNH GIÁ VỀ VIỆC ỨNG DỤNG PHƯƠNG PHÁP DỰ ÁN VÀO HÌNH THỨC HỌC TẬP KẾT HỢP

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Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu này khảo sát việc áp dụng phương pháp dự án (Project-Based – PB) vào hình thức học kết hợp (Blended Learning – BL), gọi tắt là mô hình PBBL, được đánh giá bởi học viên sau đại học trong đào tạo giảng dạy tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Đồng Tháp. Mô hình PBBL kết hợp giảng dạy trực tiếp với hình thức trực tuyến trên nền tảng số hoá nhằm thúc đẩy học tập lấy người học làm trung tâm, nâng cao tính chủ động, hợp tác và ứng dụng thực tiễn kiến thức. Áp dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp, nghiên cứu này bao gồm 47 học viên sau đại học chuyên ngành giảng dạy tiếng Anh, trong đó tám người tham gia phỏng vấn sâu nhằm thu thập dữ liệu định tính. Dữ liệu định lượng từ khảo sát cho thấy các học viên này có sự tiến bộ trong hoạt động học tập, và các kỹ năng mềm (kỹ năng hợp tác, tính linh hoạt, giải quyết vấn đề và quản lý công việc). Bên cạnh đó, họ nhận thấy sự gia tăng tinh thần tự giác, tự chủ và động lực học tập, thúc đẩy bởi tính tương tác và linh hoạt của mô hình PBBL. Kết quả định tính cũng xác nhận những kết quả trên, đồng thời nhấn mạnh đến sự phát triển về khả năng thích ứng và định hướng nghề nghiệp. Tuy có nhiều kết quả tích cực, kết quả cũng chỉ ra những thách thức về các khía cạnh là hợp tác nhóm, vấn đề kỹ thuật kết nối, và thiếu hụt sự hỗ trợ từ phía nhà trường. Cuối cùng, nghiên cứu đề xuất các khuyến nghị nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả của phương pháp này, bao gồm duy trì hỗ trợ từ nhà trường, đào tạo giáo viên toàn diện và đầu tư thêm cho hạ tầng công nghệ số. Thêm vào đó, định hướng cho các nghiên cứu liên quan tiếp theo cũng được đề xuất.

Từ khóa: *Học tập kết hợp, hoạt động học tập, học theo dự án, PBBL, kỹ năng mềm.*

1. Introduction

The project-based (PB) method not only enriches the classroom operation in general, but it also generates a medium-to-large positive impact on learners' academic performance and achievement compared with those from traditional instructional methods (Chen & Yang, 2019; Huang et al., 2023). The positive academic impact is mostly accounted by the fact that this method appears to enhance learners' learning engagement and generic competencies, including social skills, self-regulation, and critical thinking (Avshenniuk et al., 2023; Boudersa & Hamada, 2015; Shutaleva et al., 2020). Few would deny that all of these learning benefits generated via the PB method are essential for learners' personal and professional development in the 21st century, where digitalization increasingly impacts virtually all domains and corners of human life worldwide (Avsheniuk et al., 2023; Fleacă et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024).

Digitalization implemented in education via blended learning (BL) has been promoted by the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam (MOET, 2022). Accordingly, the quest for exploring the inherent benefits of the PB method used in BL is essential, especially among in-service postgraduate students. This model (i.e., PB used in BL or PBBL model) appears to match the learning conditions of in-service postgraduate students because they mostly keep on working while taking the training program at the same time. Few studies have been conducted on the PBBL model applied to TESOL postgraduate students, especially in the current Vietnamese context. Thus, the present study aims to fill this gap. To this end, one primary research question has been posed: *How do postgraduate students assess the impact of the PBBL model applied in the TESOL course at Dong Thap University*?

2. Theoretical overview

2.1. Project-based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is presented via groups/teams of learners working together to solve a practical problem or to complete an assigned project (Fried-Booth, 1986; Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2016). PBL provides significant advantages to learning. First, it employs the learner-centered approach and cultivates learner autonomy because learners have to work on their own with minimal teacher involvement (Chen & Yang, 2019; Crespí et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023). PBL naturally requires learners to self-examine the target project and proceed to take action to meet the set goals. Thus, learners have to take more responsibility and proactively engage themselves in the learning process, which is deemed to increase learning engagement and academic performance (Avshenniuk et al., 2023; Jaleniauskiene & Venckiene, 2025). Secondly, PBL likely enhances soft skills, including collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Stoller, 2006; Thomas, 2000). This makes sense because, upon the teacher's guidance, it requires group members to work collaboratively, debate, negotiate, and take the shared work as planned to fulfill the target project. Thirdly, PBL can create opportunities for learners to learn from one another. It provides learners an equal chance to work together, express themselves, and interactively learn from other group members in some ways during the project operation (Do & Le, 2019).

The above-mentioned advantages of PBL to learning have made this method accepted as a transformative educational approach, especially in language and higher education contexts (Huang et al., 2023; Margolies et al., 2014; Nunn et al., 2016; Stoller & Myers, 2019). Petersen and Nassaji (2016) showed that adult language learners experienced increased autonomy, motivation, and communicative competence in PBL environments. Nunn et al. (2016) also emphasized the reciprocal relationship between project tasks and learner motivation, emotional regulation, engagement, and learning activities.

In the same line, a recent review study by Jaleniauskiene and Venckiene (2025) on PBL-based language education worldwide concluded that PBL has robust gains in higher education; the positive results, however, depend largely on specific contexts and characteristics of projects (e.g., durations of projects and the amount of language practice). All these reviewed studies involved only undergraduate students (ibid). The postgraduate level related to PBL in language education was absent. This notion appears to call for research to provide more insights into the advantages and limitations of PBL implemented at the postgraduate level. Thus, it also adds justification to the present study, where PBL used in BL (PBBL model) is applied to in-service postgraduate students in the Vietnamese current context.

2.2. Blended learning

Blended learning integrates traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning to create a flexible and effective educational approach (Graham, 2013). It is commonly understood as the coordinated use of direct and online teaching methods and technologies towards improving learning outcomes and fostering personalized learning opportunities (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007; Jeffrey et al., 2014). It should be noted that BL does not adhere to a fixed form; rather, its design and implementation vary across instructors, programs, and institutions. In this regard, Hannon and Macken (2014) propose three primary BL models: (1) *Blended presentation-interaction model:* This model emphasizes active participation in face-to-face classes supplemented by online assignments completed outside class time; (2) *Blended block model:* Learning activities are organized into sequential blocks combining face-to-face and online instruction; (3) *Fully online model considered blended:* includes both synchronous activities (e.g., live webinars) and asynchronous activities (e.g., discussion forums) within a fully online course structure.

For language learners, BL aims to: (i) Develop students' comprehensive language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) through strategically combining face-to-face and online instruction supported by digital tools and platforms (Graham, 2013); (ii) Enhance effective communication skills in real-world contexts, enabling learners to apply English knowledge in both everyday and academic interactions (Richards, 2006); (iii) Promote autonomous learning skills, including self-management of learning progress and proactive use of online resources for personal development (Little & Brammerts, 1996; Wang, 2021); (iv) Provide opportunities for teachers to innovate pedagogical practices by integrating traditional methods with digital technology, thereby increasing instructional effectiveness, interaction, and personalized learner support (Horn & Staker, 2014); and (v) Establish a flexible and interactive learning environment that fosters motivation, active participation, and constructive collaboration between teachers and learners in English classrooms (Gouëdard & Viennet, 2020). However, since it involves the online operation, BL has a number of disadvantages (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Smartcourses, 2023; Xavier & Meneses, 2022). These include a lack of technological access and infrastructure (especially in rural areas), limited social interaction and engagement (between teachers and learners, and among learners), potential for student isolation and distraction, and increased reliance on technology. Thus, taking into decent attention these disadvantages may achieve the optimal benefits of BL.

In sum, like PBL, BL generally appears to have multiple advantages for language learning. Both mostly have in common the learning advantages of promoting language communicative practices, learning engagement, real-life orientation, authentic practice, and soft skills (including collaboration, flexibility, problem-solving, critical thinking, and task management). Thus, it makes sense for the present study to use PBL in a BL context, where digitalization in education is generally accessible and promoted across the country (MOET, 2022; Tran, 2024).

2.3. The PBBL model applied

The TESOL course for postgraduate students at Dong Thap University has applied the PBBL model. This working model is detailed as follows.

Table 1. The PBBL model's working phases

Phase	Offline (face-to-face)	Online system (online.dthu.edu.vn)
Project launched	- The instructor introduces the course-related topic, objectives, and key requirements for the target projects, strategies, and essential skills. - Groups formed, and group members' roles in specific tasks assigned. - Brainstorming initial ideas is activated, and questions/problems to be addressed.	- Students participate in project implementation discussions via Google Meet to exchange ideas and share reference materials. - Instructor provides supplementary materials (videos, readings, slides). - Individual and group work plans to be scheduled.
Research work	- Students engage in face-to-face group discussions to analyze issues and divide research tasks. - Practice data collection skills, presentation skills, and time management. - The instructor provides support and guidance when challenges arise.	- Information is searched and gathered via the Internet, digital libraries, and online resources. - Group forum discussions on materials collection and analysis to be done.
Finalizing products	- Groups conduct in-depth discussions to synthesize and analyze collected data. - Prepare project presentations including reports, posters, videos, and slides. - Instructor offers training in presentation, critique, and evaluation skills.	- Group members collaboratively revise project products using online tools (e.g., Google Docs, Slides). - Feedback is received from instructors and peer groups via online communication channels.
Showcasing products	- Students present project outcomes before the class, groups, or a panel- Facilitate discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and critiques among groups and instructors.	- Final products are submitted through the learning platform.- Participation in peer reviews and project feedback surveys.

Phase	Offline (face-to-face)	Online system (online.dthu.edu.vn)
Evaluation and Feedback	- Instructor summarizes and provides direct feedback, guiding students in reflection and improvement. - Discuss skill development throughout the project. - Plan improvements for future projects or learning.	- Students receive detailed grades and comments via the online system - Students conduct self-assessments and provide feedback on their learning process through surveys. - Continuous dialogue between instructors and students may occur, addressing further knowledge or arising issues.

Taken together, the offline component primarily emphasizes direct interaction, group discussions, skills guidance, presentations, and evaluations. Meanwhile, online activities focus on researching materials, exchanging ideas, collaborative work through digital tools, progress tracking, and receiving feedback. Ultimately, this model harnesses the strengths of both modalities to enhance flexibility, effectiveness, and the development of soft skills. Also, as seen below, since all postgraduate students attending this course are in-service teachers of TESOL, it is convenient for them to take this course while still working at their schools.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design and sampling

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Numerical surveys and qualitative interviews would provide a comprehensive understanding of lived experiences and perceptions by participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The present study adopted a purposeful sampling with an intact class of 47 postgraduate students enrolled in the 2023-2025 TESOL course at Dong Thap University. They came from different provinces in the Mekong Delta, South Vietnam. When the present study was done, the aforementioned TESOL course was nearly completed. The following table displays the background characteristics of 47 participants. Accordingly, the participants shared the TESOL course and teaching career, but they were varied in terms of ages, genders, working places, and teaching experiences.

Table 2. Participants' background characteristics

	Number	Percentage
Ages	Under 30: 10	21.3
	30 – 40: 23	48.9
	Over 40: 14	29.8
Gender	Male: 13	27.7
	Female: 34	72.3
Working places	Primary school: 8	17.0
	Lower secondary school: 5	10.6
	High school: 26	55.3
	College: 8	17.0
Teaching experience	Under 10 years: 16	34
	More than 10 years: 31	66

3.2. Data collection and analysis

3.2.1. Structured questionnaire

Since the present study applied a mixed methods approach, a structured questionnaire was used to gain quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative data from the questionnaire would provide the initial patterns of the participants' assessment (i.e., their perceptions) on the impact of the PBBL model. Based on the existing literature (as addressed earlier) on PBL and BL, the present researchers developed a 5-point scale questionnaire themselves. It comprised 23 items to measure two key dimensions of learning engagement promotion and development of soft skills (i.e., collaboration, flexibility, problem-solving, and task management). The questionnaire was reviewed by a TESOL expert for its content validity. Approval for administering this questionnaire was granted by the Foreign Languages Faculty Board, Dong Thap University.

Then, the questionnaire was delivered to each of the 47 postgraduate students via private emails. One week later, all of them returned their completed questionnaires. After that, the questionnaire responses were entered into IBM SPSS Version 26 for descriptive statistical analysis. Measures such as means (M), standard deviations (SD), and frequency distributions were calculated to summarize overall responses and identify key patterns (Cronk, 2018).

3.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

In addition to the above-mentioned questionnaire for quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data for the present study (using a mixed-methods approach as addressed earlier) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These interviews aimed to explore in greater detail participants' experiences, attitudes, and perceived impact of the PBBL model on their learning activities and soft skills facilitating professional development. The interview was conducted online one by one between the interviewer and interviewee, depending on each interviewee's convenience.

A written invitation was posted on this TESOL class website, saying that the researchers needed ten participants to take part in the interview. The purpose, format, and contents of the interview were also announced. Since it was optional, only eight (two males and six females) of them volunteered to join the interview.

Two broad, open-ended questions were asked to collect qualitative data: *(1) What would you say about the practices of soft skills over this PBBL-based TESOL course? (2) How has the PBBL model impacted your learning activities and career development?* Upon the interviewee's consent, data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded thematically. This coding process enabled the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and insights related to participants' experiences from the PBBL model, as well as its perceived effects on their learning process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The coding went through five key steps (Miles et al., 2020): (i) *Initial coding*: Breaking down the data into small parts and giving each segment a label that summarizes its meaning. It aims to identify as many ideas as possible by staying open to what the data reveals. (ii) *Axial coding*: Finding relationships between the obtained codes, grouping them into categories or subcategories. (iii) *Thematic coding*: Identifying a core category or main theme and relating all other categories to it, forming a cohesive narrative or conceptual framework. (iv) *Memo writing*: Writing reflective notes about emerging ideas, coding decisions, and links between concepts. (v) *Theoretical saturation*: Seeing the point where gathering more data no longer provides new insights or themes.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Quantitative results

4.1.1. Learning engagement promotion

Table 3 presents TESOL postgraduate students' assessments of the PBBL-based course at Dong Thap University across four aspects: interest in learning, proactive engagement, knowledge application, and perceived benefits of the PBBL model. With robust internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.962) across 10 items, the questionnaire results appear to demonstrate the nuanced and multifaceted impacts of this model.

Table 3. Postgraduate students' assessment of the PBBL-based course

Aspects	M	SD
(1) Learning Interest promoted by the PBBL model		
Item1. I feel enthusiastic when I engage with the PBBL model	4.09	.855
Item2. I enjoy learning activities based on this model	4.17	.842
Item3. I feel excited to discover new concepts about this model	4.13	.875
Item4. I enjoy interacting with the learning materials	3.94	.942
Average (1)	**4.08**	**.777**
(2) Proactive Engagement promoted by the PBBL model		
Item5. I actively participate in class discussions or group activities	3.98	.944
Item6. I regularly review and summarize my learning	3.79	.954
Average (2)	**3.88**	**.874**
(3) Knowledge Application promoted by the PBBL model		
Item7. I reflect on how new information relates to what I already know.	3.96	.884
Item8. I try to apply what I've learned to real-world situations.	4.09	.830
Average (3)	**4.02**	**.813**
(4) Perceived Benefits of the PBBL model		
Item9. I see how this model helps me achieve my future goals.	4.19	.900
Item10. I feel this model is meaningful and useful for my personal growth.	4.17	.892
Average (4)	**4.18**	**.869**

As seen above, (1) Learning Interest received a notably high average mean score of 4.08 out of 5.0 (SD=0.77), indicating that participants generally experienced strong enthusiasm and enjoyment in engaging with the materials and activities based on the PBBL model. Among the items in this aspect, "*I enjoy learning activities based on this model"* was rated highest at M=4.17, and "*I enjoy interacting with the learning materials*" was the lowest with M=3.94, but still at a high level. The (2) aspect gained M=3.88, suggesting that postgraduate students frequently participated in class discussions or group activities (M=3.98), and regularly reviewed and summarized their learning (M=3.79). This reflects a generally proactive stance toward academic engagement, though participation in collaborative activities was slightly more prominent than in an independent review.

Aspect (3) with M=4.02 displays participants' high level of relating new information to existing knowledge (M=3.96), and applying learned concepts to real-world situations (M=4.09). This suggests the PBBL model effectively fosters both critical reflection and practical knowledge application. The highest ratings were observed in aspect (4), M=4.18. Participants strongly agreed that the applied model helped them achieve future goals (Item 9,

M=4.19) and that the contents were meaningful and contributed to their personal growth (Item 10, M=4.17).

4.1.2. Soft skills development

Soft skills development via the PBBL model applied in the TESOL course was rigorously evaluated by postgraduate students, as detailed in Table 4. This 5-point scale demonstrated a sufficient level reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of .978, underscoring the consistency of the responses. For all 5 five aspects, participants rated at high levels of perceived improvement, scoring from 3.94 to 4.17 points out of 5.

Table 4. Soft skills development

Aspects	***This PBBL model helps me know how to…***	**M**	**SD**
(1) Collaboration	Cooperate well when working on group projects.	4.23	.840
	Support and encourage teammates to achieve shared goals.	4.17	.963
	Seek feedback from colleagues to improve my contributions.	4.11	.914
	Average (1)	**4.17**	**.848**
(2) Flexibility	Adapt quickly to changes in priorities or plans	4.06	.870
	Stay calm and focused when facing unexpected challenges	4.06	.870
	Average (2)	**4.06**	**.832**
(3) Problem-Solving	Analyze situations thoroughly before making decisions.	3.98	.944
	Propose creative solutions to overcome obstacles.	3.83	.816
	Take initiative to improve processes or tackle new tasks.	3.98	.847
	Feel comfortable leading a team or project when needed.	3.98	.897
	Average (3)	**3.94**	**.768**
(4) Task Management	Prioritize tasks effectively to meet deadlines.	4.06	.919
	Maintain an organized workflow that enhances my productivity.	4.04	.908
	Break large projects into smaller, manageable steps and set deadlines for each.	4.06	.942
	Regularly monitor how I spend my time and adjust accordingly.	4.09	.929
	Average (4)	**4.06**	**.860**

Table 4 shows that (1) collaboration emerged as the most strongly developed skillset, with M=4.17 (SD=0.85). Respondents rated their positive cooperation in group projects particularly highly (M=4.23), followed by their capacity to support and encourage teammates for shared goals (M=4.17). Seeking feedback from colleagues to enhance their contributions was also at a high level (M=4.11). These findings highlight the efficacy of the PBBL model in fostering cooperative behaviors and peer interaction.

For Flexibility (M=4.06), respondents reported their confidence in adapting quickly to changes in priorities or plans and maintaining learning engagement when confronted with unexpected challenges. Thus, the PBBL model appears to cultivate adaptiveness and persistence. Likewise, in aspect (3), respondents indicated that they analyzed situations thoroughly before making decisions (M=3.98), took initiative in improving processes or addressing new tasks (M=3.98), and felt comfortable assuming leadership roles when necessary (M=3.98). Regarding aspect (4), the findings were favorable, with an average mean

of 4.06. Respondents demonstrated strength in prioritizing tasks to meet deadlines, maintaining an organized workflow to enhance productivity, breaking down large projects into manageable components, and regularly monitoring and adjusting their schedules. This reflects the impact of the PBBL model in promoting essential organizational skills.

These results both reinforce and expand the existing literature on benefits gained via implementing the PBBL model within the current Vietnamese education context in general and the TESOL postgraduate course in particular. Echoing prior pertinent reports (Beckett & Pae, 2024; Jaleniauskiene & Venckiene, 2025; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2016; Thomas, 2000; Petersen & Nassaji, 2016), the results demonstrate that this PBBL model has the potential to foster active engagement in learning activities, cultivate essential soft skills (including collaboration, flexibility, problem-solving, and task-management), and elevate authentic academic practices. The present study also highlights participants' proactive use of digital tools and strategic planning, underscoring the adaptive potential of this model when bolstered by appropriate technological and institutional support (Horn & Staker, 2014; Gouëdard & Viennet, 2020).

Collectively, the above-presented results underscore the substantial contribution of the PBBL model to promoting learning engagement and soft skills enhancement among in-service postgraduate students. This model applied in the TESOL course appears to mostly match their interests and needs for critical competencies towards academic achievement, professionalism, and personal growth.

4.2. Qualitative results

As mentioned above, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight postgraduate students among 47 enrolled in the TESOL course. This qualitative data was analyzed for key themes related to the participants' lived experiences over this course applying the PBBL model. The prominent themes emerging from the interviews include: (1) Soft Skills Development, (2) Career Relevance, and (3) Challenges. Overall, the responses indicate a strong appreciation for the PBBL approach, highlighting its positive influence on both their academic and professional development, despite the existence of certain challenges related to group coordination, coursework overload, and technical issues.

4.2.1. Soft skills development

On soft skills, three subthemes were identified from the data analysis. These are (i) collaboration skills, (ii) flexibility in problem-solving, and (iii) creativity. All eight participants indicated that the PBBL model more or less promoted these three subthemes of soft skills.

Participant-3 noted: *"Online activities enabled me to exchange documents, discuss on digital platforms, and practice clear, coherent communication. Meanwhile, face-to-face sessions provided opportunities to develop interpersonal skills, presentation abilities, and effective classroom management."* Participant-8 reported: *"Evaluating teaching models and discussing with colleagues enabled me to view problems from multiple perspectives and collaborate more effectively. I was especially impressed by the reflective activities after each project."*

Besides, participant-7 emphasized: *"The most notable development was creativity and perseverance. Designing, implementing, and presenting projects in a blended environment drove me to constant innovations. When plans didn't work out, I learned how to flexibly adjust, overcome obstacles, and adapt as vital lessons for a long-term teaching career."*

Furthermore, participant-1 expressed: *It helped learners cultivate flexibility in problem-solving, collaborative teamwork, and academic presentation abilities. Integrating online and*

face-to-face learning increased learner autonomy and personalized the learning experience, thereby enhancing knowledge acquisition and application.

Apart from the skills in collaboration, flexibility in problem-solving, and creativity, participant-2 and 3 shared that the PBBL model also trained them the essential skill in teamwork of actively listening to others' views: "*When working on the team project via the PBBL model, I have learned how to actively listen and engage with others' ideas and views because this helped me look at the concerned issues more comprehensively. Thereby, I can figure out the best solutions to the problems*" (Participant-2).

4.2.2. Career relevance

Career relevance encompasses five subthemes: (i) professional orientation, (ii) public presentation, (iii) classroom management, (iv) research skills, and (v) digital literacy. The following are typical ones from the interview data.

Participant-2 stated: "*Engaging in the projects has boosted my confidence, professionalism in teaching, and classroom management skills, making me feel genuinely prepared for my career".* Meanwhile, participant-3 asserted: *"Learning in a blended environment helped me improve my self-research skills, work independently, and better manage my tasks to meet the deadlines.".*

Also, participant-7 expressed: "*Thanks to the PBBL model, I became familiar with online teamwork, public presentations, and effective organization and task management. I also improved my time management skills; when I couldn't attend face-to-face sessions, online classes offered an optimal alternative. These skills are invaluable for my future teaching career*". (Participant 4)

The development of digital literacy via the PBBL is directly relevant to professional requirements as shared by participant-1: "*In a blended online lesson design project, I applied teaching theories by creating lesson plans incorporating videos, interactive exercises, and group discussions. This process deepened my understanding of digital learning material design and strengthened my ability to effectively guide students in online learning as a critical skill in modern teaching".*

4.2.3. Challenges

Apart from the benefits gained by the PBBL model, participants reported three key subthemes of challenges: (i) difficulties in group work coordination, (ii) coursework overload due to different assigned projects to complete, and (iii) technical issues in digital manipulation.

The fact that they were all in-service postgraduate students from different working locations made synchronous schedules among group members inevitably challenging at times. As participant-2 said, *"During the projects in the blended learning environment, my main difficulty was coordinating group activities online due to time differences and conflicting personal schedules".* The nature of taking the TESOL course while still working also made it hard work for these postgraduate students. Participant-2 added that "*Additionally, the large volume of research contents imposed pressure on time management to complete the project by project."*

Likewise, participant-4 shared that *"I struggled to allocate time between working and group work assignment via synchronous online and offline schedules".* Participant-5 acknowledged: *The greatest challenge for me was balancing my teaching duties with the demanding workload of this PBBL-based TESOL course when I had to complete my shared group work in different assigned projects."*

On technical issues, participant-1 said, "*I really felt frustrated when internet connectivity or technical support was stalled, especially when I had to fulfill my roles assigned by two different projects concurrently".* Similarly, participant-8 noted, "*I also faced challenges coordinating online group work, including occasional network issues and technical difficulties."* Participant-6 commented: *"The biggest barrier was the lack of technological resources; sometimes the internet connection was weak or devices were unavailable."*

In sum, the qualitative findings align with the above quantitative findings in terms of promoting learning activities, soft skills development, and career enhancement. However, the qualitative data also reveal challenges in group coordination, coursework overload, and technical issues during online collaboration. This is partly because, as given earlier, these in-service postgraduate students work in different locations in the Mekong Delta. Thus, it is inevitable that their working schedules clash. Previous studies on PB and BL with online involvement have reported problems of student interaction, engagement, and technical issues (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Smartcourses, 2023; Xavier & Meneses, 2022), especially in rural areas. The present study applied the PBBL model during the TESOL course and has, however, identified added challenges to the students involved, including online group coordination and coursework overload due to different projects to be completed while still working in different locations. Taking into sufficient consideration these challenges is vital when applying the PBBL model to obtain optimal advantages in specific learning contexts.

5. Conclusion and implications

Based on the results detailed above, the present study shows that the PBBL model applied to the TESOL course for in-service postgraduate students appears to be productive. It has provided multiple advantages to learning and academic performance. From the involved students' assessment, it has promoted them to actively engage with learning activities and develop soft skills for career practices, including collaborative work, flexibility in problem-solving, creativity, and digital literacy. Inherent challenges, on the other hand, are pointed out as well.

Given Vietnam's ongoing educational reforms and rapid digital transformation, the findings from the present study suggest that maximizing the PBBL potential will, first of all, necessitate sustained institutional support, especially digital literacy. This would include enhancing digital facilities and practices for both instructors and students so that they could manipulate the digital system comfortably and effectively. Secondly, the contents of projects should be authentically designed to align with the involved students' academic and professional trajectories, thereby enhancing motivation, learning engagement, and robust skills development. Thirdly, the number of projects for students to complete over the entire TESOL course should be appropriately scheduled so that it can mitigate the coursework overload.

The present study has reached its targets by providing the concrete impact of the PBBL model derived from the assessment of the involved postgraduate students. However, on the downside, its shortcomings lie in the non-random sampling and small sample size (only 47 participants). As a consequence, the result generalization is limited. This also indicates the need for further research to address these limitations. Pointers for future studies (when it comes to using the PB method in BL format in the TESOL course for in-service postgradute students in particular) include (1) identifying the optimal number of projects over the entire TESOL course lasing approximately one and a half years or so; (2) investigating specific contents of the projects conducive to learning activities and academic success, (3) suitable intervals between assigned projects over the entire course, and (4) types of experimental research should be included (e.g., with pretest and posttest formats) to showcase concrete academic

achievement resulting from the PBBL model applied. Pertinent findings obtained from future research in Vietnam and other countries would provide more significant insights into the concerned issues.

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