

The European Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences EJSBS

eISSN: 2301-2218

The ISSN Cyprus Centre notifies that serial publication under the title icCSBs The Annual International Conference on Cognitive – Social, and Behavioural Sciences has been allocated ISSN 2357-1292 and has been registered with the International Centre for the Registration of Serial publications, in Paris.

The European Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences
EJSBS Volume XV (eISSN: 2301-2218)

Linking Literacies through A Creative Group Project in English Classes

Jeng-Jia Luo^{a*}

^a *Tunghai University, No.1727, Sec.4, Taiwan Boulevard, Taichung, 40704 Taiwan, R.O.C*

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/ejsbs.179>

Abstract

Linking literacies as a teaching approach has been perceived by language educators as natural and necessary (Dodson 2002; Hinkel 2006). Nevertheless, the literature has not documented much regarding how to adopt this approach in English classes, especially in EFL contexts. The present study was thus conducted to examine how EFL learners perceive a project work, which foregrounds productive skills (writing and speaking) and backgrounds receptive skills (reading and listening). In particular, the researcher intended to investigate which tasks in the skill-integration process would benefit these learners.

The study was implemented at a university in central Taiwan. Two high-level English classes, one comprised of Creative Design/Science majors and the other of Social Science majors, participated in this study. The students in each class formed groups to work on an English play project. This project required every group to complete these tasks: revisiting the news stories they had reported, adapting at least one self-selected story to compose a play outline, drafting a play based on the instructor's feedback, revising the draft according to the instructor's advice, reading the scripts to the instructor, and performing the English play in class.

At the end of the semester, the instructor conducted a survey to examine how her students perceived the above tasks and then analyzed the students' responses quantitatively and qualitatively. The results show the students in the two classes held different perceptions of news story selection and play outlines; however, the majority of them seemed to consider drafting, revision, performance and, in particular, scripts reading helpful to improve their English proficiency.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0-000-000-0000 ; fax: +0-000-000-0000 .

E-mail address: caroline.luo@gmail.com



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Keywords: Linking literacies; project work; EFL; drama.

1. Introduction

The design of the study were rooted in the notion of linking literacies, i.e., integrating multiple language skills. Warschauer (2000) advocated English teachers prepare their students for the challenges caused by the changing global economy, which required the use of diverse English skills simultaneously in the workplace. In practice, he urged English educators to explore project-based schemes to help students practice analytic problem solving and argumentation due to their authentic and practical nature. Among the schemes, he specified multi-literacies, which in his terms, consisted of two features: 1) immersion - helping students learn to critically interpret and communicate in a given social context, and 2) transformed practice - guiding students to work toward higher quality outcomes within particular contexts and applying what has been learned in new social and cultural context.

Conventionally, a fundamental English skill or macroskill was considered as a command of related subskills or microskills (Richards, 2002). Therefore, English educators tend to adopt a discrete approach to teach their students individual English skills. For example, they teach exclusively reading skills and overlook the other English skills. Nowadays, linking literacies as a teaching approach has been perceived by language education professionals as natural and necessary (Dodson 2002; Hinkel 2006). Hinkel (2006) noticed the trend of moving away from discreteness toward integration. A growing number of teachers find it hard to teach one language skill without teaching other skills at the same time. Dodson (2002) regarded this difficulty understandable because "separation of skills is not natural, for when we communicate, we are always using more than one isolated skill at a time" (p. 164).

Enlightened by the above assertions, the researcher designed the assignments in her Freshman English for Non-English Majors (FENM) curriculum, which is a required course for all incoming university students and lasts for an academic year at her university. In the first semester, she had all her university freshmen take turns presenting current news in English in class on weekly basis. Every student was required to report two pieces of news, one domestic and the other international, and concluded the presentation by raising two thought-provoking questions to his/her fellow classmates. This assignment was thus comprised of all four literacy skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. In the second semester, she designed a project assignment to meet the program-wide requirement - an English play. This assignment aimed to develop FENM students' English writing and speaking abilities and to assess these two skills in meaningful contexts. She designed the assignment around the concept of "crossing" - crossing language skills, time, places, and people. Foremost of all, this assignment integrated four language skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking. Secondly, the students were guided to connect what they had learned earlier to the project work. Besides, they were expected to work on the project in class and outside classes. Finally, they had to work in groups under the instructor's supervision. In order to achieve the crossing of multiple language skills, the researcher included six tasks in the project work: Revisiting previously reported news stories and selecting them to compose plays (reading), constructing play outlines (writing), drafting play scripts (writing), revising play scripts (writing), reading scripts to the instructor (reading) and performing the English play (speaking and listening).

As the students completed the project assignment, the researcher conducted a survey to obtain the students' opinions of all the tasks mentioned above. She distributed a piece of blank paper to every student and asked them to comment on every task. After collecting the students' responses, the researcher analyzed them quantitatively. Besides, she color-coded the students' remarks, i.e., marking similar responses in the same colour, to better understand their perceptions of those tasks.

2. Problem statement

The literature in this area has not documented much how to integrate multiple language skills in English classes. Williams (2008) pinpointed this gap, especially in speaking and writing:

...connections between L2 oral proficiency specifically and writing development have not often been made. Most research on cross-skill influence has pointed to connections within modalities, either between reading and writing (e.g., Carson, 1993; Grabe, 2003) or speaking and listening (e.g., Vandergrift, 2006). Yet it is increasingly apparent that the act of writing may also promote general proficiency in ways that have not always been acknowledged. Thus, it is now possible to consider the influence of the development of L2 speaking and writing proficiency to be bidirectional as well. (p. 11)

3. Research questions

The researcher conducted an action research study to answer the following two questions:

- 1) Which tasks in the process of a play production as a skill integration project benefit EFL learners?
- 2) Do EFL learners with diverse disciplinary backgrounds perceive the tasks differently? If so, which tasks?

4. Purpose of the study

The present study was conducted to explore how university freshmen in Taiwan perceive a project work, which foregrounds productive skills (writing and speaking) and backgrounds receptive skills (reading and listening), in a project assignment. In particular, the researcher intended to know which tasks in the skill-integration project would benefit these EFL learners in general and the students of different academic backgrounds. The research findings will provide pedagogical insights to the researcher and the other English educators, who plan to replicate this project.

5. Research method

The study was conducted in the spring semester at a central university in Taiwan. The researcher taught two high-level FENM classes, one comprised of Creative Design majors and Science majors and the other of Social Science majors. There were 25 students in each class. The classes were selected based on the principle of convenience sampling. In other words, the researcher selected as her sample those classes that she taught at her school during the academic year. In this semester, one of the program-wide required course assignments was to produce a play in English. To conform to this requirement, the instructor/researcher composed assignment guidelines, including six tasks. Table 1 below illustrates the timeline, the tasks and the language focus of every task.

Table 1 Schedule of the English Play Project

Week	Task	Literacy
5	Revisiting previously reported news stories and select them to compose plays	Reading, speaking
6	Constructing play outlines	Speaking, writing
8	Drafting play scripts	Writing
10	Revising play scripts	Reading, writing

12	Reading scripts to the instructor	Speaking, reading, writing
14	Performing the plays	Speaking, listening

On the first day of class, the instructor/researcher announced to her students that they would have to work in groups of four to six to compose and perform English plays. She explicitly stated the educational goal of this assignment was to promote and practice the creative use of English for real communication. In order to bridge students' prior knowledge and potential literacy advancement, she returned the news notes, which the students had submitted to her on their news presentation day during the previous semester, to her students and told every group to choose at least one of them as the cornerstone of their English play. Later, within each group, the students revisited the news notes and made the decision. Then all the group members collaboratively exercised their imagination to adapt the selected news story/stories and composed a play outline. The instructor read every play outline and responded with written comments, focusing on the plot. After receiving the instructor's feedback, three or four students in every group had to compose a play draft. Again, the instructor read the drafts. This time she made comments on the plot as well as the language so that the other members of each group could use her feedback to revise their play. The instructor read every revised work and corrected every linguistic mistake. Next, every group made an appointment with the instructor and read the scripts to her to assure accuracy of verbal and non-verbal performances. Every group then typed it up and made a clean copy for every group member to recite the lines. Finally, the students took turns presenting their English plays in class and their performances were assessed by the instructor/researcher.

It is worth mentioning that the inclusion of news, revision and script reading was in resonance with Sosa's (2008) pedagogical suggestions for the teachers who intend to incorporate multiple literacies in their curriculum. Her first suggestion was encouraging students to embrace difficult ideas:

Pressures from within and outside the institution make it difficult to enact change (see McVeigh, 2002), with the result that we rarely immerse ourselves or our students over time in complex ideas, designed to be shared with others, particularly in the required English class.....We want to be able to tell ourselves, future language teachers, and our students: Challenge yourself to explore difficult ideas; do not be afraid to try this; seek and nourish difficult ideas until you understand them. (p.90)

Current news, when being read on a superficial level, is simply a piece of information. However, if English educators guide their students to read their self-selected news stories closely and to make such interrogative inquires as "How did it happen?"/ "Why did it occur?"/"What impact(s) might it make on their family and on the society?" and then used these questions to create English plays, they take their students on a journey to explore multiple possibilities.

Sosa also cautioned language educators of the challenges students might encounter in the exploratory process and thus advised the teachers to collaborate with their students:

How all of us manage to do these transformations requires playing with thought and language, revising, replaying ideas in the presence of others, perhaps representing ideas graphically as well as linguistically, repeating many versions of the original idea until bits and pieces begin to find their way onto paper or screen, or into speech...We are suggesting that teachers in both ESL-EFL classes and language teacher education classes conceptualize their spoken and written explorations of difficult ideas as social practices (Gee, 2006), and that teachers become co-learners with students in a joint project of engaging with difficulty. (pp. 106-107)

In the study, the instructor walked her students through the refining process. She made comments, corrected linguistic mistakes, and raised questions on her students' drafts, revisions and during script-reading conferencing.

When the project assignment was completed, the instructor conducted a survey in both classes. She gave every student a reflective feedback report as shown in Figure 1 below. She encourage her

students to give specific explanations and allowed them to respond in either Chinese or English. After collecting the students' responses, she analysed them quantitatively and qualitatively. The researcher, who was skilled at both Chinese and English, color-coded the qualitative data based on the students' explanatory remarks.

Opinion	Does it help improve your English?	Why or why not?
Revisiting reported news		
Composing play outline		
Drafting play scripts		
Revising play scripts		
Reading play scripts		
Performing the play		

Figure 1 Post-Project Survey

6. Findings

Research Question #1 Which tasks in the process of English drama as a skills integration project benefit EFL learners?

The quantitative data were acquired from students' responses to the first question on the reflective feedback report papers. Every student gave either a positive (helpful) or negative (not helpful) response to this question. The results, documented in Table 2 below, suggest that the majority of these EFL university students held positive perceptions of these four tasks - drafting, revision, script reading and performance, while the two tasks in the starting phase of the project, that is, revisiting the news stories and channelling them into English play outlines received relatively more negative perceptions.

Table 2 Quantitative Analysis of Participants' Perceptions of the tasks (%)

Major	Creative Design/Science		Social Science		Average Overall Total	
	Positive	Negatives	Positive	Negatives	Positive	Negatives
Opinion						
Revisiting reported news	56	28	76	16	66	22
Composing play outline	56	8	88	12	72	10
Drafting play scripts	96	0	80	0	88	0
Revising play scripts	80	4	88	4	84	4
Reading play scripts	92	0	88	0	90	0
Performing the play	84	4	80	4	82	4

The students' explanatory remarks, recorded in Table 3 below, provide insights into their positive perceptions of those four tasks. Script reading, which received the highest percentage of positive perceptions, allowed students to assure the accuracy (grammar, wording, pronunciation,

tones), resulting in increased confidence in one's own English ability, clarifying and enriching the play, increased faith in the play, grasping a better understanding of one's own role, and obtaining a better understanding of the play. The second highest ranked as a helpful task is play drafting. According to the students, this task enhanced their imagination and creativity, improved their writing skills, granted a better understanding of the whole play and each character, made their discussions engaging, provided them an opportunity to modify the play, and pushed them to think of props, backdrops, music and so on. The next task considered helpful is script revision. The students claimed that this task assured accuracy (grammar & wording), provided them another opportunity to modify the play, generated a sense of achievement, and generated a better understanding of each character. The last reportedly beneficial task, play performance, helped them learn English skills from other groups, acquire a sense of group achievement, breed a positive attitude toward English speaking, feel more confident in their English speaking ability, know how to use their body language effectively, and become aware of their own weaknesses in personality traits.

Those justification remarks suggest that this project work generated several significant benefits on EFL learners' English learning. First, process writing (drafting and revision) and linking literacies (constructing the play scripts and reading the scripts to the instructor) seemed to help these students have a better understanding of their own plays and of the roles in their plays. Moreover, process writing allowed the students to modify their play to achieve clarity and richness of the final product. This increasingly improved understanding and continuous efforts to refine the plays along the way resulted in their confidence in this group project and later a sense of group achievement. Besides, this multi-literacy project seemed to have enhanced individual EFL learners' sense of achievement in English learning, especially writing and speaking. Along with the increased confidence was a better attitude toward English learning.

Table 3 Participants' Explanative Remarks of the Reportedly Helpful Tasks

Task	Justified Remarks	Number of Students
Script drafting	Enhanced imagination & creativity	6
	Enhanced writing skills	6
	Grasped a better understanding of the whole play and each character	6
	Helped members engage in discussions	3
	Had an opportunity to modify the play	2
	Pushed students to think of props, backdrops, music...	1
Script revision	Assured accuracy (grammar & wording)	20
	Had another opportunity to modify the play	2
	Generated a sense of achievement	1
	Grasped a better understanding of each character	1
Script reading	Assured accuracy (grammar, wording, pronunciation, tones), resulting in increased confidence in one's own English ability	12
	Clarified and enriched the play, resulting in increased confidence in the play	9
	Grasped a better understanding of one's own role	5
	Grasped a better understanding of the play	1
Play performance	Learned English skills from other groups	16
	Generated a sense of group achievement	15
	Enhanced positive attitude toward English speaking	8
	Increased confidence in English speaking	2
	Learned how to use body language effectively	1
	Had a better understanding of one's weakness (e.g., stage fright)	1

Research question #2 Do EFL learners with diverse disciplinary backgrounds perceive the tasks differently? If so, which tasks?

Despite the shared perceptions of the above-mentioned four tasks, the students in the two classes reported different perceptions of news story selection and play outlines. When we re-examine Table 1, it is obvious that Social Science majors were relatively more positive about these two tasks at the initial stage of the project work. While scrutinizing the comments documented in Table 4 below, it is noteworthy that Social Science majors not only concurred their counterpart's opinion that revisiting reported news granted them freedom of choice, enhanced their creativity and imagination, provided a solid foundation for the play, but they also uttered additional positive remarks on this task: raising their awareness of current news and generating a better understanding of the reported news. Similarly, although both classes considered it difficult to combine different pieces of news into a play, the students in these two classes reported different negative opinions: Creative Design/Science majors considered news selection challenging and forgot the details of the reported news; Social Science majors complained this task limited their freedom of choice and aroused exclusion. When it comes to play outline construction, the only reported benefit both classes had in common was that this task helped them build the structure of the play. Differences are found in their additional positive remarks. Creative Design/Science majors asserted that play outline construction had sharpened writing skills and reminded them of the reported news. Social Science majors claimed that this task had enhanced their imagination and creativity, and helped them engage in group discussions.

The synopsis of the above findings suggest that in the project-based learning process, EFL learners with different disciplinary backgrounds may perceive certain tasks differently in terms of task difficulty, personal beliefs and so on. It seems that Creative Design/Science majors needed more guidance and follow-up assistance from the instructor to reduce the difficulty in decision making and in recalling what had been learned previously. Social Science majors were more favorable of the two initial tasks due to their beliefs. They considered revisiting reported news helpful because they deemed it essential to stay informed of current news and the ability of obtaining a deep understanding of current events. They considered outline construction helpful probably because they valued devoted collaboration.

Table 4 Reported Perceptions of Two Initial Tasks in Two Classes

Task	Positive Comments	Negative Comments/Suggestion
News revisited	Enhanced creativity & imagination (2, 3)	Difficulty in news selection (1)
	Provided a solid foundation for the play (1, 3)	Difficulty in combing different pieces of news into a play (1, 1),
	Raised awareness of current news (3)	Forgot the details of the news (1)
	Granted freedom of choice (1, 4)	Limited sources for the play (1)
Outline construction	Grasped a better understanding of the reported news (1)	"My group didn't use my reported news stories." (1)
	Helped construct the whole play (6, 11)	Similarity to drafting a play (2)
	Sharpened writing skills (1)	Difficulty in writing an outline (1)
	Helped remind students of the reported news (1)	
	Enhanced imagination & creativity (1)	
	Helped members engage in discussions (3)	

Note The highlighted numbers are the number of students in the Social Science class

7. Conclusion

Rogoff, Matusov and White (1996) discussed three learning theories - transmission, acquisition and transformation of participation. The first theory, taking up an "adult-run" view, argues that experts should be responsible for novices' learning and should transmit their knowledge to them. The second theory, taking on a "student-run" view, claims that learners should take the primary responsibility for their own learning and acquire knowledge through active exploration. The third theory, a "community of learners" model, asserts that both experts and novices should share the responsibility. In other words, intellectual growth takes place when guiding experts and active learners collaborate in a learning community. Experts' role is guiding the functioning process of the community as learners manage their own learning and make contribution to the community. The third theory is increasingly widely recognized by foreign/second language educators. For example, Marchenkova (2008) maintained "teaching is not merely about transmitting skills but about transforming students as persons" (p. 56). In this study, the instructor demonstrated her faith in her students' abilities to demonstrate their creativity in their writing/speaking performances and to continuously sharpen their English skills. Embracing the transformation of participation theory, the researcher implemented the linking-literacy project work. The participating students' responses to this collaborative work provide several pedagogical insights:

7.1 *Advantages of incorporating multiple literacies in a course assignment*

7.1.1 *Improving English proficiency*

The students' reported benefits imply that this project assignment has enhanced their English proficiency. The tasks enhanced their reading (obtaining a better understanding the reported news stories), writing (setting a solid foundation for the play, constructing the plot, grasping an increasingly better understanding of the plot and each character, repeated modification the plot, enhanced accuracy of grammar and wording, improved writing skills), speaking (refined pronunciation and tones, boosted confidence in and positive attitude toward English speaking) and other English skills.

Those reported advancements may not have occurred without extended time and purposeful interactions. Weissberg (2008) once argued that sharing and responding to ideas promote profound thinkers and skilled writers. Thus, allowing students adequate time to interact, digest and explore ideas is critical to achievement. The students in this study engaged themselves in discussions while they were collaborating on news selection, play outlines, drafts and revisions. Moreover, as Adams & Ross-Feldman (2008) asserted, English learners may pay more attention to form of a writing piece when the instructor combines speaking and writing in a single task. The students' perceived advanced writing echoes Williams' (2008) observation that " talking about writing can improve the overall quality of writing, at least in draft-to-draft changes (p. 17)." Through several rounds of peer/instructor-group interactions, the quality of the students' plays became better; in the meanwhile, their speaking ability had a chance to grow. When they read scripts to the instructor, they talked with the instructor and negotiated within their group to make sure their final written product faultless. This echoes Rubin and Kang's (2008) contention that "the arrows between development in speech and writing are double-headed (p.210)."

7.1.2 *Improving students' soft skills*

On top of English proficiency, it is noticeable that this multi-literacy project work seemed to result in perceived advancement of other abilities. According the students responses, revisiting reported news stories (reading), constructing play outlines and drafting play scripts (writing) had enhanced their creativity and imagination. In the meanwhile, revisiting reported news stories (reading) raised their awareness of current news. Moreover, the writing tasks (outlining, drafting, revision) and the speaking task (performing plays) made them realize that individual engagement

and group operation in teamwork would lead to increased self-confidence and collective sense of achievement. The play performance (speaking) also made them notice appropriate body language to achieve effective communication and more importantly, made them aware of their own weaknesses. Those skills are critical qualifications for university students to equip themselves before they enter an increasingly competitive job market.

To implement this transformation mode in English classes, language teachers are encouraged to design project assignments. For example, they may hold an election for a class leader. To win the election, the students in every group would need to learn how to understand campaign speeches delivered by English speakers, how to read the English texts on genuine English flyers, how to compose convincing posters, and how to give an impressive talk at a "press conference" or beat their opponents at a debate.

7.2 Crucial components of project-based learning

Adams and Ross-Feldman's (2008) endorsed Swain's (1995) argument that 'output pushes learners to process language more deeply (with more mental effort) than does input' process (p. 244). Although the project work was output-oriented, its design was process-centered rather than one-stop shopping. It gave the students much freedom to choose news stories and to turn the self-selected news stories into sensible plays. This project work included feasible and procedural tasks for the students to step forward without much difficulty. Besides, it provided the students numerous opportunities to think of how to refine their plays.

Despite the careful design, several students voiced dissatisfaction. Most of the complaints are related to the two initial tasks - adapting reported news stories and writing play outlines. The students expressed their difficulties in these two tasks. Several of them did not seem to know why they had to construct play outlines. Those remarks indicate that teachers are advised to provide more guidance and support during the initial phase of the project. Besides, teachers should make more efforts in clarify the purpose of play outline construction.

7.3 Advantages of collaborative work

The development of a writing piece require more than individual reflections. As mentioned before, numerous students reported positive opinions of several tasks because they incited engaging discussions, which in turn, as Yang (2008) stated, "connect to and shape writing" (p. 160). Hyland (2008) also emphasized the value of collective thinking in the writing process:

Oral interaction can be a starting point for students to develop and refine their ideas prior to writing.....Oral discussion can also be a way of confirming and elaborating their understanding of the writing task itself, as well as being of practical assistance. Such discussions can provide reassurance and serve as the kind of 'academic apprenticeship' discussed by Weissberg (2006). It can also be a catalyst to push students on with their writing and serve as a source of support when the writing task seems hard of the obstacles seem difficult to overcome. By discussing the challenges they face, students can articulate their problems, which is often the first step to solving them. Sharing problems also makes students aware that everyone experiences similar difficulties and thus makes these seem less oppressive. (pp. 186-187)

7.4 Importance of considering students' disciplinary backgrounds

As discussed earlier, the students of the two classes perceived the two initial tasks differently. It is advisable that teachers who intend to replicate this assignment design take into account their students' fields of study. In this study, it is evident that Social Science majors benefited from the first task, revisiting news stories and adopting them to write English plays. Their preference in this task might be related to the nature or requirements of their area of study. More research studies need to be conducted to explore this possibility. For the students of other departments, alternative reading/audio materials, such as (auto)biographies of the celebrities in their disciplines, may received favorable responses.

7.5 *Important of teachers' guidance*

It was mentioned earlier in this section that in a learning community, teachers' duty is to facilitate the functioning of the community. To do so, according to Socio-Cultural theory, the teacher/experts should work with learners/novices in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978; Weissberg, 2008). In the study, the end product - an English play - was not easy to accomplish, even for university students with a high level of English proficiency. Therefore, the instructor broke this project into several manageable tasks. Later, she assisted her students through the project work. She provided feedback on the every outline, draft and revised the play scripts to improve each written piece; besides, she helped her students to read their part aptly. Those efforts on the instructor's part were extremely time-consuming but turned out tremendously rewarding because her assistance and guidance reduced the students stress and enhanced their confidence in learning/using English.

7.6 *Importance of learner agency*

Another insight from the students' responses is the need to respect for learner agency. It is evident that the students in this study appreciated the freedom of choices in news selection and detested the limitation on the materials to be adapted for play composition. Consequently, it is advisable that teachers initiate discussions with their students in regard to source materials. Predictably, the discussions would be time-consuming, but they are likely to motivate students to make commitments to this collaborative project.

In summary, the researcher launched a study though an project assignment in her two high-level FENM classes in response to foreign/second language education experts' call for more research on crossing of literacies in this field. She deliberately included multi-literacy tasks in the project, hoping that all her students would improve their reading, writing, speaking and listening by carrying out those tasks. On the completion of the project, the students in both classes gave favorable responses about most of the tasks and expressed different opinions of two tasks. The results suggest that project assignments that combine multiple language skills are feasible in high-level English classes in higher education as long as they are solicitously planned and implemented with constant scaffolding.

The study, similar to many other action research endeavors, was conducted on a particular group of students (university freshmen placed in high-level classes) in a particular institution (private university in central Taiwan). Though the researcher examined quantitative and qualitative responses, readers should beware that those responses do not necessarily reflect all the EFL university students' opinions of the tasks. Any attempt to replicate this project assignment should be made with caution and prudence. Future research in this domain should target other student groups (those with a lower command of English and those from other fields of study) and/or in other school settings (universities of science and technology, secondary schools and elementary schools) to investigate whether and to what extent multi-literacy project work is affected by age, academic disciplines, English proficiency and institutional context.

Acknowledgements

The study would not be completed without the participating university students' efforts made in accomplishing the project work and time spent in responding to the survey.

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