



## Authentic Project-Based Learning in Times of Crisis

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### ABSTRACT

*The shift to an online learning environment during the Covid-19 outbreak has not been conducive enough for either active learning or fair assessment procedures that yield valid results. Accordingly, this research paper aims to investigate the extent to which Authentic Project-Based Learning engages students and hence provides a valid assessment of students' genuine performance and proficiency during online learning in EFL communication and Intensive English courses. Using a mixed-methods design, the researchers employed the self-completion questionnaires and focus group interviews to collect their data from their 100-purposively –selected participants. The findings showed promising results in terms of engaging students in the learning process, curbing online cheating, and ensuring reliable and valid assessments of students' performance. These results are significant in providing a pedagogical approach to be adopted by EFL educators during and after the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** academic integrity, authentic learning, Covid-19, online assessment, project-based learning (PBL), student engagement.

### Introduction

The pandemic outbreak, which has affected all the sectors including the academic, necessitated a shift to online instruction in academic institutions worldwide. This shift has been challenging to most institutions (Halaweh, 2021; OECD, 2020). Two main challenges were reported, namely curbing cheating in online exams (Golden & Kohlbeck, 2020) and engaging students (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). To ensure academic integrity and students' engagement, universities used different types of proctoring software and tools that align with the new learning environment. However, these measures were not successful and raised several concerns on the technical level and the capabilities of faculties and students in utilizing these tools. Despite the different procedures used (time constraints and/or proctoring software tools such as Respondus, Proctorio, or ProctorU), many educators were unable to control for the different forms of online cheating and to ensure valid and reliable results. Hence, the online environment has become stressful and not conducive enough for either active learning or fair assessment procedures that yield valid results.

Like all the academic institutions, the researchers' universities had to shift to online teaching during the pandemic. Online instruction has been used there since March 2020, the middle of the spring semester then. Knowing that online learning would be the mode of teaching and learning in the new academic year (2020-2021), one of the researchers, the Chair of the Languages and Liberal Arts Department, required the move into project-based learning (PBL) in Intensive English Language Program (IELP) and English communication classes to maximize students' engagement and

curb students' cheating or plagiarism. The researchers believed that project-based learning (PBL), an inquiry-based model highly correlated with learners' engagement (Almulla, 2020; Noviyanti et al., 2021; Randazzo et al., 2021) could be the solution to ensure active learning and fair assessment (Halaweh, 2021; Elzainy et al., 2020). The researchers hypothesized that the students become less prone to cheat and/or plagiarize when they have engaged affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively. Having been using PBL for two consecutive semesters, the researchers aimed to investigate the extent to which this strategy has been effective in realizing what it was meant for, that is, engaging students and curbing dishonest activities.

This research study was done in a small-sized private Lebanese university, which consists of three main colleges, namely the College of Business Administration, the College of Engineering, and the College of Arts and Sciences. English is the medium of instruction. That's why all its applicants must demonstrate a minimum English proficiency of 550 on the institutional TOEFL to be admitted as regular students into their programs. Otherwise, they take either remedial or intensive English courses depending on their TOEFL scores. Four intensity levels are ranging from beginner to advanced; these courses are IELP 070, 085, 095, and 100 respectively. ENGL 101 is a freshman English course given to Freshman students and to sophomore students that score between 514 and 549 on the TOEFL. All the students are required to take ENGL 210, English Composition, and Rhetoric, as a part of the General Education requirement.



## Literature Review

This section is divided into three sub-sections, the first of which reviews articles related to engaging online learning. The second and the third depict research studies related to combating online cheating and project-based learning respectively.

### *The Dimensions of an Engaging Online Learning Experience*

Creating a successful and engaging online learning environment that supports the achievement and well-being of students depends on the interrelation between several psychological-social factors. O'Shea et al. (2015) explain that "When shifting to online contexts, engagement takes on different manifestations due to the lack of face-to-face contact and how teaching and learning are mediated through technology" (p.43). Many studies categorize these manifestations under 1) psychological engagement: perceived social support and sense of belonging and 2) social and intra-individual interaction: self-efficacy and engagement (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kennedy, 2020; Vayre & Vonthron, 2019).

Similarly, Kahu's (2013) framework of student engagement describes the learners' interaction with the social-cultural context, psycho-social influences, and structural influences. The first two dimensions overlap with the previous explanation of the social and psychological factors. As for the structural-influences dimension, it is related to the course and the material design. Kahu explains that a course design, which encourages social presence and interaction, integrates real-life experiences and simulations into its content, and builds on students' world knowledge schemata, has a positive impact on e-learners' engagement. In addition, the institution support related to learning support center, counseling and administrative services, library, and other services make learners feel that they are still given a priority and attention for their needs.

Hence, interpersonal relationships and social interactions in an online environment represent an important social and emotional support for learners. Such type of support is also translated into teachers sending frequent personalized messages for students, constantly showing help by providing more information and learning facilitation, and holding individual or group conferences when students need that. The perceived social and emotional support from teachers enhances e-learner engagement and academic self-efficacy (Baczek et al., 2021; Martin & Bollinger, 2018; Vayre & Vonthron, 2019). Social support in online learning is also perceived by peers, which helps promote learners' retention and achievement as well as boost their self-efficacy.

Intra-individual factors are also part of successful online learning. More specifically, e-learners' self-efficacy belief has a direct effect on their emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. It affects the amount and level of effort in activities and in understanding complex concepts, their enthusiasm to reach their goals and develop self-regulation

strategies, their perseverance to overcome challenges, and their resilience to unpleasant situations (Hu & Hui, 2012; Vayre & Vonthron, 2019). Self-efficacy is not only related to academics; it also includes technical self-efficacy. Learners' technical competence with IT equipment and online platforms has a direct positive influence on their online-time investment, enthusiasm, perseverance, and academic self-efficacy (Baczek et al., 2021; Hu & Hui, 2012; Martin & Bollinger, 2018; Vayre & Vonthron, 2019).

Based on the above description of engagement, Brault-Labbé and Dubé (2010) categorize learners' engagement into three dimensions:

1. The affective dimension, related to the extent to which the learners are enthusiastic about learning and are attracted to the material
2. The behavioral dimension, related to the extent to which learners are willing to exert effort to overcome obstacles and perseverance to reach their goals
3. The cognitive dimension, related to the extent to which learners are willing to "reconcile", which implies their willingness to give up certain things and cope with the difficulties to fully take advantage of their engagement.

Accordingly, catering to all the dimensions of engagement secures learners' retention and successful course completion. However, Kennedy (2020) discusses that several researchers have argued that engagement components are not necessarily interlinked. For example, e-learners might show a behavioral engagement through checking the online platform and going over the required material. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they have been deeply and critically been engaged with the material (cognitive dimension). So, educators must design tasks and projects and encourage their learners to get involved in activities that foster all dimensions of engagement. Tasks designed according to inquiry-based learning models engage students across all engagement dimensions. Students are engaged in authentic contexts where they are asked to investigate and explore, analyze and inquire, and conclude and resolve individually or in teams. Involving learners in such types of learning models helps educators determine who is truly engaged and to what extent s/he is engaged (Kennedy, 2020). Moreover, they reveal students' originality and creativity as well as their academic integrity (Egan, 2018).

That's why this research study adopts the inquiry-based learning model, particularly project-based learning to engage learners on all engagement levels.

### *Online Cheating and the Combat of Academic Dishonesty*

Among the main challenges faced by educators is combating online cheating and maintaining academic integrity. The International Center for Academic Integrity defines academic integrity "as a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage" (as cited in Gamage et al.



2020, p.3). Conversely, academic dishonesty is defined as any attempt of cheating in terms of giving or obtaining assistance in a formal academic context without due acknowledgment (Berkeley City College 2018, as cited in Peterson, 2019).

The issue of academic integrity must be addressed if educational institutions want to save their quality of education and maintain their reputation and academic vision and mission (Egan, 2018; Peterson, 2019). The violation of academic honesty threatens accreditation and dilutes learners' degrees and universities' credibility (Egan, 2018; Peterson, 2019). Moreover, cheating has serious threatening implications on society in general and on learners as citizens and prospective employers in specific (Egan, 2018; Hart & Morgan, 2010; Peterson, 2019). In particular, in situations when the penalty is not serious or overlooked, learning is most likely to be devalued, and graduating students are most likely to be unprofessional and incompetent that are used to failing and cheating. With this mindset and attitude, these graduates will most probably resort to cheating and dishonest means in their workplace, and hence endanger society. This phenomenon has been proven by several research studies that found a positive correlation between cheating in college and cheating at work (Egan, 2018; Hart & Morgan, 2010; Peterson, 2019). The new generation is sadly "learning to inextricably combine the cheating culture with best business practices" (Crittenden et al., p.337 as cited by Egan, 2018).

Online cheating takes different forms, and since the beginning of Covid-19, academic integrity has been on the rise. Countless measures and exam designs have been adopted to minimize academic dishonesty. Text-matching was at the forefront of forms of academic dishonesty, and Turnitin has been the most common software used to detect plagiarism and deal with it (Gamage et al., 2020). This in turn has turned teachers into detectives overwhelmed with chasing their students. From here major pedagogical revisions were needed; among them are research projects based on personalized cases and problem-solving tasks (Gamage et al., 2020), information mapping to chunk the tasks, and rubrics to determine the success criteria of the final product (Egan, 2018; Gamage et al. 2020; Peterson, 2019). Other approaches depended on setting deadlines to limit and control the given time of an assignment and prevent learners from cheating. However, free-lancers and other online services that sell assignments within a short period made assessment security challenges. Student conferences were also used as forms of assessment and were moderated by several members. In addition, different social media platforms were used to encourage active participation.

Continuous low-stakes formative tests and different practical assessments (laboratory-based, performance-based, physical artifact, simulation-based, audio-based, and other forms) have also been alternative assessment forms, in addition to time-bound take-home exams based on essay questions and problems assessment, but this form required a lot of precautions. Pass/Fail has also been an option instead of

conventional exams. Contract cheating and online invigilation (remote online proctoring) have also been options; however, the latter couldn't be adopted in countries with poor infrastructure (Egan, 2018; Peterson, 2019; Gamage et al. 2020). Even in the countries, it was used in, it proved to be expensive as well as problematic, especially on the technical level. Another way of upholding academic integrity is by employing all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy in the teaching, learning, and assessment process. Moving across all the levels of the educational objectives, the pedagogical interchange between the learner and the teacher is clearer as well as the purpose behind the interchange (Gamage et al. 2020). Also, the high-stakes assessment based on Bloom's Taxonomy minimizes the chance of cheating as they test learners on what they were taught (Gamage et al., 2020).

However, despite all of the described measures and pedagogical approaches, there remains dissatisfaction and concern among teachers and learners. More empirical studies should be done for a clearer understanding of how online assessment should be designed to minimize cheating and maintain academic integrity (Egan, 2018; Noviyanti et al., 2021). Exploring further online pedagogies would "inform faculty's instructional choices" (Noviyanti et al., 2021, p.2), an aim which this research study attempts to fulfill.

### ***Project-Based Learning: Minimizing Online Cheating and Boosting Engagement***

Inquiry-based learning has been highly correlated with learners' engagement and self-efficacy (Almulla, 2020; Noviyanti et al., 2021; Randazzo et al., 2021). Among its different learning-based models is the project-based learning one (PBL), which the current study is based on. According to Almulla (2020), PBL is a constructivist learning approach based on projects that are implemented in authentic environments and that introduce appealing realistic problems and stimulate critical thinking, problem-solving skills, media literacy, and learners' autonomy and leadership. Hence, the nature of tasks is student-driven in which learners are involved in the constructive investigation, exposed to real-world context rather than theoretical, engaged in collaborative work rather than individual, and immersed with multiple conclusions rather than one, all of which are essential skills for success in the 21st century (Randazzo et al., 2021). More specifically, they collect data and learn how to organize and apply their knowledge followed by a thorough analysis, discussions, meaning-making, and reflection (Wu & Wu, 2020). In this way, learners show more in-depth reflections of what they learn as well as of their own life (Almulla, 2020; Noviyanti et al., 2021).

As for the teachers, they play the role of the facilitator who designs experiential and authentic learning tasks and creates a dynamic environment beyond the classroom in which students get engaged on the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive levels. Moreover, teachers negotiate knowledge rather than provide it (Almulla, 2020). They monitor the receiving and giving process of peer-feedback, provide



constant descriptive feedback themselves, and conduct frequent formative assessments that evaluate not only learners' understanding of the content but also their understanding of the feedback given to them and their ability to reflect on it and properly implement it (Grossman et al., 2019). However, this requires highly motivated instructors who are well trained in the design and implementation of such projects (Almulla, 2020; Noviyanti et al., 2021; Randazzo et al., 2021).

There are certain stages to consider when teachers implement PBL whether online or in face-to-face classrooms. The first stage is related to choosing an appealing topic related to students' life experiences. The topic should be introduced in a way that activates students' prior knowledge (discussion, videos, trips, simulating questions). After introducing and discussing the topic, the teacher introduces to learners a thematic, challenging, and open-ended question and encourages them to form their sub-questions. Then, learners carry out their projects in an authentic learning environment where they use all necessary sources, tools, and material to reach conclusions and reach their final product or answer. The third stage is related to the demonstration and sharing of content (video recording, open discussion, synchronous/asynchronous meetings, formative evaluation). This stage heavily relies on teachers' and peers' feedback, revision, and modification. Finally comes the evaluation and communication stage in which learners' product is measured according to a pre-shared rubric for quality and novelty (Aldabbus, 2018; Peffers et al., 2007).

On the other hand, the implementation of the PBL stages might be accompanied by certain challenges and demands. Instructors engaged with the PBL approach devote much more time preparing and following up on all the above-described stages. An updated challenge on the process is Covid-19, in which it has become difficult to separate the impact of the pandemic factors from the learning process. Also, teachers need to carefully consider the real-world implications of their designed projects and to make sure that they are led by students. This in turn requires more group and individualized attention to learners and more time devotion (Almulla, 2020; Randazzo et al., 2021). Tasks could be time-consuming for students too. Moreover, social loafing and unfriendliness might result among the team members and could have negative consequences on the quality of work (Almulla, 2020). This is why teachers' unpreparedness in terms of tools, sources, clear rubric and milestones, and enthusiasm would greatly affect their learners' attitude and engagement (Lasauskiene & Rauduvaite, 2015). They would be misguided and eventually lose focus. More importantly, the emphasis should be placed on the process of implementing the project stages rather than on the end product. Also conducting the project should be authentically done and aligned with exploring the real-world context (Aldabbus, 2018; Holland, 2015).

Hence, in-service training on implementing PBL and collaboration among faculty members is highly recommended, in addition to creating different interventions and assessment designs to guarantee a successful implementation process and end product (Aldabbus, 2018). Accordingly, further research to explore the effectiveness of PBL in developing learners' 21st-century skills is required (Aldabbus, 2018). Also, the literature does not offer enough concrete samples of assessment design which scholars can replicate for more empirical and valid results related to maintaining academic integrity and engaging students on multiple levels (Egan, 2018). More specifically, further data is needed on how to allow learners to incorporate their personal experiences and reflections into their projects, how teachers move from no grading to giving frequent low-stakes to high-stakes assessments to support their learners and develop their self-efficacy, how to embed these forms of assessments as part of the course work and not as a separate part, and how to use personalized assessment approach and provide efficient and timely feedback to ensure academic integrity among all members (Egan, 2018). In response to all these needs, the current study provides both qualitative and quantitative data that reveal how the adopted online assessment design, which is preceded by several low-stakes formative assessments and tasks, helps teachers curb e-learners' cheating and encourage originality of work.

## Research Questions

The following main and sub-questions guided this research study:

- To what extent do authentic project-based assessments (PBA) provide a valid evaluation of students' genuine performance and proficiency during online learning?
1. To what extent are students engaged with authentic (PBA)?
  2. To what extent does PBA help students refrain from cheating and depend on themselves during exams or writing assignments?

## Methodology and Methods

The researchers used the mixed-methods design, which involves the use of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, to get "an expanded understanding" of the research problem (Creswell, 2009, p. 203). To collect the quantitative data, the researchers employed a self-completion questionnaire, which consisted of 3 multiple-choice questions, 30 5-point Likert Scale questions, and one open-ended question. This questionnaire was piloted and revised before emailing it to the participants. Cronbach's Alpha was .846. As to qualitative data, it was collected through 3 focus-group interviews.

One hundred- fifty students of different English proficiency levels and genders were purposively selected to participate in this study. The questionnaire was emailed to all these participants; however, only 120 participants emailed the filled-out questionnaires despite the continual reminders. Twenty questionnaires were ruled out because of incomplete

answers. Hence, the researchers ended with only 100 completed questionnaires, which comprised the quantitative data of the study. Out of the 100 participants, there were 42

females and 58 males. As to their English proficiency levels, the table below provides the specific number of participants in each level.

**Table 1. Number of participants in each English level**

IELP 085	11
IELP 095	20
IELP 100	19
ENGL 101	17
ENGL 210	33
Total	100

The number of participating students in these levels represents the number of registered students in each level. Out of these participants who indicated their willingness to be interviewed, the researchers purposively selected 30 participants enrolled in different English levels and genders for their focus group interviews. The interviews were done across three pre-scheduled meetings and were moderated by the researchers themselves. Questions were open-based related to participants' experience with the authentic PBL process and assessment design.

The collected data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The researchers used SPSS (version 23) to analyze the quantitative data mainly descriptively. As to the qualitative data, the participants' responses (which the researchers did not edit to maintain the participants' voices) were transcribed and thematically coded. This helped in identifying and reporting common patterns, categories, and subcategories in participants' narration. Then the conclusions derived from both analyses were triangulated. The similarities

found between these conclusions contribute to the validity of the findings.

## Results and Discussion

The findings and their interpretations are presented under four sub-themes representing the commonalities between the two types of collected data: 1) A multidimensional engaging learning environment, 2) Enhanced self-efficacy and confidence, 3) Originality and academic integrity, 4) Challenges and recommendation.

### A Multidimensional Engaging Learning Environment

The quantitative data reveal that more than half of the participants enjoyed and felt engaged when working on their English projects. Almost the same number of the participants enjoyed collecting their primary data in their community and felt excited to share their collected data with their classmates during class discussions. Only a few did not enjoy any of the aforementioned activities as revealed in table 2 below. However, the majority of the participants believed that including these projects in their English classes rendered these classes more interesting.

**Table 2. Enjoyed and feeling Engaged when working on English projects**

	Strongly Agree/Strongly Agree (SA/A)	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/disagree (SD/D)
Enjoy working on projects	63%	25%	12%
Feel engaged	69%	24%	7%
Enjoy collecting data	63%	21%	16%
Feel excited to share data	64%	24%	12%
Projects add interest to class	81%	14%	5%

The qualitative data was in line with the quantitative data. The participants expressed their joy and interest in working on these projects as shown in the examples below.

*To be extremely honest, I love everything about the course itself and the projects since I am allowed to express myself and my own beliefs and thoughts through them. Moreover, I felt connected to the topics and the essays to the point that I became obsessed with them and I started reading them to my friends and family members. It made me feel proud of how far I have become thanks to our instructor (participant 17)*

*The authentic projects were beneficial and interesting (participant 29).*

The qualitative data provided an in-depth understanding of the participant's perceptions of the authentic

projects that could explain their responses in the questionnaire. During the interviews, the participants expressed their interest in different steps of the projects; some enjoyed the initial steps, which involved the audiovisual part as evident in the examples below:

*I liked watching the videos because when we watch the video we understand the topic more. I enjoyed this step the most (Participant 6)*

*the videos are more enjoyable and more beneficial than taking notes from people on any theme. I felt that interviews is taking time. I feel the videos are needed in every level (Participant 7)*

However, others enjoyed the data collection part more as reflected in the following responses:

*I enjoyed it when we collected data from people and talked about it in class and the videos (Participant 10)*

*the data collection stage helped us be sociable by making an interview with people and getting information. it makes our life easier with the project*

*and to understand more the theme also a little bit in the speaking projects (Participant 2)*

The design of the authentic project-based activities and the choice of appealing themes facilitated students' learning. Specifically, they helped the learners complete the required tasks and meet submission deadlines (See table 3 below).

**Table 3. PBL facilitating students' learning**

	SA/A	Neutral	SD/D
Complete the tasks	88%	10%	2%
Meet deadlines	85%	13%	2%

During the interviews, the participants expressed how doing the authentic projects in steps helped them gain time management skills as reflected in the testimony below:

*Projects are really important, it helps us to understand the importance of time management, how to make everything step by step (Participant 9)*

The authentic project-based activities also encouraged their social presence and interaction and fostered their emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement.

*the projects increased the sense of belonging in class and if someone doesn't attend class and participate in the discussion he is lost and takes everything serious he will get a bad grade in the end (Participant 17)*

Not only did the English projects engage the participants within the classroom, but these projects also helped them gain deeper knowledge about the outside world and relate it to real-life as shown in table 4.

**Table 4. PBL benefits beyond the classroom**

	SA/A	Neutral	SD/D
Gain deeper knowledge	78%	15%	7%
Relate projects to real life	80%	11%	9%

Through probing, the researchers were able to get rich data about how the design of the projects contributed to the participants' learning. Their responses revealed that the primary data-collection step added to participants' prior knowledge. Their investigation and data collection made them more aware of the social issues in their community. This helped them link the lesson to their real-life and to appreciate more the learning process.

*We felt the data collected we felt every problem we interviewed or we saw or we know about so... (Participant 13)*

*The data collected from people helps us show that the thing we are learning applies to real-life (Participant 6)*

According to the participants, their involvement with the community members was insightful and added more depth to their understanding of the theme. The investigation stage simulated deep knowledge and cognitive engagement and raised their awareness about things they ignored or had no idea about.

*The thing I enjoyed the most is collecting data from real people ... better than collecting data from articles or reading something... I know the truth more from this person I am interviewing. I know that it is real ... so real-life examples are better (Participant 11)*

*When you collect data from all people you will see that not all people suffering is the same. so you end up with so many things to write about (Participant 19)*

Moreover, most participants highlighted the effective role of the teachers in supporting them throughout the steps of

the project and keeping them more focused on work. 86% of the participants believed that the discussion sessions with their teachers were beneficial to them. This was also echoed in the participants' responses during the focus-group interviews. The participants' categorized the teacher's effective role in two areas: 1) the class discussion in which teachers highlighted important concepts and helped students dig deep into the sub-concepts and different faces of reality in the Lebanese community and 2) the continuous descriptive feedback on students' product that focused on the quality of work rather than grading.

*I want to increase the importance of the teacher in helping us pass the test easily and also in submitting the project. (Participant 18)*

*The discussion in the class with my doctor and classmate help us very much to gain more information. (Participant 19)*

These findings were in line with the literature (c.f. Baczek et al., 2021; Martin & Bollinger, 2018; Vayre & Vonthron, 2019; Kennedy, 2020). Thus, participants' multidimensional engagement and their deep understanding of the tackled themes added more confidence and fluency to their communication, hence the rationale behind the following theme.

### **Enhanced Self-Efficacy and Confidence**

The authentic project-based learning contributed to the participants' self-efficacy and confidence. Through linking the given content to primary data collection to the social support the participants received from their teachers and peers, the projects rendered the writing process easier for most of the



participants, who felt that these projects helped them develop more fluency in oral communication and gain new vocabulary (see table 5 below).

**Table 5. Enhanced self-efficacy**

	SA/A	Neutral	SD/D
Projects made the writing process easier	81%	16%	3%
Projects helped develop more oral fluency	78%	17%	5%
Projects helped gain new vocabulary	92%	7%	1%

The qualitative data was consistent with the quantitative data. In more detail, the participants talked about how writing became less challenging for the participants as their world-knowledge schemata were rich enough to make the planning and brainstorming stage easier than before.

*I felt the difference in writing because we have the background we have ideas and we are sharing them with our classmates which I used in my writing so we didn't feel lost (Participant 10).*

*There was a big difference in writing before and after passing through the project process... we were writing through the data collected through their pain and translating them into our words (Participant 13).*

In addition to having more confidence in writing, the majority of the participants reported richer vocabulary which helped them gain more fluency in speaking too.

*Projects tasks are a good way to be more active in studying the English language it allows us to be better in reading and speaking this language also it gives us more new words in this language ... (Participant 11).*

*The topics are important and varied and give us an overview of our society ... such as (women rights, etc.) It helps us gain new vocabulary words (Participant 1.)*

Self-efficacy and oral communication confidence were also enhanced by the data-collection stage as the participants

had to conduct the interviews themselves and build up a meaningful dialogue to reach the desired outcome.

*These projects were helpful for me, especially when I had to collect data from the community. They improved my skills in asking, which is the right question to ask and the way of asking, also it helped me to develop my self-confidence more (Participant 15).*

## Originality and Academic Integrity

The design of the authentic project-based tasks and its division into several stages, including “chunk” activities and several formative assessments before reaching the final summative assessment, played a major role in minimizing academic dishonesty among the participants. The participants' involvement in the investigation tasks and the personalized impact it took in terms of finding the suitable candidates in their community and recording the participants' experience not only urged learners to be committed to their projects but also provided them with sufficient background information about the theme to be able to discuss and write about it. The following table reveals that the majority of the participants did not feel the need to cheat after going through the step-by-step authentic projects.

**Table 6. Authentic projects curb cheating**

	SA/A	Neutral	SD/D
When working on projects, cheating becomes difficult	66%	27%	7%
Having developed the knowledge about the themes, I didn't feel the need to cheat in draft 1	83%	14%	3%
I didn't feel the need to cheat in draft 2	93%	2%	5%

The qualitative data was similar to the quantitative data. In more detail, the participants during the interviews explained how the class discussions of the collected data, their classmates' reflections, and the conclusions they shared whether individually or collectively contributed to their originality and involvement.

*I don't think that my colleague or I had to cheat to do our project because we got our information from the session discussions (Participant 3)*

*We are working on the data and we are collecting them so everything is clear and we do not need a*

*second hand or searching for anything ... it is all clear and we can work alone ...so no I don't feel that we need to cheat or search for any idea because all the data is in front of us (Participant 17)*

These findings fill a gap in the literature called upon by Egan (2018).

On the other hand, almost one-third of the participants thought that there were fewer chances to cheat in projects than exams (32% SA/A; 35% Neutral; and 33% SD/D). Likewise, some participants in the interviews admitted referring to

certain sources during the essay drafting stage as in the case of the following participants:

*Online learning helps students to cheat in authentic activities. While I'm writing my essay drafts and my authentic activities, I mainly use google translate to make sure that the idea I wrote will reach my instructor in an obvious and clearer way. And, sometimes I open the grammar videos that my instructor post on Moodle or other websites to make sure that I'm far away from getting grammar mistakes (Participant 5)*

*I just focus on my work while doing the exam but I refer to my friends in my assignment just to make sure I understood the task right (Participant 12)*

What these two participants said can explain the contradiction reflected in the quantitative data about the possibility of cheating in authentic projects. It is obvious that some of the participants are unaware of the concept of

plagiarism and its forms; they assume that checking a dictionary or a thesaurus online is a form of cheating or plagiarism. However, using any lexical or grammar resource during the writing process is recommended to help our students achieve lexical and grammatical accuracy in their writing.

Finally, only a few participants admitted to cheating but did not report the way they did it. They only provided their justification behind it such as participants 22 and 24.

*anxiety (Participant 22) fear of a decrease in GPA (Participant 24).*

## Challenges and Recommendations

Most of the participants found authentic project-based learning so helpful that they recommended the implementation of these projects in the coming semesters. They seemed to get more used to this type of learning as they expressed more comfort working on their projects compared to the previous semester (see table 7 below).

**Table 7. Participants' recommendations**

	SA/A	Neutral	SD/D
Recommend these projects	70%	20%	10%
Feel more comfortable working on these projects this semester	63%	28%	9%

The qualitative data revealed the same opinion among most of the participants despite the challenges they faced while working on these projects.

*The most helpful thing in the semester was the project because they were real-life examples (Participant 31).*

*It contains a huge number of assignments, but for me, it is the best way in our online semester to enhance our English skills (Participant 37).*

Other challenges and recommendations were deduced from the participants' responses during the focus-group interviews. The medium of online learning made understanding the material and retaining the acquired knowledge difficult for those types of learners that feel more engaged and safer with face-to-face teaching. Another consequence was the feeling of isolation from the class community.

*But I'd like it more if we had some sort of communication between each other...During the pandemic, we learn a lot from being in the company of our peers. However, in an online class, there are minimal physical interactions between the instructor and me, which resulted in a sense of isolation for me... (Participant 22)*

Some participants also reported other overwhelming factors related to the number of tasks and the amount of time and commitment needed to accomplish them. Similar findings were reported in the literature (c.f. Almulla, 2020).

*I want to highlight... how much time English takes from us because, in my opinion, English takes from me a lot of time and hard work .... Second especially when*

*we are taking online classes the work becomes double than when we were in University. (Participant 27)*

Surprisingly, only one participant complained about the poor internet connection in a county that lacks proper infrastructure to sustain good connectivity and power.

*The internet during the lesson is worst (Participant 23)*

The absence of such complaints could be attributed to the project design that takes into consideration the avoidance of over-reliance on synchronous meetings especially since the context the study was conducted in suffers from poor infrastructure. Despite this, the quality of learning was maintained through the recorded sessions on Teams, the continuous give and take asynchronous feedback, and the recorded conferences with the available members of the group. This explanation is confirmed by Participant 8 who believes that *"we can accomplish the task without any fear of losing time or problem with submission of the exam on time because of electricity or internet connection problems."*

Some participants seemed not to be happy with the group work design, so one participant suggested that group work should be optional and so should the choice of the project topic.

*In my perspective, group work should be optional, some students like to work alone, also some student's levels are higher or lower than the others, so they won't affect their grades. Projects about the personal experience may be better sometimes, students can share their experiences and thoughts so they help each other to be more mature (Participant 21)*



Finally, most of the recommendations were about the extension of due dates.

*I think that the instructor should provide more time for the due date of the project because it takes time, and we have several things to do ... (Participant 3)*

## Conclusion

The shift to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated a reconsideration of the teaching/learning process. The type of lesson delivery, the nature of the activities, and the design of the assessment have all been under study. More specifically, the alerting findings of students' disengagement with online learning and the intolerable rise in the different forms of e-learners' academic disintegrate have been reported in different research studies. However, till now, suitable interventions and solutions are still debatable. In alignment with the global academic effort directed towards "teaching in times of crisis", the following research study investigated the impact of authentic PBL on student engagement and originality of the performance of 100 online undergraduates in IELP and English communication courses. The triangulated qualitative and quantitative data shows promising findings, which accredits the approach to be adopted by educators not only during online learning but also

during face-face teaching. In terms of involvement and commitment, e-learners showed a noticeable engagement on the affective, behavioral, and cognitive levels. Students' engagement on different dimensions enhanced their self-efficacy and communication confidence. It also secured their knowledge retention and successful completion of tasks. The engaging online learning environment also helped teachers in minimizing online cheating. Learners' involvement in inquiry-based projects that require investigation, authentic data collection, analysis, and personal/collective reflection with peers and teachers all helped in combating academic disintegrate. The adopted assessment design encouraged originality of work and resulted, to a considerable extent, in fair and valid results. Finally, it is worth noting that the implementation of an authentic PBL approach saves many educators and e-learners from the hassle and challenges of poor online connectivity as this approach partly involves community engagement and partly relies on a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning. That's why the researchers recommend the use of PBL in EFL courses for all the benefits it can provide to educators from students' engagement to curbing academic dishonesty.

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