

# Perceptions and Practices of EFL Teachers and Students towards Project-Based Learning at an Ethnic Minority Boarding High School in Vietnam

<sup>1</sup>Ngo Duc Hoai Nam, <sup>2</sup>Le Thi Giao Chi

<sup>1</sup>Dam San Ethnic Minority Boarding High School, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup>Doctor of Philosophy, The University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies, Vietnam.

## Abstract

This study examines how EFL teachers and students at Dam San Ethnic Minority Boarding High School in Dak Lak Province (DS-EMBHS) perceive the benefits and practices of Project-based learning (PBL) activities. It seeks to identify common challenges encountered by the teachers and students and then suggests solutions to improving PBL effectiveness at DS-EMBHS. The study involves a sample of one hundred and five (105) eleventh-graders taking part in the survey questionnaires and ten students engaging in follow-up semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that PBL is an effective method of English teaching and learning, with most students in the social sciences thinking more positively towards PBL rather than those in the natural sciences. Besides, the native ethnic minority or Ede people had a more positive attitude towards PBL than other ethnic counterparts. The biggest challenges indicated by the participants were related to limited access to reliable resources for project work. The study also illustrated certain challenges encountered by EFL teachers when implementing PBL. These include curriculum-related issues like insufficient detailed guidance and unclear assessment criteria for PBL implementation as specified in the textbook, as well as those pertaining to students' mixed abilities, differences in interests, and learning styles. Several problems were also identified to be tied to teacher practices, including adaptation of project activities, inability to provide needed support for students, and difficulty in managing large-sized classes for conducting project-based activities.

**Keywords:** students' perceptions; practices; challenges; benefits; boarding high school.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In this modern world, English has become a global language in many aspects of business, science, aviation, and international trade, and also in educational settings where an emphasis has been recognized on the language proficiency of students who are expected to understand the medium of instruction (Rao, 2019). Effective teaching methods can help learners acquire the necessary language and communication skills. However, to apply classroom knowledge to the real world, students are expected to familiarize themselves with Project-Based Learning (PBL), an innovative way of teaching and a student-oriented, teacher-assisted way of learning that develops independent thinkers and learners (Bell, 2010). The PBL involves active engagement of students and places students in realistic, problem-solving environments that serve to make connections between the classroom and real-life experiences (Le & Nguyen, 2021). The approach was deemed to result in improvement in students' speaking skill, especially with aspects like students' fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and comprehension (Riswandi, 2018).

In the Vietnamese context, Project-based learning (PBL) had a positive impact on student learning experiences in general and cooperative learning in particular (Tran & Tran, 2020; Mai & Nguyen, 2022). However, there are certain problems connected with PBL implementation, ranging from the nature of the curriculum itself, student-related matters as well as challenges faced by teachers in conducting project activities (Ho and Nguyen, 2022). Although PBL has been a method of choice in many schools, it is a fact that not all schools implement PBL in their delivery of instructional content, given that project tasks are designed in each unit of the nationwide textbooks. Put another way, not all teachers successfully apply PBL to their teaching. Furthermore, there is currently a lack of research on the implementation of PBL in minority schools, especially in Dak Lak Province, Vietnam. This study will address this gap by conducting a comprehensive study of Dam San Ethnic Minority Boarding High School (DS-EMBHS), providing valuable insights into the challenges, benefits, and best practices of implementing PBL in this specific context.

The study is thus entitled *"Perceptions and Practices of EFL Teachers and Students towards Project-based Learning at an Ethnic Minority Boarding High School in Vietnam,"* and it aims to seek answers to the following questions:

1. What are EFL teachers' and students' perceptions towards PBL at DS-EMBHS?
2. What are EFL teachers' and students' perceptions towards the practices of PBL at DS-EMBHS?
3. What are the main challenges faced by teachers and students in implementing PBL at DS-EMBHS?

The study is thus hoped to pave the way for EFL teachers to work out the practical solutions to enacting project-based work, especially in terms of creating a dynamic learning environment in which students' skills and qualities can be fully developed to meet the requirements of the 2018 General Education Programme in Vietnam.

## II. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

### Reviewing Prior Studies

Research articles and academic papers authored by scholars worldwide, as well as within Vietnam, have extensively examined PBL as an approach to teaching and learning. Indeed, researchers from various linguistic backgrounds have long been intrigued by this field of study, dating back from Wrigley's work in 1998, which explores the promise of PBL with new ways for teachers and students to work together through a model of teaching. Subsequent studies like Hadim (2002) reveal how the engineering curriculum can be enhanced through PBL with a freshman-level course on the mechanics of solids and a junior-level course on mechanisms and machine dynamics. Certain studies in the field of education have examined the application, practices, and challenges related to PBL activities (e.g., Helle et al., 2006; Riswandi, 2018; Aldabbus, 2018; Fatmawati et al., 2023; Gao & Yang, 2023). For example, Helle et al. (2006) explore the pedagogical or psychological motives behind PBL implementation and its impact on learning in post-secondary education. Riswandi (2018) investigates how PBL could be used to enhance students' speaking abilities. Likewise, Fatmawati et al. (2023) investigate the implementation of PBL in the delivery of a writing course, and Islam et al. (2022) attempt to look at the effectiveness of PBL on skills courses at the tertiary level. While these contributions have been important in understanding PBL implementation at all levels of education, they have overwhelmingly centered on students in general education rather than on those of a more disadvantaged group like those of an ethnic minority boarding school.

In the context of Vietnam, insufficient research on PBL has been recorded in the context of a boarding high school, given a number of studies being conducted in the area of PBL. Ho and Nguyen (2022) explore the reality of applying PBL in the context of lower and upper secondary schools in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Tran and Tran (2020) look at EFL high school students' attitudes toward PBL with the new English textbooks at Bui Thi Xuan High School in Vietnam. Ngo (2014) explores the implementation of project work in the teaching of intercultural communication in English at Vietnam National University - Hanoi. Besides, Nguyen (2022) conducts research to review project-based teaching that has been used in the education system of Vietnam.

In general terms, both international and domestic scientific research has predominantly focused on PBL for general EFL learners, yet there exists a notable gap in whether PBL can be a reality in minority boarding high schools, especially in Dak Lak Province, Vietnam. This study will address this gap by examining how EFL teachers and learners at Dam San Ethnic Minority Boarding High School (DS-EMBHS) perceive project-based activities as implemented, thus providing valuable insights into the challenges, benefits, and best practices experienced by EFL teachers and students upon implementing PBL in this specific context.

### Revisiting Key Concepts

#### *Project-Based Learning (PBL)*

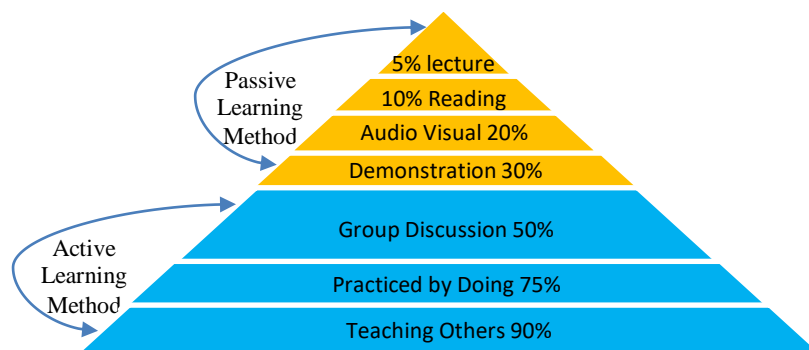
Project-Based Learning, or PBL, according to Bell (2010), is an approach to education that empowers students to actively engage in their learning process through practical and collaborative projects rather than traditional instructional methods. For Railsback (2002), PBL involves students in investigating and responding to complex, authentic questions, problems, or challenges. As far as the benefits of PBL are concerned, Beckett (2002) posits that PBL aims to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication. In the same vein, as pointed out by Sudadi (2019), PBL is an instructional approach built upon authentic learning activities that engage student interest and motivation.

According to Markula and Aksela (2022), there are some key characteristics of Project-based Learning. These include (i) Authenticity, (ii) Inquiry-based, (iii) Collaboration, (iv) Guided by Facilitators, (v) Reflection, (vi) Sustained Engagement, and (vii) Public Product. With these key elements, as mentioned, PBL can promote students' engagement, motivation, and a deeper understanding of the involved subject.

Railsback (2002) also presents some benefits of PBL. Chief amongst those are a) *Preparing children for the workplace*; b) *Increasing motivation*; c) *Connecting learning at school with reality*; d) *Providing collaborative opportunities to construct knowledge*; e) *Increasing social and communication skills*; f) *Increasing problem-solving skills*; g) *Enabling students to make and see connections between disciplines*; h) *Providing opportunities to contribute to their school or community*; i) *Increasing self-esteem*. Moreover, Sudadi (2019) introduced six steps of teaching PBL: (i) *Identify a project idea*; (ii) *Define a plan*; (iii) *Determine the timeframe*; (iv) *Monitor the projects*; (v) *Assess the outcome*; (vi) *Reflect on the experience*. To realize the benefits that PBL can generate for students, it is necessary to revisit the classical concepts of the *Collaboration Pyramid* (Berg, 2015) and *Edger Dale's Cone of Experience* (1946).

#### **The Collaboration Pyramid**

According to Berg (2015), the Collaboration Pyramid (**Figure 1**) refers to a model that is intended to show what areas need to be addressed for a team that wishes to become collaborative. The model consists of eight layers that are divided into three larger layers: community building, cooperation, and collaboration. Activities specifically associated with team collaboration are listed in the top three layers. The bottom five layers are less visible to the outside observer and have more social characteristics of collaboration. This pyramid can help illuminate how PBL can take advantage of collaboration for students to work towards project-based outputs.

**Figure 1.** *The Collaboration Pyramid model (Berg 2015)*

### ***Edger Dale's Cone of Experience***

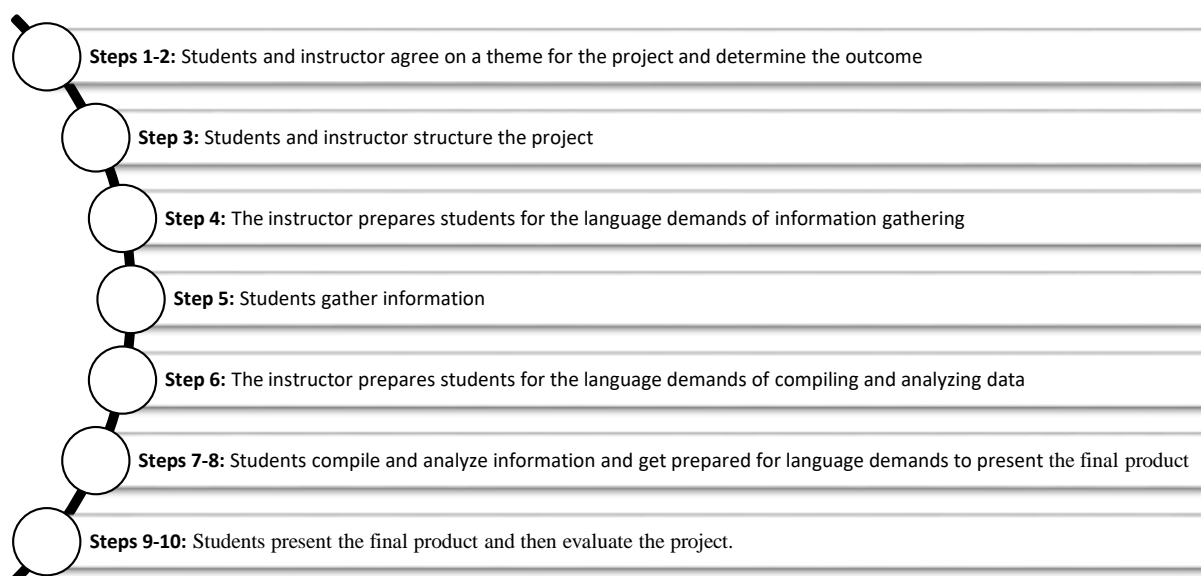
In the Cone of Experience framework coined by Dale (1946), the base of the cone is characterized by more concrete experiences, such as real-life experiences (real-life experiences), contrived experiences (interactive models), and dramatic participation (role plays). Direct, purposeful experiences represent reality or the closest things to real, everyday life. The common theme among these levels is learners are “doing.” The middle of the cone is slightly more abstract and is characterized by learners realistically “observing” the experience. These levels are differentiated from the lower levels of the cone because students do not interact directly with the phenomenon. Levels in this section of the cone include demonstrations, field trips, exhibits, motion pictures, and audio recordings or still pictures. The peak of the cone is the most abstract, where the experiences are represented non-realistically by symbols, either visual or verbal, i.e., listening to the spoken word. The cone charts the average information retention rate for various methods of teaching. To this point, the review of Gold Standard PBL is presented.

### ***Gold Standard PBL***

According to Larmer et al. (2015), many traditional practices remain but are reframed in the context of a project. The typical practices adhered with the process of implementing a project can be illustrated with *Design and Plan* whereby teachers create or adapt a project for their context and students and plan its implementation from launch to culmination while allowing for some degree of student voice and choice, and *Align to Standards*, in which teachers use standards to plan the project and make sure it addresses key knowledge and understanding from subject areas to be included: (i) building the culture; (ii) managing activities; (iii) scaffolding student learning; (iv) assessing student learning; and (v) engaging and coaching.

### ***Steps and Procedures in Implementing PBL***

Papandreou (1994) introduced six steps of a project-based model, starting with Preparation and then continuing with Planning, Research, Conclusions, and Presentation, and ending with Evaluation, whereby the teacher gives comments on the students' effortful outputs. These steps can be adapted further by Dewi (2020) to become the procedures that assist in designing an observation checklist as the instrument for a research study. The steps can be summarised as seen in **Figure 2**.

**Figure 2.** *Observation checklist for PBL implementation (Adapted from Dewi, 2020)*

It is important to see that similar steps can occur concurrently, and among steps and procedures in implementing PBL, evaluation is one of the most important steps to take into consideration. That is to say, the criteria for assessing students' speaking are vital to ensure reliability and fairness in assessing student's performance.

### ***Teachers' Perceptions***

Generally, research on teachers' perceptions of PBL has been conducted by Baki and Butuner (2009), for example, stressing that educators lack sufficient knowledge of PBL and are unwilling to provide the students with sufficient guidance during the PBL implementation process. In a similar vein, Guven (2013), as cited in Baysura et al. 2015), highlights that despite having the opportunities to work on projects during their undergraduate studies, the teachers in their research study lack the necessary teaching expertise to assist students with project setup or oversee the PBL process that follows. Therefore, in order for teachers to assist their

students in completing projects in the future, the teacher must guide their students towards properly designing their project work and overseeing a project of their own. In what follows, the research methodology is presented.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### Research Design and Research Methods

This study used a mixed-methods approach with a descriptive design. A questionnaire and in-depth interviews were used to gather quantitative and qualitative data to answer the study questions listed above. More specifically, the 5-point Likert scale was employed in the questionnaire's design, and it was intended to gather quantitative data by using SPSS 22 software. Five observations were conducted to observe the actual PBL activities organized by the teachers and students. Subsequently, a semi-structured interview was utilized to obtain a more profound understanding of how PBL has been implemented by the instructors in their own classrooms, as well as the difficulties they encountered. Their perspectives, remarks, and justifications for the participants' actual PBL implementation were collected through the interviews. This comprehensive approach enables the researchers to gather relevant data for the investigation.

#### Research Setting, Population, and Sampling

Dam San Ethnic Minority Boarding High School (DS-EMBHS) was established on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022, named Dam San or Đăm Săn, a hero in the epic "Song of Dam San" of Ede people in the Central Highlands. Dam San Ethnic Minority High School is located in Ea Blang commune, a type of specialized public school in the national education system, under the direct management of the Department of Education and Training in Dak Lak Province. The school was established to meet the learning needs of children of families in the province. In the 2023-2024 school year, the school enrolls 210 students, bringing the school's total number of students to 386 students and 38 officers, teachers, and staff. The school has 65% of students from local ethnic groups such as Ede, Mnong, and Giarai, 10% of Kinh people from remote and disadvantaged areas, and the rest are children of other ethnicities. In general, the majority of students come from particularly difficult economic areas with poor learning conditions and are influenced by community customs and practices, which also affect the organization of learning activities.

#### Instruments

##### *Oral Corpora*

Oral corpora of L2 performances by EFL 11<sup>th</sup> graders at DS-EMBHS following the English Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) format were gathered. These corpora comprised samples of spoken language produced by the research participants in the courses, facilitating a thorough analysis of the observation of PBL activities. According to García-Vizcaíno et al. (2006), oral corpora constitute excellent sources of real data with which to undertake inductive research into language phenomena.

##### *Questionnaires*

One hundred and five (105) EFL 11<sup>th</sup> graders at DS-EMBHS took part in the survey with 30 questions whose marking criteria are based on the 5-point Likert scale, which was used to measure students' perceptions, practices of PBL activities, and challenges faced by Students in carrying out PBL at DS-EMBHS. It consisted of a statement or a question, followed by a series of five answer statements. Respondents chose the option that best corresponds to how they feel about the statement or question.

##### *Observations*

Observations were done with five PBL classes of five different groups from five different classes to gather evidence about the perceptions and practices of PBL in their language classrooms. In this step, the PBL products were examined carefully to evaluate the quality, the materials as well as their ideas. Moreover, the way students interacted with teachers, their peers, and their attitudes towards the PBL products was observed carefully to find statistically significant differences.

##### *Interviews*

Interviews, which were in a semi-structured format, were conducted with ten students from different classes and five teachers whose consent had been confirmed. Respondents' answers were recorded to collect information for the study, and their personal information was treated with utmost confidentiality.

#### Data Collection

As already stated, the study collected data, both quantitative and qualitative. For one thing, a total of 315 samples were collected and imported to SPSS 22 for analysis. Qualitative data were gathered from observations made with the selected groups of students to delve deeper into the perceptions and practices of PBL in their language classrooms. At this stage, the way students interacted with teachers and their peers, as well as their attitudes towards PBL products, were carefully observed to pinpoint the differences. Added to this was the data collected from the group interviews with the ten invited students and five invited teachers, as stated. Ten semi-structured interviews were enacted with the sample students, and responses were recorded for the study. It is important to note that, during the interview sessions, all students' personal information was treated with the utmost confidentiality.

#### Data Analysis

With both quantitative and qualitative data being collected, the former from questionnaire surveys were analyzed using SPSS 22.0 in terms of mean and standard deviation, enabling the meaning of the mean scores for students' attitudes towards PBL to be interpreted. Specifically, the EFL students' responses to the questionnaires, the transcript of their interviews, and detailed notes from observation forms of reflective journals at English classes at DS-EMBHS were collected, recorded, and carefully transcribed as part of the study's sample. The collected data were analyzed using the framework of the 5-point Likert-type scale.

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the logical analysis approach. Indeed, the interview responses were analyzed by means of content analysis, meaning that three steps, namely (i) familiarizing and organizing, (ii) coding and recoding, and (iii) summarizing and interpreting, were employed. For easy reference and confidentiality, the groups' interviewees were coded S1 to S10 for students and T1 to T5 for the teachers. The content analysis was also employed to deal with qualitative data collected from the students' journals. Based on the research questions and each theme related to the topic, the students' interview responses and notes in journals were classified, analyzed, and coded to figure out students' and teachers'



perceptions and practices towards PBL to identify types of PBL at school and to determine students' language competences and communicative performances. The results were then reported, discussed, and presented using charts, graphs, and diagrams.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

##### *Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient*

According to Hair et al. (2009), a good scale should have Cronbach's Alpha reliability of 0.7 or higher and it should ensure one-way communication while the reliability should reach the Cronbach's Alpha limit of 0.7 or higher. However, as a preliminary exploratory study, Cronbach's Alpha limit of 0.6 is acceptable. The higher the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, the higher the reliability of the scale. These results are compatible with the research by Koo and Li (2016).

Prior to the main data analysis, the correlation coefficient was computed in SPSS to determine the reliability of questionnaire responses. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value is 0.80, greater than 0.60, which indicates that there was a high agreement or reliability between raters in scoring the questionnaire responses. (Table 1)

**Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No. of Items
0.80	0.81	30

##### *Students' perceptions towards benefits of PBL activities*

As regards students' perceptions towards how PBL activities benefit them in their study, it is evident that EFL high school students expressed positive attitudes towards PBL ( $M=3.57$ ;  $SD=.70$ ), as clearly shown in Table 2. The results of the study highlight that most EFL high school students agreed on their enhancement of reading and listening comprehension thanks to PBL activities ( $M=3.57$ ;  $SD=.705$ ). Speaking skills, especially presentation skills, were also recorded with quite good achievement ( $M=3.57$ ;  $SD=.818$ ). Writing skills were reported to improve through activities such as designing questionnaires, writing interview questions, or making a written report ( $M=3.49$ ;  $SD=.708$ ), not to mention enrichment in vocabulary repertoire thanks to exposure to various topics for projects. ( $M=3.81$ ;  $SD=.817$ ). Concerning improving useful language patterns for effective speaking and writing, the data show that students were quite spread out in their positive responses, and the same is recognized with aroused interest and creativity thanks to PBL with similar values  $M=3.40$ ;  $SD=.816$ , and  $M=3.49$ ;  $SD=.878$  respectively. Developing critical thinking, interaction, collaboration, time management, and leadership skills were recorded as consistently high, ranging around  $M=3.37$ - $3.52$  and  $SD=.71$ - $0.85$ .

**Table 2: Students' perceptions towards PBL at DS-EMBHS**

No.	Statements	N=105	
		M	SD
1.	I could improve reading and listening comprehension.	3.57	0.70
2.	PBL helps me develop my speaking skills especially presentation skill.	3.57	0.81
3.	PBL improves my writing skills through activities like designing questionnaires, writing interview questions or making a written report.	3.49	0.70
4.	PBL enables me to enrich my vocabulary repertoire through various topics for projects.	3.81	0.81
5.	PBL helps me improve useful language patterns for effective speaking and writing.	3.40	0.81
6.	PBL activities arouse my interest and creativity.	3.49	0.87
7.	I could develop critical thinking through PBL activities.	3.36	0.77
8.	Project activities allow me to interact and collaborate with peers for task completion.	3.52	0.77
9.	I could improve problem solving skills through engaging in PBL activities.	3.44	0.85
10.	PBL can enhance my time management and leadership skill.	3.37	0.81
	Overall	3.57	0.70

Note: M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation

##### *Students' Perceptions Towards PBL Practices in the Classroom*

It is clear that perceptions prompted by students are directed towards different aspects of PBL implementation. These include how instructions were given on PBL tasks, what the group size was, whether sufficient and useful resources were given, what and how PBL tasks were assigned, how much time was allotted, what kind of monitoring was available for students to progress towards their project outputs, not to mention teachers' encouragement, giving feedback and grading. These were, indeed, amongst the categories of project-based practices prescribed in the questionnaire for the participants to report on their perceptions toward PBL practices. With the five-point Likert scale, the mean scores of the ten clusters were computed in the following table (Table 3).

**Table 3: Students' perceptions towards PBL practices in the classroom**

No.	Statements	N=105	
		M	SD
1.	The teacher explains the instructions clearly for each PBL activity.	3.77	0.75
2.	The teacher puts students into groups of medium size (5-7 students) for each project.	3.91	0.78
3.	The teacher provides students with useful resources for carrying out PBL tasks.	3.70	0.84

4.	The teacher organizes PBL at the end of each unit in the coursebook.	3.56	0.73
5.	The teacher gives students sufficient time to complete PBL tasks.	3.77	0.93
6.	The teacher monitors students' progress through well-planned project schedule	3.52	0.88
7.	The teacher asks students to present the PBL products in front of the class.	3.54	0.74
8.	The teacher encourages students to present/submit podcasts or videos showing project outputs.	3.80	0.83
9.	The teacher provides feedback for students' PBL outputs.	3.64	0.77
10.	The teacher grades students' PBL products using rubrics.	3.34	0.80
	Overall	<b>3.70</b>	<b>0.80</b>

Note: M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation

Data from **Table 3** show that the overall mean is 3.70, which was quite high. This revealed that interviewees agreed with the hypothesis about students' perceptions of PBL activities and practices. It also revealed from the collected data that the students gave a positive assessment of this type of teaching and learning. As clearly seen from the table, the means for the majority of the questions from the semantic differential are between 2.6 and 3.9 on a 1 to 5 scale. The students acknowledged that the teacher explained the instructions clearly for each PBL activity (M=3.77; SD=.750). The teacher also put students into groups of medium size (5-7 students) for each project (M=3.91; SD=.785). In addition, the interviewees admitted that the teacher provided students with useful resources for carrying out PBL tasks (M=3.70; SD=.842). Comments on the instructors organizing PBL at the end of each unit in the coursebook were cited, specifically with M=3.56 and SD=.732. Sufficient time provided for completing the PBL task was quoted with M=3.77 and SD=.932. On a similar scale, elements such as the teacher monitoring students' progress through a well-planned project schedule were reported with M=3.52 and SD=.888, as well as asking students to present the PBL products in front of the class (M=3.54; SD=.747). Likewise, students also agreed that the teacher encourages students to present or submit podcasts or videos showing project outputs with recorded M=3.80 and SD=.833. In terms of assessment, feedback was timely provided for students' PBL outputs (M=3.64; SD=.771) and graded students' PBL products using rubrics (M=3.34; SD=.806). Overall, EFL teachers often conducted the suggested procedures for PBL implementation in their classes. Besides the perceptions of PBL practices, the challenges as perceived by EFL teachers and learners at the research school should not be presented.

#### Challenges when conducting PBL at DS-EMBHS

Together with the positive attitudes towards the use of PBL in their language learning, many students expressed their concern about a number of problems they encountered when conducting PBL in their learning environment. **Table 4** demonstrates the means scores as regards the problems encountered by students when engaging in PBL activities.

**Table 4: Challenges when conducting PBL at DS-EMBHS**

No.	Statements	N=105	
		M	SD
1.	I have problems with communicating in English because I have poor vocabulary and language structures.	3.75	0.96
2.	There are not enough reference books or resources at school to support our PBL initiatives.	3.19	0.89
3.	I do not have much support from teachers and parents in conducting PBL activities.	2.95	0.89
4.	I find it difficult to manage time for completing PBL tasks.	3.25	0.83
5.	I find it hard to collaborate with other groupmates.	2.90	0.97
6.	I find the PBL topics in the textbook challenging for me.	2.99	0.77
7.	I find it hard to share information with my groupmates.	2.78	0.88
8.	I do not have chances to act out or present in front of class about the group project.	2.61	0.85
9.	There is not enough space on campus to work on the group project.	3.16	0.94
10.	I find it hard to use mobile apps and other technological tools to create podcast, videos or other project outputs.	2.84	0.91
	Overall	<b>3.10</b>	<b>0.88</b>

Note: M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation

As can be seen from **Table 4**, the overall mean score is 3.10, which is high and reliable. Firstly, most students agreed that they have difficulties communicating in English because they lack vocabulary and language structures (M=3.75; SD=.968). Furthermore, for many respondents, there are not enough reference books or resources at school to support their PBL initiatives (M=3.19; SD=.899). Besides, students had a neutral agreement that they lacked support from teachers and parents in conducting PBL activities, which is also demonstrated via the data shown (M=2.95; SD=.892). In terms of managing time for completing PBL tasks, respondents gave a moderate degree of agreement that they have difficulty managing time for task completion (M=3.25; SD=.832). Additionally, it is believed that students have problems collaborating with other groupmates, which is confirmed by the mean score (M=2.90) and standard deviation (SD=.975). The fact that students find the PBL topics in the textbook rather challenging is also recorded (M=2.99; SD=.778).

Regarding information sharing, the participants neutrally agreed with the statements that they find it hard to confide information with their groupmates (M=2.78; SD=.887). They also found it not too challenging to act out or present in front of the class about their group project, as the mean score and standard deviation of this item were only 2.61 and 0.85. The fact that there is not enough space on campus to work on the group project is proven with M=3.16 and SD=.941. Furthermore, the students more or less agreed

that they find it hard to use mobile apps and other technological tools to create podcasts, videos, or other project outputs (M=2.84; SD=.917).

However, as common with the other side of the coin, students experienced certain problems regarding the facilities as well as time management and background knowledge. This can be easily seen in the mean scores of several categories, as shown. To be more specific, the mean scores of these categories are highest, ranging from having problems with communicating in English because of poor vocabulary and language structures (3.75), not having enough space on campus to work on the group project (3.1), insufficient reference books or resources at school to support our PBL initiatives (3.19), to having a myriad of difficulties to manage time for completing project-based activities (3.25).

#### ***EFL students' and teachers' perceptions towards PBL benefits***

In response to Research Question 1, "***What are the EFL teachers' and students' perceptions towards PBL at DS-EMBHS?***", both ten students and five teachers interviewed expressed agreement on the benefits of PBL (see **Table 5**). For example, PBL activities helped students develop various skills such as communication, presentation skills, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving. More importantly, the interviewees of both groups agreed that PBL gave students ample chances to express their ideas, hence fostering collaboration as well as autonomy and self-management.

However, the results of the study revealed that differences exist in viewpoints between EFL students and teachers. Most students admitted to being given not only knowledge in the textbooks but also practical knowledge in real life. Meanwhile, all teachers interviewed expressed that students took greater ownership of their learning as they were often given more autonomy in PBL activities. Moreover, most of the teachers expressed that PBL was integrated into multiple subjects, which allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in various contexts.

**Table 5: Summary of EFL Students' and Teachers' Perceptions towards PBL Benefits**

<b>Students' and teachers' perceptions toward PBL</b>	<b>Students' responses</b>	<b>Teachers' responses</b>
<i>PBL helps students develop their speaking skills especially presentation skill, communication skills, teamwork, critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills.</i>	✓	✓
<i>PBL gives students opportunities to express their ideas.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Teachers enrich them not only with knowledge in textbooks but also practical knowledge in real life.</i>	✓	-
<i>PBL enhance autonomy and self-management.</i>	✓	✓
<i>PBL helps improve learning environment.</i>	✓	✓
<i>PBL often increases student engagement and collaboration."</i>	✓	✓
<i>PBL makes learning more relevant through complex projects.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Students take greater ownership of their learning as they are often given more autonomy in PBL activities.</i>	-	✓
<i>PBL is integrated into multiple subjects and allows students to apply knowledge in various contexts.</i>	-	✓

In terms of PBL practices, it was noticeable that both teachers and students had almost the same opinions on the questions "***What are the EFL teachers' and students' practices of PBL at DS-EMBHS?***" (See **Table 6**). Both EFL students and teachers interviewed agreed that they collaboratively planned the project, divided suitable groups, and set clear goals and timelines. Furthermore, they both admitted that PBL activities provide students with opportunities to practice and apply new knowledge and skills. Additionally, both teachers and students came to the conclusion that teachers hold regular checks to monitor progress, provide feedback, and help students stay on track.

However, there were some differences in the responses provided by the teachers and the students. Most teacher respondents claimed that their students enjoyed working in groups and sharing responsibilities while collaborating to complete the project effectively. Meanwhile, all of the students stated that they learn more knowledge through projects assigned by the teacher. Many students also added that teachers also regularly conduct games combining vocabulary and grammar to create an interesting atmosphere. This finding resonates with what has been called a facilitating environment created by project-based classroom activities (Kanter & Konstantopoulos, 2010).

**Table 6: Summary Of Students' and Teachers' Perceptions towards Practices**

<b>Students' and teachers' perceptions towards PBL practices</b>	<b>Students' responses</b>	<b>Teachers' responses</b>
<i>The teacher introduces a topic and then divided the class into groups.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Students discuss the issues in the lesson and the teacher is always by their side.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Students learn more knowledge through projects assigned by the teacher.</i>	✓	-
<i>Teachers provide students with opportunities to practice and apply new knowledge and skills.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Teachers often organize different activities between classmates or groupmates.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Teachers and students collaboratively plan the project, setting clear goals and timelines.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Students often work in groups, share responsibilities and collaborate to complete the project.</i>	-	✓

<i>Students engage in research and inquiry to gather information and develop their projects.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Teachers hold regular check in to monitor progress, provide feedback, and help students stay on track.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Students present their projects to the class or a wider audience, allowing them to show their work and reflect on their learning.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Teachers also regularly conduct games combining vocabulary and grammar to create an interesting atmosphere.</i>	✓	-

Regarding the difficulties as perceived by the poll teachers and students, and in response to the question “*What are the main challenges faced by teachers and students in implementing PBL at DS-EMBHS?*”, both EFL teachers and students shared similar views on the level of difficulty attached to project-based activities. Nevertheless, they had almost completely different views on the challenges they faced upon implementing PBL.

The data, as shown in **Table 7**, revealed that both teachers and students agreed on a lack of time and materials to enable students to finish their projects. Furthermore, they all agreed that students lacked motivation to carry out their project-based assignments. They all acknowledged varying students' language proficiency, which results in varying degrees of PBL involvement. What is more, they highlighted the troublesome task of selecting and filtering information and resources due to limited resources, that is, little access to technologically-assisted tools or multi-modal materials. In addition, most teachers agreed that they may need more training or support to effectively implement PBL in their classrooms. This finding is compatible with the results suggested by Kanter and Konstantopoulos (2010) on the aspects that can cause confusion and problems to students once PBL is in place.

The data also showcase the differences in viewpoints held by the students of the sample. For example, students reported that it is challenging for their group to come to a common view on the way of doing a project. Most students added that, for the implementation of project-based activities, students required more assistance and frequent feedback from their teachers. More than that, they admitted that there are moments when they feel under a lot of pressure because they have limited time to accomplish their projects and because they are often assigned many projects from multiple subjects concurrently at the same time.

Nevertheless, as mentioned in **Table 7**, the sample teachers had some different perspectives. For example, all teachers agreed that some projects in textbooks are at poor quality in terms of content and topics. They also added that most students do not have essential skills for doing PBL products. Moreover, the respondents then admitted that assessing PBL can be complex and time-consuming, as it often requires evaluating both the process and the final product. Interestingly, they stressed the importance of having more intensive training or support to effectively implement PBL in their classrooms. Similarly, all teachers mentioned problems encountered among student groups during the presentations, public speaking, team building, and group management.

**Table 7: Summary of Students' and Teachers' Perceptions towards Difficulties**

Students' and teachers' perceptions towards difficulties	Students' responses	Teachers' responses
<i>It is difficult for our group to have common views on how to do the project.</i>	✓	✓
<i>There is a lack of time and resources to support students' understanding of the topic.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Students lack motivation to conduct the PBL.</i>	✓	✓
<i>There are differences in learning abilities among students.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Selecting and filtering information and resources can also be quite troublesome.</i>	✓	-
<i>Students need more support and regular feedback from teachers.</i>	✓	-
<i>There are times they are under a lot of pressure because we do not have enough time to finish because they learn many subjects at the same time.</i>	✓	✓
<i>There are problems of presentation, group formation and group management.</i>	✓	✓
<i>There is a lack of time for students to finish the PBL products.</i>	-	✓
<i>Teachers may need more training or support to effectively implement PBL in their classrooms.</i>	-	✓
<i>Some projects in textbooks are at poor quality in terms of content and topics.</i>	-	✓
<i>Most students do not have essential skills for doing PBL products.</i>	-	✓
<i>Assessing PBL can be complex, as they often require evaluating both the process and the final product.</i>	-	✓
<i>There are problems among student groups, problems of presentation; problems of group formation and group management.</i>	-	✓
<i>PBL evaluation can be time-consuming.</i>	-	✓

With reference to the 2018 General Education Program (GEP) implementation in terms of PBL, the data interviewed in **Table 8** can throw some light on the varying opinions and concerns from the part of EFL students and teachers towards the PBL component in the GEP. Indeed, EFL students and teachers alike agreed that PBL, as part of its curriculum, fosters skills such as critical thinking skills, collaboration, teamwork skills, communication skills, and real-world problem-solving. Also, they stressed the merits of PBL in terms of creating a positive learning environment and encouraging their involvement. In addition, they stated that PBL was



integrated into various subjects, from natural sciences to social sciences. This interesting insight well echoes what has been claimed by Almulla (2020) on the tremendous benefits that PBL can bring to students apart from mastery of lesson content.

However, there were some differences in viewpoints between the two interviewing groups. Most students that teachers provide students with opportunities to practice and apply new knowledge and skills. Also, they stated that they learned how to work together and solve difficult problems creatively. This might signify a shift in the viewpoint of the EFL teachers towards implementing PBL, which means fostering a more student-centered and interactive learning environment. Put another way, they see the merits of using PBL for enhancing students' competencies.

**Table 8: Summary of Students' and Teachers' Perceptions towards PBL within the 2018 GEP**

Students' and teachers' perceptions towards 2018 General Education Program implementation in terms of PBL	Students' responses	Teachers' responses
<i>There will be a focus on necessary skills and expanding knowledge more deeply.</i>	✓	✓
<i>PBL creates a positive learning environment and encourage students to learn.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Teachers provide students with opportunities to practice and apply new knowledge and skills.</i>	✓	-
<i>Project-Based Learning (PBL) is integrated into various subjects, from natural sciences to social sciences.</i>	✓	-
<i>The new program has helped us develop important skills such as teamwork, problem solving and communication through projects.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Students learn how to work together and solve difficult problems creatively.</i>	✓	-
<i>The implementation of PBL is a significant shift aimed at fostering a more student -centered and interactive learning environment.</i>	-	✓
<i>PBL as part of its curriculum fosters skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and real-world problem-solving.</i>	-	✓
<i>PBL are integrated across various subjects.</i>	✓	✓
<i>Teachers are encouraged to use it as a method to develop students' competencies.</i>	-	✓

### **Generalisations from the Research Findings**

The findings from the analysis of questionnaire responses and in-depth interviews with EFL students and teachers show that students have a very positive towards PBL implementation. The results from both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that there were no significant differences according to sex. However, there were differences in the assessment of the PBL in the class group to which the students belonged. In particular, it can be appreciated that the social science group had a more positive opinion of PBL activities than the students belonging to the natural science group. Moreover, native ethnic minorities or Ede people had a more positive attitude towards PBL activities than other ethnic minorities.

### **In terms of PBL benefits**

Through questionnaire responses, classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews, both teachers and students agreed that PBL activities provided students with the chance for to development of a variety of skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and presenting skills. More importantly, the findings showed that PBL offered students plenty of opportunities to express their opinions, foster greater teamwork, and develop greater independence and self-control. The study results were similar to those suggested by other researchers like Riswandi (2018), whose findings showed that there was an improvement in the students' speaking skill with aspects ranging from students' fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and comprehension, or Le and Nguyen (2021) who concluded that the PBL involves the active engagement of students and places students in realistic, problem-solving environments, connecting the classroom and real-life experiences. Furthermore, the activities of the PBL are designed to promote a deep level of understanding of the content that is meaningful to the learner and high in collaboration. In other words, PBL had a positive impact on learners' experiences in general and cooperative learning (Tran & Tran, 2020; Mai & Nguyen, 2022). It was also recorded that in addition to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills in promoting human rights, project-based learning also positively affected learners' language improvement in English.

### **In terms of PBL practices**

The findings show that it was so convenient for boarding students to gather together quickly to carry out the PBL because they lived under one roof called a boarding high school. Moreover, the fact that students knew how to use online apps to better the PBL products was proven. In addition, the data indicated that to do a project; students need to plan carefully, divide appropriate groups, establish clear objectives and deadlines, solve project-related problems, negotiate with group members to reach a common view, assign work to each group member or decide how to complete different project tasks; present the finished product to the class, and many other skills.

### **In terms of the challenges of PBL implementation**

Finding credible sources and identifying reliable information are the most concern; however, with the characteristics of a boarding high school for ethnic minorities like DS-EMBHS, it may not be a problem because boarding students who live under one roof called boarding high school, could gather together quickly to carry out the project-based tasks. In addition, students knew how to use online apps to shape and refine their PBL products, not to mention the fact that the PBL topics were related to everyday life and the real world.

Other major challenges included those related to curriculum in terms of lack of time, no specific guidance and assessment criteria for PBL implementation; challenges related to students regarding their mixed abilities, differences in interests and learning styles, and lack of necessary materials and skills for doing projects; and challenges related to teachers comprising adaptation of project

activities, lack of time for student support, and controlling large classes. These results are compatible with the findings suggested by Ho and Nguyen (2022).

## V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### CONCLUSION

This study is an attempt to showcase how PBL as an innovative approach to teaching and learning English can be implemented at a boarding high school for students of ethnic minorities in a highland province in Vietnam. The study looked at how EFL teachers and students perceived PBL in terms of its merits and practices as it is in place at the school for a group of 11<sup>th</sup> graders. The triangulation of data has been utilized, generating both quantitative and qualitative results. It is revealed that PBL is a successful method for EFL teaching and learning. The data gathered from the questionnaires, observations, and interviews demonstrate that PBL is not only viewed as appropriate and pleasurable by English language learners but also efficient for these students who are at a low proficient level of English. The findings have answered the three research questions as stated at the beginning of the research.

### IMPLICATIONS

From the findings discussed above, it is important for the study to yield some implications for improving PBL implementation at an ethnic boarding high school. Firstly, it is recommended that students arrange time for completing PBL products within competing priorities when students have to learn many subjects at the same time. In addition, as revealed from the findings of the research regarding insufficient materials provided to students for implementing PBL projects, it is suggested that due attention needs to be made from different levels of school management to increase the sources of materials in both quality and quantity for better quality products can be produced with varying students' language proficiency, and varying degrees of PBL involvement.

Moreover, the findings show that it was challenging for their group to come to a common view on the way of doing a project. Therefore, it is advisory that clear guidance, goals, and instruction from the teachers are vital to help students complete the PBL exercises. Additionally, the findings also demonstrate that PBL needs to be well structured and monitored by the teacher, who should offer feedback to students on the quality of the product put together by the group. Hence, it is suggested that teachers have detailed rubrics and clear work plans to facilitate PBL assessment as it can be complex and time-consuming, which requires evaluating both the process and the final product. This necessitates the importance of encouraging teachers to go for more training or support to effectively implement PBL in their classrooms.

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