Indonesian Tesol Journal, 8(2), 177-196 (2026)

INDONESIAN TESOL JOURNAL

e-ISSN: 2622-5441(Online) Journal homepage: https://ejournal.iainpalopo.ac.id/index.php/ITJ/index

Project-Based Assessment In Moroccan Higher Education: The Students' Perspective

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Abstract: *In recent years, research has demonstrated that conventional ways of assessment in language classrooms have become incongruent with current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching methodologies, which emphasize the need for involving learners and encouraging their active participation as well as fostering the development of soft and transferable skills. Accordingly, it is a prerequisite that higher education institutions incorporate innovative assessment methods such as project-based assessment for assessing 21st-century language learning. The purpose of the current study is to explore the attitudes and perceptions of Moroccan higher education students of English towards project-based assessment as an alternative to traditional essay writing assessment. The research is based on empirical data collected using two data collection instruments; questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The analysis made use of both qualitative and quantitative data in order to identify key themes and patterns in the participants' responses. The findings of the study revealed that Moroccan higher education students of English have positive and favourable attitudes towards this assessment approach, with the participants underscoring some of the benefits of this form of assessment, such as creativity, collaboration, enhanced engagement, real-world application, and relevance. However, some students expressed concerns regarding time management, group coordination, and clarity of the assessment criteria. This research contributes to the current growing interest and discussions about innovative assessment practices in the context of higher education. In addition to that, the study offers insights into the role of project-based assessment in supporting learners' engagement, creativity, and the development of 21st-century skills.*

Keywords: *Alternative Assessment, Project-Based Assessment, TESOL, Higher Education, Student Attitudes, Language Education*

INTRODUCTION

The field of foreign language testing and assessment has shifted its focus in two major ways, "(1) to a consideration of what is at stake for learners learning the English language and their performance as test-takers; and (2) from an exclusive focus on tests and testing to a broader consideration of assessment practices in language classrooms" (Cheng & Fox, 2017, p. xvii).

Hence, considering the weaknesses of conventional forms of assessment in today's foreign language classrooms, the need emerged for the incorporation of assessments that are consistent with learner/learning centered approaches and that are an integral part of the learning process. Additionally, it is important that assessment is authentic and assesses multiple skills. As confirmed by Sujana, et al, (2020), "assessment must be designed in the form of authentic activities that can enhance high-level thinking (HOTS) and build students' understanding" (p.102). Assessments that are diverse, catering for individual differences and learning styles and that foster the development of 21st century skills such as communication, collaboration, autonomy, critical thinking, leadership, etc., are considered to have a pivotal power and role in enhancing learning. As Earl (2010) puts it,

> When teachers use classroom assessment to become aware of the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that their students bring to a learning task, use this knowledge as a starting point for new instruction, and monitor students' changing perceptions as instruction proceeds, classroom assessment promotes learning (p.6).

One of the most popular and innovative forms of alternative assessments is project-based assessment (PBA). Project-based assessment has received increasing attention in the field of English as a foreign language education for the numerous benefits it offers. Research (e.g. Beckett & Slater, 2005; Gülbahar & Tinmaz, 2006; Fragoulis, 2009; Bell, 2010; etc.) found that one of the primary advantages of project work is the development of twenty-first century skills of collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, leadership. More importantly still, project-based assessment promotes authentic learning as it exhibits not only what a student knows about language but also how he or she uses that language in various contexts and situations.

Although project work as an alternative assessment has received considerable attention, not all teachers use it. One reason for this may be that project work places a great demand on educators who find it difficult to manage projects and perceive that project work requires considerable extra effort and time on their part. Each project requires from educators a high level of pre-planning and coordination together with dedication to monitor and support learners throughout the project stages. Moreover, it is not easy to choose the appropriate topics for the students' level and interests, and fit them to the curriculum (Gokçen, 2005).

Although project-based assessment is increasingly adopted in language courses in higher education worldwide, assessment of learning has been predominantly traditional in the context of higher education in Morocco. As Ouakrime (2016) noted,"it so happens that assessment in institutions of the Moroccan educational system has been of a summative-final nature, with very few exceptions if any" (p. 54). This is also confirmed by Bouziane (2024) who argues that Moroccan institutions of higher education, especially open-access institutions, face a number of challenges that make it hard to use assessment mechanisms that are effective and systematic. The author attibutes this to issues such as students' absenteeism, high student ratios, lack of resources, and the fact that exams are at high stake in Morocco. The context where the current study is conducted is no exception; Most

, if not all, the assessments that the study's participants take are in the form of an essay writing where students are supposed to demonstrate knowledge attainment.

More importantly still, although the implementation of project-based assessment has sparked the interest of several researchers, little research has been conducted to examine the implementation of this assessment method from the perspectives of students. Exploring students' attitudes and experiences in addition to their perceptions of benefits and challenges is important for educators aiming to effectively implement project-based assessment with their students.

Examining this issue from the students' perspectives not only impacts motivation and engagement but also provides valuable insights into the practical realities of project-based implementation that may not be apparent from educators and institutional perspectives. Therefore, the objective of this study is to address this gap in research by exploring how language learners in higher education perceive project-based assessment. By centering student voices, this study aims to provide evidence-based insights that can inform more effective and equitable assessment practices in higher education language courses. Specifically, the study seeks to find an answer to the following research questions:

1. What are students' attitudes towards projects as a learning activity?
2. What are students' attitudes towards PBA?
3. What are students perceived benefits of PBA?
4. What challenges do students face while preparing a project?
5. What do students recommend for improving PBA implementation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-Based Learning as a Pedagogical Framework

Project-based assessment (PBA) derives from Project-based learning (PBL) which is grounded in constructivist views. According to the constructivist perspective, learning is a social, active and problem-solving process (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, in PBL learners are positioned as active participants in knowledge development who are allowed chanches to draw on their prior knowledge and experiences, ask questions and investigate them, and improve their understanding through meaningful activities. Such orientation is a reflection of Dewey's (1938) theory which emphasizes the link between experience and education. The collaborative aspect of project work, on the other hand, aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) views on social interaction and its mediating role in learning.

This framework shifts the teacher's role from controlling the teaching and learning processes to guiding learners' inquiry, designing meaningful tasks, and offering the required support for learners to undertake increasingly challinging tasks and activities. Consequently, learners develop autonomy alongside the teacher's guidance and scaffolding as they gradually assume greater responsibilities in planning learning, making decisions throughout the process, and evaluating their own progress.

In the field of language teaching and learning, such principles form the basis for teachers to organize their intructional practices around communicative purposes that go beyond isolated linguistic activities. For example, projects require learners to collect information, negotiate roles and responsibilities, discuss results, and produce an oral presentation or a written report. These activities help learners connect all language skills within a sequence that is coherent and that makes language not only a source of inquiry but an object of learning as well. As Stoller (2006) discusses, project work enables learners to integrate both language and content which provides learners with opportunities to apply linguistic resources in context. Nevertheless, meaningful learners' participation requires deliberate support from the teacher such as modelling, providing relevant vocabulary as well as the provision of feedback and revision opportunities. Therefore, the true pedagogical value of projects is conditioned by the effective alignment of its activities with explicit learning objectives.

Such emphasis on using purposeful learning activities also establishes a conceptual link between project-based learning and project-based assessment. Specifically, when learners learn through collaboration, investigation and production, assessment measures not only the end product but also the process that led to the development of that product. In other words, the stages involved in preparing a project provide additional evidence of learners' progress. In this way, project-based assessment extends the pedagogical principles of project-based learning as it connects assessment to those decisions, activities and communicative practices through which learning takes place.

Projects as an Alternative Assessment Tool

Language assessment has increasingly moved towards methods that seek to assess learners' real-world performance and their communicative competence. As a result, project-based assessment has emerged as a key alternative to conventional testing methods, emphasizing aspects like authenticity, collaboration and learner autonomy (Thomas, 2000; Beckett & Slater, (2020).

More specifically, projects as an alternative assessment tool have gained much attention in education in general and in language classrooms in particular for several reasons. To begin with, one of the strongest advantages of projects is authenticity. Wiggins (1990) argues that assessment tasks that are authentic offer a better reflection of real-world performance. As projects are usually designed with the aim of addressing real world problems, they equip learners with practical life skills. As asserted by Gokçen (2005), projects as an assessment tool exhibit both what learners know about language and how they use that language in different situations. Moreover, when students work on a project, they are required to apply both knowledge and skills like researching, interviewing, writing, and public speaking. Therefore, through projects, learners enhance not only linguistic competencies but also non-linguistic ones such as collaboration, critical thinking and research skills, (Guo, 2021).

In addition to that, as projects allow integrating all language skills, learners' linguistic competence and social skills are developed. That is, in order for students to accomplish a certain project, they would be required to conduct interviews and take notes, for instance. This is likely to sharpen their listening and writing skills. Also, students would have to read different materials related to the topic of their project which improves their listening skills. Finally, students may be asked to present their end product orally which helps develop their speaking skills.

More importantly still, project work helps learners become more independent and autonomous. When students are involved in selecting, organizing and carrying out a project of their choice, they gain more responsibility and control of their own learning. In addition, giving learners the chance to make decisions about the methods, content and outcomes of a project, they perceive their assessment as more equitable, and hence more engaging (Little, 1991). Moreover, when students are allowed to and supported in working independently, their motivation to learn increases (Fragoulis, 2009). Projects also provide opportunities for personalizing learning and showcasing individual learner strength which in turn results in increased motivational levels among learners (Lam, 2011).

However, despite having numerous benefits, there are several challenges associated with the use of project-based assessment. For instance, when teachers assess through projects, they face difficulties especially with establishing clear assessment criteria, managing time, organizing the classroom, and making sure that all group members of the project participate equally (Beckett, 1999). A further major concern is related to reliability because the outcomes of a project can be influenced by factors other than language ability like group dynamics or design skills (Bachman, 2002). For teachers to address these concerns, the literature recommends the use of clear checklists and rubrics, the use of both group and individual assessments, as well as the provision of scaffolding and support throughout the project (Andre, 2010).

Previous studies on Project-Based Assessment in Language Learning

Tran and Tran (2020) investigated Vietnamese students' attitudes towards project-based learning and found that students hold positive conginitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes towards Project-based learning. Similarly, the study conducted by Jalil and Mouhalij (2025) yielded that Moroccan higher education students show positive attitudes towards project based learning because this learning method enables them to "understand and remember material better, develop teamwork and collaboration skills, prepare them for real-world problem-solving and increase their motivation and engagement" (p. 344).

As for attitudes towards projects as an assessment method, the literature suggests that students hold favourable attitudes towards this assessment method and prefer it over traditional examinations for different reasons. For example, Gratchev (2023) study concluded that the learning experience of students improved after replacing exams with project based assignments. This is because this assessment method enabled students to see practical applications of the course content. This

result echoes also the resuls yielded by Essien, (2018) who found that project-based assessment improved students' "critical thinking ability, independent study skill, personal and social responsibility, and strong communication skills" (p. 438).

Concerning the challenges associated with project-based assessment, research showed that group formation and students' streaming are the main challenge to group assessments. This is voiced by several studies. For example, Hellström, Nilsson and Olsson (2009) argue that group formation affects group performance. Similarly, Lejk, Wyvill and Farrow (1999) compared students' performance in streamed and mixed abilities groups and demonstrated that students in mixed ability groups are more likely to be advantaged or disadvantaged because the members they are assigned to work with withing the group. More specifically, the study indicated that team members with high ability obtain strikingly lower grades when they work in a mixed ability group rather than a streamed one.

One of the most extensive recommendations for improving the project-based experience is the provision of feedback. For example, Pellegrino et al. (2001) assert that feedback is a prerequisite in assessment, guiding, challenging, and redirecting learners' thinking (p. 234). Following the same line of reasoning, Hounsell, et al. (2008) underscore the significance of feedback by stating that it either enhances the quality of learning outcomes or facilitates and acceletrates the attainment of these outcomes. Similarly, the meta-analysis conducted by Hattie and Gan (2011) revealed that feedback is the most influencial element in students' achievement. Moreover, Irons and Elkington (2021) argue that feedback is a fundamental aspect in assessment as it enables students to benefit from assessment, increases their motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic), and hence enhances learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

Instruments

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach employing both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires as data collection instruments. Questionnaires are adopted as a data collection instrument for this study because they are the most popular and favored research method for measuring attitudes in the context of educational research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The questionnaire was adesigned using Google Forms and was sent to the participants who completed it online. The questionnaire consists of four main sections. The first section is devoted to the participants' demographic information. The second section investigates students' attitudes towards project work as a learning activity (not as an assessment method). The third section seeks to examine the participants' views towards project-based assessment as an alternative to the end of term written examination. Using a five-point Likert Scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', the section aims to probe participants perceptions of the benefits of PBA and the challenges involved in this assessment form. The fourth section includes open-ended questions, exporing the participants'

experience with PBA and their recommendations. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed through correlation coefficients, Cronbach alpha. The consistency measure was calculated as 0.87 which is considered to be an acceptable reliability measure.

Since questionnaires are limited in terms of eliciting in depth answers from the participants, semi-structured interviews are also used to collect data for this study. This qualitative data collection instrument allows participants the time and scope to talk about their opinions on a particular subject, and it allows the researcher to elicit in-depth information about the topic. This, in turn, ensures the credibility of data, and the quality of the findings. Hence, the aim behind using this research instrument is to get in-depth and direct answers from the participants concerning their attitudes towards the implementation of project-based assessment and to thouroughly descibe their experience with this assessment method. Besides, interviews are meant to elicit further explanations from the participants with respect to the challenges they faced while preparing for the project as well as the recommendations they suggest for improving students' experience with PBA.

Participants

The sample population of this study consists of Moroccan higher education students enrolled in the B.A. program "English Language Teaching in Secondary Schools" at Ecole Normale Superieure, University Moulay Ismail in Meknes. Three groups of third year students participated in this study after having been assessed using projects in one of their Semester 6 courses instead of the regular end of term essay writing exam.

Following the completion and submission of their group projects, the participants responded to online questioonnaires and took part in semi-structured interviews focusing on their perceptions and attitudes towards project-based assessment, their experience with this assessment method as well as the challenges they faced. More details about the study's respondents are summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1. *Respondents' Demographic Information*

	Number	**Gender**		**Age Category**	
		Male	**Female**	**20-22**	**22+**
Questionnaires	N=103	40%	60%	93%	6%
Interviews	N= 10	50%	50%	100%	0%

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed qunatitatively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 26). The open-ended questions and the interview data were analyzed using 'Thematic Analysis', a qualitative method for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). The focus on themes across data enabled the researcher to

interpret students' experience, attitudes and perceptions about Project-based assessment beyond what is offered by the quantitative analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Attitudes towards Project-Based Learning

The first section of the the questionnaire is devoted to an exploration of students' general attitudes towards projects as a learning activity. The results of the questionnaire data revealed that students' attitudes towards projects-based learning are generally very positive. The figure below (Figure 1) illustrates this finding.

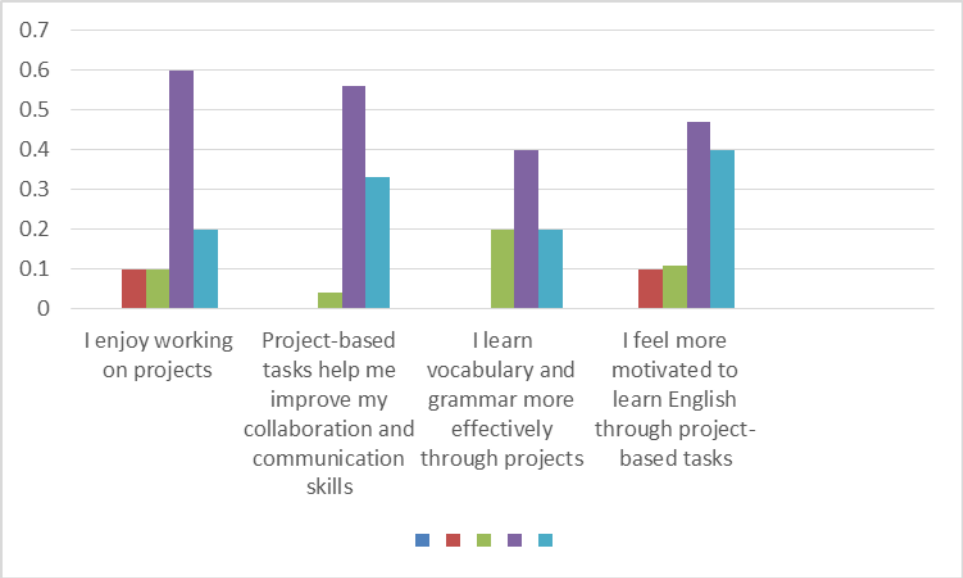


Figure 1. *Students Attitudes towards Project-based Learning*

As demonstrated in the figure, 60% of the participants agree that they enjoy working on projects, 58.7% agree that projects improve their communicative and collaborative skills, and 60% agree that learning through projects is more motivating for them.

Attitudes towards Project-Based Assessment

The second section of the questionnaire was devoted to an exploration of students' attitudes towards Project-based assessment. The participants were provided with a list of statements and were asked to state the level of agreement with the statements using a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from 'strangly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The results of the analysis are demonstrated in the figure below.

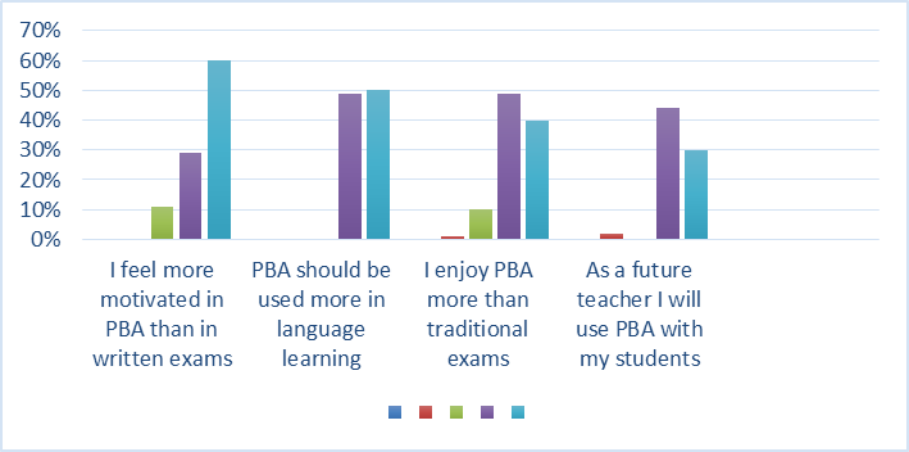


Figure 2. *Students Attitudes towards Project-based Assessment*

Figure 2 shows that students' attitudes towards being assessed through projects are predominantly favourable. Specifically, 60% of the participants expressed their strong agreement with the fact that they feel more motivated in project-based assessment than in written exams. Also, 49% agree and 40% strongly agree that they enjoy project-based assessment more that traditional assessments. Moreover, 50% of the particpants agree and 49% strongly agree that this method of assessment should be used more, and revealed that as future teachers, they are willing to incorporate project-based assessment with their students.

Students' Perceived Benefits of Project-Based Assessment

The results of thematic analysis conducted to examine students' responses to the questionnaires's open ended questions as well as their responses to interview questions revealed five major perceived benefits of project-based assessment. These perceived benefits are discussed in the section below.

Authentic Language Use

The ability to use language authentically is the most reccuring benefit of project based assessment in the participants' responses. Students expressed their appreciation of the fact that working on the project required them to apply their knwoledge of the language to accomplish meaningful tasks. Rather than memorizing the couirse content and reproducing it in the form of an essay for their final examination, students prepared a group project, allowing them the chance to better improve retention and practical competence. As reported by one of the participants who stated,

> *"What I enjoy most about language learning through projects is that it makes learning more meaningful, engaging and practical. Instead of just memorizing vocabulary or grammar rules, I get to use the language in real-life contexts, which helps me remember it better. I also love that I get to explore topics deeply, work creatively, and use the language in real situations".*

The practical aspect of project work was also emphasized by another participant who stated,

> *"..I enjoy the collaborative aspect of the work and the learning process was easy and joyful as you can learn from your peers in a practical way not just theory Which help you enjoy through hands on experience activities".*

Collaboration and Peer Interaction

Collaborative learning emerged as another highly valued aspect of project-based assessment by the participants of this study. This experience allowed students to share their knowledge with one another and develop their communication skills through peer work and collaboration. The motivational and social dimension of collaborative learning was clearly highlighted in students' responses. For instance, one of the students said,

> *"Participating in projects gives me the chance to work with others, which makes learning more engaging and interactive. I enjoy gaining insights from my peers, sharing ideas, and developing my communication skills through group work. Working this way also helps me stay motivated and feel more connected to the learning process".*

Several other students mentioned peer feedback and supportive learning as a benefit of project based assessment. For example, two of the participants stated,

> *"I enjoy collaborating with others during language projects. It gives me the chance to practice speaking and listening in a more natural way, also we can share our knowledge together as well as give and receive feedback instantly which improve understanding"*.

> *"I can say it was an opportunity to develop our communication, and collaborative skills and develop a sense of belonging . We learned how to make decisions together and cooperate instead of compete".*

Multiple Skills Development

The thematic analysis of students' responses revealed that skills development is a further important benefit of project based assessment. In this regard, the participants stated;

> *"I think project -based learning is an effective way to enhance language learning as it allows students to master a wide range of skills that are essential for 21th century, including collaboration, effective communication, patience and adaptability".*

> *" I also enjoy how projects encourage teamwork and allow us to express ourselves while learning important skills for the future".*

Creativity and autonomy are also among the major skills that were mentioned by the respondents when they were asked about the benefits of PBA for them. This is clearly expressed in the following examples:

> *"I enjoy the endless space for creativity and innovation".*

> *"What I enjoy most about language learning through projects is that it helps develop communication skills, encourages creativity, and promotes collaboration with others".*

> *"Projects helped me become more independent, build confidence, and relate learning to my daily life. I also enjoy how projects encourage teamwork and allow us to express ourselves while learning important skills for the future".*

Professional Relevance

The data analyzed revealed also that students appreciated PBA not only for its immediate learning benefits but also for its role in preparing them for their future careers. As mentioned earlier, the participants of this study are language learners preparing for the teaching profession. Therefore, they find the skills developed through projct work professionally relevant and transferrable. İn this regard, one of the participants described their experience with PBA in the following words:

> *"...as future teachers, this experience helped us apply educational theories and models we learned in class, to design clear objectives and structured activities for interesting and effective lessons".*

Enhanced Engagement and Motivation

The participants were asked to describe their experience with Project-based assessmenty. The results showed that students appreciated the fact that PBA, unlike traditional assessment methods, made their learning more engaging, memorable, and enjoyable. Most of their responses used affective language to describe this experience as shown in the following responses:

> *"It was a joyful experience full of motivation, support and sharing knowledge*
>
> *"It was a fun, enjoyable, and new".*
>
> *"I think its more enjoyable and a memorable experience".*
>
> *"It was great !"*
>
> *"It's amazing, I really preferred the project as a final exam rather than writing an essay".*

Pereceived Challenges

Even though the participants generally have favourable attitudes towards PBA and although they described the experience in a highly positive way and listed numerous benefits, they expressed some concerns regarding this method of assessment. More specifically, students listed a number of challenges that they encountered while preparing the project. This section presents these challenges.

Unequal Participation

The participants cited unequal distribution of work among group members as the most challenging part of preparing for the project, with some students bearing most of the workload while others' contribution to the work was minimal. For example, some students expresssed their frustration regarding instances when they had to work independently to complete the work and meet the deadline as shown in these examples of students' responses:

> *"One of the main challenges I faced during PBA was that some group members were not active, which sometimes led to delays or problems. In some cases, I had to finish most of the work on my own to meet the deadline".*
>
> *"...to divide work fairly also sometimes some people of the group don't do their parts as it should which create problems".*
>
> *"Balancing roles in teams".*

Group Dynamics and Interpersonal Conflicts

Related to the previously discussed issue of unequal participation, is the issue of group dynamics and interpersonal conflicts among students. Some students reported that it was dificult to collaborate with their peers due to interpersonal tensions, conflicting opinions and differences in working styles. These problems created stressful working conditions for some students, slowed down their progress, and decreased their motivation. These concerns are best expressed in the following examples:

> *"The biggest challenge for me was collaborating with others,it can be tricky when everyone has different ideas or levels of language skills".*
>
> *"One of the main challenges I've faced during project-based learning is when group members have conflicting opinions or different ways of approaching the task. It can be difficult to find common ground or make decisions that everyone agrees on, which sometimes leads to delays or misunderstandings".*
>
> *"The one dominant challenge is working with uncreative, limited, and disinterested students because they hinder my working flow and pace".*

Time Management

Another significant challenge faced by students while preparing for the project is managing time as clearly expressed in these responses:

> *"One of the challenges I faced during project-based learning was time management. It was hard to progress at the same pace and there were also some moments of disagreement".*
>
> *"One of the main challenges I faced during PBA was managing time, especially with group projects".*

Clarity of Expectations and Lack of Resources

Although they were mentioned less frequently in students' responses, lack of clear expectations and resources appeared to represent a challenge for a few participants. Students expressed confusion and anxiety over what is expected of them and found that the assessment criteria are not clear enough. As stated by Jalil and Mouhalij (2025) " when the expectations and goals of a PBL project are not clearly defined, students can struggle to understand what is required of them" (p. 356).

Other students stated difficulties in terms of lack of resources. To effectively prepare the project, it was necessary for the students to have access to technology

and other materials. These resource constraints posed a problem for some students as expressed in these examples:

> *"Sometimes resources and time constraints might hinder project progress"*
>
> *"Time management and group collaboration can be difficult, especially when expectations aren't clear".*
>
> *"Time management, unequal group participation, and lack of resources were the main challenges".*

Students' Recommendations for Improving PBA Implementation

The study's participants were asked about their recommendations for the improvement of projecty-based assessment based on their experience with this assessment method. The thematic analysis of the interview data and the questionnaire's open-ended questions revealed a number of recommendations.

Assessing Individual Contributions and Facilitating Group Formation

Given the challenges associated with unequal participation that was discussed earlier in the paper, students recommended recognizing individual students' contribution rather than assigning the same grade for all group members. In line with this, students offered also certain suggestions related to the issue of group formation that they revealed as another challenge in project-based assessment. Specifically, some students recommended that teachers take a more active role in monitoring group processes and interfering when conflicts arise among members of the same group. Others suggests allowing them the chance to choose their own convenient groups and change groups when needed. These two recommendations are better expressed in the following students' responses:

> *"I think teachers can improve project-based learning better by providing clear guidance and examples to help students know what is expected and arranging groups thoughtfully to encourage equal participation".*
>
> *"They can use platforms for PBA that they can have access to, so they can observe students interactions and contributions. In order to make sure that everything is on the right track"".*
>
> *"Divide the work initially for the group and give very clear instructions to avoid misunderstanding. give the choice to students to choose who to work with".*
>
> *"Teachers should facilitate group formation, monitor progress, and address issueds like unequal participation early".*

Explicit Teaching of Project Management Skills

Some students revealed that they lack the necessary skills for managing a project. They recognize that effective implementation of project-based assessment requires certain skills that need to be taught explicitly. This is clearly infered from responses such as the following:

> *"I think that it is crucial to prepare learners prior to the experience with the information and skills needed to help them navigate the experience properly".*

> *"They should integrate and familiarize this approach to students prior to the full integration of it".*
>
> *"Help students learn the necessary skills first so that they can be prepared".*

Providing Clear Guidelines and Continuous Feedback

Students frequently highlighted the need for clearer communication of guidelines, expectations, requirements, and assessment criteria as demonstrated in the following examples:

> *"I think teachers can improve project-based learning better by providing clear guidance and examples to help students know what is expected".*
>
> *"By providing initial guides and guidelines to help students kickstart their work. That way there will an agreed upon starter point. Also, there should clear indication on how the assessment shall be considered so that students/group members can be responsible and take accountability".*

A large number of the participants also mentioned the value of providing continuous formative feedback as expressed in these responses:

> *"By giving clear guidelines, practical examples, and regular feedback to guide students.*
>
> *"For teachers, it is crucial to provide guidance and continuous feedback to help students stay on track and achieve better outcomes".*
>
> *"Teachers can improve the use of PBA in language courses by providing clear guidelines and rubrics, offering regular feedback".*

Indeed, feedback is a key aspect of any assessment type. It guides students and facilitates their attainment of the learning objectives. As confirmed by Rasyid, et al, 2023, "the process of assessment provides students with a valuable opportunity to receive feedback regarding their performance, thereby facilitating their progress beyond their initial learning objectives" (p.322).

DISCUSSION

The study's first research question investigated students' attitudes towards learning through project work. The results of the quantitative analysis showed that students hold positive atitudes towards projects as a learning activity. This means that the projects motivate all students to learn and makes them feel engaged in the teaching and learning processes regardless of their proficiency level. In this regard, Burke (1994) explains that one of the advantages of projects is that they can be assigned to students at different levels of proficiency and can be adjusted to learners' own individual learning styles and ability levels which increases their motivation levels.

The second research question sought to explore students' attitudes towards project-based assessment. The analysis of the quastionnaire data revealed that tudents' attitudes towards PBA are predominantly positive. This could be explained by the fact that this assessment method is new to the participants of the

study as most of the assessments that these students take are traditional. Therefore, the innovative nature of project-based assessment increases students' interest in it and raises their curiousity to try it themselves. Moreover, the anxiety that surrounds traditional written examinations is not felt by students when they prepare a project which enhances their positive attitudes towards project-based assessment.

After exploring students' attitudes towards projects both as a learning activity and an assessment method, students' perceived benefits of project-based assessment were examined through the study's third research question. The results of thematic analysis conducted to examine students' responses to the questionnaires's open ended questions as well as their responses to interview questions revealed five major perceived benefits of project-based assessment; authentic language use, collaboration and peer interaction, multiple skills development, professional relevance, enhaced motivation and engagement.

The results of this study disclosed that authentic use of language is the most reccuring theme in students' responses regarding the perceived benefits of project-based assessment. This theme reflects the idea that language learning is best achieved through application and authentic use rather than memorization and rote knowledge. Students realize that working on a projects is an experience that helps them to apply and practice language in context. As expressed by Gokçen (2005); Sardi et al (2025), projects as an assessment method not only show what a student knows about language but also how he or she uses that language in a situational context.

Peer collaboration is the second perceived benefit of project-based assessment according to this study's participants. The collaborative aspect of Project-based assessment adresses the social and affective needs of students. At the same time, it provides them with the opportunity of authentic language use through discussing, negotiating, and constructing knowledge with their peers unlike traditional examinations which emphasize individual work and and neglect the collaborative aspect necessary for effective language learning. In this respect, Gokçen (2005) asserts that projects help students improve their social skills and increase self confidence, leadership skills, persuasive skills, citizenship, social abilities, critical faculties, assertiveness and self-awareness. This is further confirmed by Bell (2010) who argued that "learning responsibility, independence, and discipline are three outcomes of PBL" (p. 40).

Another perceived advantage of project-based assessment according to the results obtained from the thematic analysis is the development of multiple skills. Beyond linguistic skills, project-based assessment is believed to foster the development of a range of higher order skills and life skills such as leadership, digital literacy, responsibility, critical thinking, time management, problem solving, and creativity. The creative aspect of PBA boosts studnents' self confidence and independence making them able to take ownership of their learning and personalize their work. As students are involved in the selection and organization of the project, they gain more responsibility and control of their own learning. Moreover, letting students work independently and supporting them in this process is likely to increase their motivation to learn (Fragoulis, 2009).

The analysis of data revealed also that students perceive professional relevance as a further benefit of project-based assessment.appreciated PBA not only for its immediate learning benefits but also for its role in preparing. This is further confirmed by Gratchev (2023) whose study concluded that "project work provides students with opportunities to learn about the practical value of the course and its relevance to their industry careers" (p.8).

Another important theme that emerged in the participants' responses on the benefits of project-based assessment is increased levels of motivation and engagement. The engaging nature of PBA seems to be the result of combining practical relevance, authentic language use, creative autonomy, and collaboration. When combined in a single assessment task, these factors are more likely to enhace learners' motiovational levels, participation, interest in learning and class attendance. This result is corroborated by the results obtained by Bell (2010). The author's paper titled "Project-Based Learning for the 21st Century: Skills for the Future" clearly explains that when students participate in projects, they become more motivated to learn and perform better which translates into higher attendance rates, increased interest and improved grades.

The fourth research question is related to the participants' perceived challenges of project-based assessment. The results of the analysis revealed four major themes; unequal participation, group dynamics and interpersonal conflicts, time management, and lack of clarity of expectations and resources.

The issue of unequal participation was the most recurring theme in students' responses regarding the challenges faced with project-based assessment. This issue appeared particularly challenging for those students who are more conscientious and who feel responsible for the success of the project. These students get frustrated when they feel that their team members do not exhibit the same level or work at the same pace.

The analysis of students' responses yielded that group dynamics and interpersonal conflicts are a furthen challenge, clearly emphasizing the complexities that collaborative work involves. As the project required students to work as a team, conflicting views on certain ideas emerged. Additionally, group members exhibit varying degrees of hardwork, seriousness, motivation, and competence while preparing for the project. This led, most of the time, to disagreements among students, slowing their progress and creating frustrating working environments. This challenge was revealed also in the study conducted by Jalil and Mouhalij (2025) and in which it was highlighted that students' satisfaction and success can be affected by group dynamics.

Moreover, the study found that students had difficulties maintaing progress and balancing their academic responsibilities with project work. The project required students to work on an extended timeline (a semester of study) which created time constraints in terms of organization and schedule coordination and made the task overwhelming for some students. This finding aligns with the finding of Jalil and Mouhalij (2025) who listed time consumption as one of the challenges that Moroccan higher education students face in the process of preparing a project.

Additionally, the sults of the thematic analysis showed that lack of resources and unclear communication of expectations can also undermine the benefits of

project-based assessment. When the assessment criteria are not clearly explained and shared, students feel uncertain about what and how to proceed with the project. Similarly, when students have limited access to the required resources, they find themselves unable to achieve the desired outcomes.

As far as the study's fourth research question, students were asked to provide recommendations for effective incorporation of projecty-based assessment based on their experience with this assessment method. The thematic analysis of the interview data and the questionnaire's open-ended questions revealed that students recommend assessing individual contributions and facilitating group formation, teaching project management skills, and providing clear guidelines and continuous feedback.

To begin with, some students felt that they invested more effort in the project preparation than their team members, leading them to consider assigning the same grade to all group members regardless of their effort as being unfair. Hence, these students suggest that effort and achievement should be fairly and equitably rewarded in Project-based assessment. This finding echoes the results obtained by Hellström, Nilsson and Olsson study in which the authors found that "students prefer group learning in favour of written exams. However, when it comes to assessment the majority of students want some kind of individual grade" (2009, p. 4).

Besides, the participants recommended that teachers should not assume that students are already equipped with the organizational, self-regulatory, and collaborative skills that are essential for successfully carrying out a project. Rather, such skills should be developed prior to project asssignment to avoid any setback in the process. This recommendation is emphasized also by Bell (2010) who insists that skills such as planning, collaboration, time management must be taught explicitly taught to students. Similarly, Mergendoller and Thomas (2005) strongly argue that project management skills need to be taught, modeled and scaffolded.

Clear communication of assesment criteria is another recommendation provided by the participants. This seems to be especially crucial for ensuring that students know what is expected of them. When students have a clear idea about how their work is going to be evalued, their anxiety decreases and they gain more confidence in themselves for accomplishing the required assignments.

Additionally, students recommended the provision of ongoing support and feedback to ensure that they are on the right track. Rather than assigning the project and evaluating the end product, students suggested that they are guided throughout the project process to regularly address any problems or difficulties that might arise and hinder progress.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' perceptions and attitudes towards project-based assessment in higher education in Morocco. The findings revealed that students appreciate PBA's emphasis on authentic language use, collaborative learning, skill development, creativity, and meaningful engagement. However, the participants revealed that they faced some challenges related to group dynamics,

unequal participation, time management, and unclear expectations. Based on these findings and on students' insights, certain pedogogical implications are drawn.

Moroccan education institstutions need to teach project management and collaborative skills and make them part of their curricula and not assume that students are already equipped with these skills. İn line with this, it is also essential to provide clear assessment criteria and guidelines and design assessment tools for evaluating students' projects which also implies that educators have access to innovative assessment training programs and workshops. It is also premordial to ensure that both students and educators have access to the necessary materials and tools for facilitating and encouraging the implementation of project-based assessment within Moroccan institutions of higher education.

Although this study has various practical implications, it has some limitations as well. The first limitation of this study is related to the sample population. While the sample size is sufficient for exploratory qualitative research, it limits the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future research could consider investigating the issue with a larger and a more diverse population.

Second, the study is limited in the sense that it is exclusively based on students' self-reports for collecting data. Despite the fact that students' insights and perspectives are valuable and relatively under-represented in the existing literature, triangulation with educators' perspectives or observational data, for instance, would offer a more overarching understanding of the issues at hand.

In addition to that, the study's focus on students' perceptions of the benefits of project-based assessment without directly measuring learning objectives is another limitation. In this regard, future research could consider assessing whether these perceived benefits lead to measurable improvements in language proficiency, collaborative skills, or other learning outcomes.

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