Digital Passion Projects for Online Education in Emergencies

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Abstract—The research studied the effectiveness of the digital passion project activity for developing oral presentation skills of undergraduate students learning English as a foreign language in online education in emergencies. Considering the basic intervention principles suggested by psychologists for students affected by disasters and mass violence circumstances, the researchers conducted a quasi-experiment exploiting the recognized potential of the passion project to build a positive emotional environment and encourage more efficient learning. The findings revealed that experimental group students outperformed control group students in the four out of five aspects of the rubric applied (content, coherence and cohesion, vocabulary richness and adequacy, and grammatical correctness). The results can be attributed to the observed increased creativity, inquisitiveness, engagement in learning, and self-efficacy as well as to the project marketplace method applied at the initial stage. The passionate involvement in the project was proved by the survey administered to check student's level of passion during the work on the passion project.

Keywords—engagement, passion project, academic performance, self-efficacy, education in emergencies

1 Introduction

The notion of 'education in emergencies', unfortunately, is not new in the modern world. In 2001, UNESCO published the thematic study on education in situations of emergency and crisis where educational emergencies were defined as crises situations caused by conflicts or natural disasters that lead to destabilisation, disorganisation and destruction of the education system [1]. Students are considered a vulnerable group at risk of developing anxiety disorders in crises situations, such as pandemics or armed conflicts [2] – [4]. Researchers indicate that the individuals affected by war are at high risk of posttraumatic disorders, anxiety, and depression [5]. The various effects such as damage to properties, death, lack of social support, and negative coping skills and others could negatively affect the mental state of Ukrainian people [5], [6].

Exceptional means of response in such situations are important emergency education programmes. Their primary objective is to respond to the immediate needs of students at different levels: humanitarian, pedagogical, organisational and infrastructural [1].

In February 2022, educationalists in Ukraine faced unprecedented educational emergencies and realised that the main tasks that they had to fulfil immediately were to organise uninterrupted education and to cope with the trauma of the war. The experience of pandemic-time online emergency remote teaching helped to deal quickly with the first task by providing synchronous and asynchronous teaching via various online platforms (Moodle, Google Classroom, Teams, Zoom, Facebook etc.) [7] – [10]. The second task to meet the psychological needs of stress-affected students (especially refugees, temporarily displaced persons or those who remained in occupied areas) was a big challenge. The teaching staff also affected by the war had to revise the content of the material and instructional design making efforts to establish a sense of normalcy and support students psychologically. The psychologists consider that to address the needs of people affected by disasters and mass violence it is necessary to follow five main intervention principles that have to promote: 1) a sense of safety, 2) calming, 3) a sense of self-and-community efficacy, 4) connectedness and 5) hope [11]. Considering these essentials of immediate and midterm mass trauma interventions, the researchers decided to utilise the passion project activity as a strategy having the recognized potential to reduce stress and build a positive emotional environment which can be productive for gaining emotional resilience and learning more efficiently [12], [13].

2 Literature review

2.1 Passion project in education

Passion project (also known as Genius Hour or 20% Time) is a relatively new educational trend that takes its origin more than 50 years ago in the business sphere. At that time 3M company offered their employees to spend some of their paid time exploring the projects of their interests. That approach benefited the production of many best-selling company products and was later followed by other top technology companies. Thus, Google established 20-time projects allowing its engineers to allocate 20% of their work time to research spheres catching their attention. Gmail and Google news are some of the 50% of Google's projects created during this time [14].

Later this movement was shifted to the educational environment to inspire students' interest in innovation and inquiry. Passion project in education was understood as "classroom practice devoted to enabling students to develop and explore their own inquiry question about a personally meaningful topic" [15]; a special form of personalised learning that presupposes the ability of students to have the choice, time, and autonomy for deeper learning that develops important 21st-century skills [16], etc.

Notably, despite widespread interest in the Passion project (or Genius Hour) among educators, as evidenced by numerous publications in the press and practitioners' blogs [17], [18], its history in education is not studied thoroughly. Some scholars consider that it was Pink's idea that the key factors that increase performance and satisfaction in

the modern world are autonomy, mastery and purpose but not reward [19] that challenged schools to turn to this project-based instructional technique [20]. The application of this technique in various educational contexts exploiting passion, purpose and intrinsic motivation was studied by Juliani and Wettrick [12], [13]. But these were the analyses of different practitioner-level findings.

Empirical research on the problem is rare. Most of these studies were conducted in the school environment and only some of them in the higher education context. Reuer [20] investigated the impact of Genius Hour on self-efficacy and science identity of ninth-grade science students and his findings were mixed: qualitative methods showed a positive effect on the development of science identities while quantitative methods demonstrated no substantial effect. Environmentally-focused Genius Hour was practised by Opsahl [21] who noticed the improved attitude of ninth graders towards the environment although its long-term effect was not investigated. The empathy of seventh-grade students as the main factor urging them to find real, STEM-based, solutions to authentic problems in the Third Space Genius Hour was studied by McCurdy et al. [22].

Downes and Figg [23] working with teacher candidates who participated in Genius Hour stated that they reported their improvements in creativity and participation and an increased understanding of teaching with technology. LeGeros et al. [24] studied middle school educators' perceptions of their experimentations with Genius Hour projects and showed the benefits of this approach for the improvement of self-direction and students' engagement through relationships and choice provision. Quinn also studied the perception of Genius Hour by the teachers who applied this activity. They noticed advantages both for their students and themselves: students showed increased levels of engagement, innovation, and ingenuity while teachers drew personal enjoyment and meaning from engaging with students. Quinn also summarised the important research areas of Passion Project potentials: the ability to bridge the existing gap between school experience and personal interests; the ability to redefine the instruction in education to meet the demands of learners in the digital society; the ability to foster connected learning which focuses on personal interests, the ability to build relationships, and the opportunity for future career and civic growth [15].

In language teaching the productivity of the Passion Project Journaling for the development of journal writing skills was examined by Kambara with 1st-year undergraduate students [25]. The findings showed the increased number of words written per journal entry, improved journal quality, and increased topic engagement. It was explained by the fact that students were engaged with topics they were passionate about in authentic communication using previously obtained knowledge which gave them agency to acquire new vocabulary and language structure in meaningful contexts and increased their sense of self-efficacy.

2.2 Passion and outcomes

One of the theories behind the Passion Project activity is The Dualistic Model of Passion according to which passion is defined as a strong inclination for a self-defining activity that people love and find important, and in which they invest a significant

amount of time and energy [26]. Stoeber et al. considered it to be a key factor in unlocking academic engagement [27]. According to this theory, there are two types of passion: harmonious and obsessive. Having harmonious passion, a person participates in an activity freely in a flexible way, they are not compelled to do it and they enjoy it, which produces positive emotions and outcomes. The activity is in harmony with other aspects of their sense of self and is autonomously internalised into the person's identity. On the contrary, with obsessive passion people feel an uncontrollable urge (internal or external pressure) to take part in the activity. A deliberately controlled internalisation of the activity to a person's identity is observed. Although they liked the activity, they feel compelled to do it, which leads to both positive and negative consequences.

The empirical research reveals that harmonious passion exploited productively in education may have several positive outcomes such as flow and positive emotions, psychological well-being, physical health, relationships, and performance [28].

A number of studies demonstrate a significant importance of emotions in the educational context. Positive emotions such as enjoyment are considered predictors of academic achievement [29], [30]. Chin et al. noticed a relationship between positive emotions and students' performance [31]. Hayat et al. [32] consider that a positive learning environment created by interactive approaches, cooperation but not competition, positive feedback to success, and a sense of belonging to class may evoke positive feelings of enjoyment, pride, and hope while learning, which in turn leads to academic success.

2.3 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, which is interpreted as a person's belief of having the ability to promote and mobilise one's actions to achieve a desired goal, was the main concept of Bandura's social cognitive theory [33]. Self-efficacy is a resource for controlling the events of one's life and a powerful motivational determinant of students' behaviour, influencing their perseverance, engagement, and academic success [34], [35].

Some research suggests that self-efficacy is considered an important factor in managing stress [36] – [38] and investigated self-efficacy as a mediator to mentally protect against the effects of stressors at the university [39], [40]. Others show a close connection between self-efficacy, positive emotions, post-stroke stress, and academic performance [41], [42], considering that self-efficacy beliefs can lead to excellent performance by increasing the drive to succeed [32]. But there are still only a few studies that have traced the relationship between specific metacognitive learning strategies, self-efficacy, and academic performance [32], [43].

Having considered the previous studies, the researchers ***hypothesise*** that, in emergency education, Passion Project can be a productive stress-reducing activity performed in a meaningful context able to promote the development of language skills due to the potential of passion for the topic to stimulate positive emotions and self-efficacy, which could lead to increased academic performance.

The purpose of the research was to study the effectiveness of the passion project activity for developing oral presentation skills of undergraduate students learning English as a foreign language in times of emergencies.

The *objectives* of the study were:

- to explore the seminal principles of the passion project activity;
- to study the anticipated academic success (development of oral presentation skills);
- to observe the link between passion, self-efficacy, and learning outcomes.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants were 52 first-year students majoring in Law at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University (Ukraine). They were enrolled in the course Foreign Language (Introduction to Legal English) and learning in the 2021-2022 academic year. The research program was designed under the university code of ethics, all participants confirmed their voluntary participation.

3.2 Instruments and research procedure

Initial stage. All students participating in the quasi-experiment were given the project assignment and could choose one of the two options: a traditional project or passion project. The options were suggested as the researchers considered possible stresses during the task implementation and realised that the emergency circumstances could present tremendous challenges connected with students' psychological well-being, physical state, living and learning environment, access to resources and technology, etc. According to the option that they chose, the students were divided into two groups.

The first group (N=25), the control group, chose a traditional project, they did not reveal a desire to work in an unlimited format. They received step-by-step directions and detailed instructions for preparing the project: a list of topics to choose from, format, structure, recommended list of resources, time to complete, project timeline and requirements, and technical characteristics of a digital presentation. This group received instructions at all stages of the project preparation.

The second group (N=27), the experimental group, opted to prepare a passion project on a topic of interest within the framework of the curriculum, and also present the work in the form of a digital presentation. It was explained in detail that students can use any means, forms and sources to prepare the work. The emphasis was placed on the aspect that the topics of the research could correspond to any passion or interest. For the effective application of language and cognitive skills, students were allowed to independently choose problematic topics that they were already passionate about earlier in the course of study, or others that were disturbing and appeared recently.

During the initial stage the control group students chose a topic from a suggested list, in the experimental group the *project marketplace method* described in detail by Walsh [44] was employed with some modifications. It consisted of several steps.

1. The first *inspirational step* was suggested as homework. Students were given the task to view a video unit about passion projects and their advantages. They were also asked to brainstorm with their groupmates or to think about ideas for a passion project proposal. In addition, they were assigned to make a 1-minute speech to persuade their group-mates that their problem area was interesting and to write a post-it note with a brief description of the problem.
2. In the *problem-pitching step* students presented their ideas making 1-minute argumentative speeches. The presentations were oral without any digital support thus the students had an opportunity to practise their verbal presentation skills paying attention to formulating concise and persuasive arguments to support their ideas. On presenting, they placed their post-it notes on the Padlet wall which was demonstrated by the researchers during the Zoom lesson.
3. Before pitching, students were informed about the next *voting step* and asked to pay attention to the enthusiasm of the speaker, persuasiveness, coherence, cohesion and language correctness to make their subsequent choice easier. Voting was conducted by the researchers via Google forms three times, each new time picking out the topics with the highest votes. Thus, 9 topics were selected by the participants and 7 groups were formed (3 participants in each group).

At this stage in both control and experimental groups all organisational matters were discussed.

Intermediate stage. Students of both groups were working on their projects. Once a week a tutorial was organised for both groups where they could consult with the researchers concerning the project. The students of the experimental group also met regularly with the members of their small groups to discuss the progress.

Final stage included several steps.

1. The students of both groups presented their projects in the form of digital presentations in Zoom meetings. They were informed at the initial stage that only their presentations but not projects will be assessed, primarily, since traditionally passion projects are not assessed [12], secondly, the researchers realised that in the emergency situation the students had different access to technology and resources as well as that online presentation delivery and interaction with peers could have a specific character. A rubric instrument was adopted to evaluate the students' oral presentation performance. To ensure the validity of the instrument, similar instruments in higher education in the field of presentation research were examined [45], [46]. It was found out that the four main presentation criteria were reflected in the studied instruments: the content, structure, delivery manners, and interaction with peers. The researchers adapted the studied assessment criteria focusing mainly on the linguistic aspects of the presentation and included the following to the applied rubric: content (thoroughness of the ideas presented and their originality); coherence and cohesion; lexical richness and adequacy; grammatical correctness; and phonetical correctness. Each criterion was allocated maximum 3 points (1 point – poor, 2 points – average, 3 points – excellent). Maximum points – 15. Subsequently, the rubric instrument was validated by 10 teachers of the Department of Foreign Languages with more than 15-year teaching experience in higher education.

The obtained results were collected, analysed and interpreted by means of SPSS. The comparative achievements of the control and experimental groups were tabulated. It allowed researchers to check the effectiveness of the applied approach for presentation skills development.

2. To investigate the level of passion and interest that was taken when performing a passion project all students of the experimental group were asked to participate voluntarily to complete a survey. The questionnaire was designed in line with previous studies [30], [32], [44], [47] and based on a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to answer 1 question concerning their feelings about the task they completed. The responses were obtained and converted to percentages presented in the pie charts.

4 Results

4.1 Passion project and academic performance

The average results of the control and experimental groups performance on project presentation are given in Table 1.

Table 1. The average results of the control and experimental groups performance on project presentation

Groups	Assessment criteria				
	Content	***Coherence and cohesion***	***Vocabulary richness and adequacy***	***Grammatical correctness***	***Phonetical correctness***
CG	2.34	2.26	2.24	2.5	2.5
EG	2.7	2.57	2.71	2.6	2.5
Max. points	3	3	3	3	3

The obtained results reveal that the students of the experimental group outperformed those of the control one in four aspects. The observation over the *content criterion* showed that experiment-group students elaborated the problem profoundly, supporting ideas with captivating evidence. It can be attributed to several reasons. The experimental group students were engaged in the activity in an interesting real-life environment. They had the freedom of choice as teaching was organised with open-ended inquiry, which stimulated them to apply their critical thinking and metacognitive skills to define the problem and choose the ways of its solution. The learners transformed from being passive to active. They worked in the learning community and it might have made them find interesting ideas. The technical aspect of the project presentation was not assessed due to the emergency conditions, but the researchers noticed that experimental group students used various software to present their works, probably, to produce more spectacular and affecting visuals of the topic as they were genuinely interested in. The control group students used only three: Microsoft Powerpoint, Canva, and Keynote. Figure 1 shows the presentation software used by the experimental group.

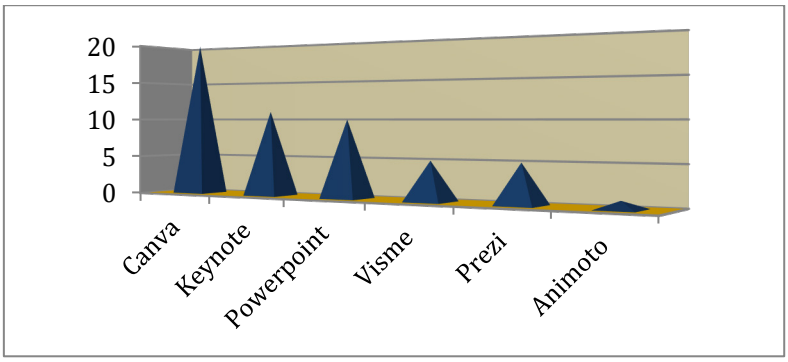

Fig. 1. Presentation software used for passion projects by the experimental group

The coherence and cohesion criterion showed that the speeches of the experimental group were more well-organised. It can be explained by the activity practised at the marketplace stage that required attention to the logicality and persuasiveness of idea proposals. The students trained to do it orally and in writing and had a chance to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of idea presentations by other students.

Assessment of the *vocabulary richness and adequacy criterion* revealed better results of the students of the experimental group concerning the breadth and depth of topical vocabulary knowledge. It might be connected with the work in the meaningful passion-driven context and wish to understand and present the topic better. Figure 2 demonstrates a presentation slide showing the extended range of the vocabulary on the topic.

Fig. 2. A presentation slide with extended vocabulary

The grammatical correctness criterion has less significant differences in the results while the phonetical correctness criterion has similar results.

The results of the independent-samples t-tests of the achievement scores of the experimental and control groups on the project presentation are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Independent-samples t-test results of the achievement scores of the experimental and control groups on the project presentation

Groups	n	Mean	SD	Mean Diff	t-value	p-value
CG	25	11.84	1.84	1,24	-4.0387	<0,0005
EG	27	13.08	1.38			

The data in Table 1 show that there is a significant (p<0,0005) difference between the achievement of EG and CG on the project presentation. The calculated t-value is larger than the tabulated t-value at 0.05. Furthermore, the mean values reveal that the experimental group (M=13.08, SD=1.38) demonstrated more excellent performance as compared to the control group (M=11.84, SD=1.38). It proves the hypothesis about the effectiveness of the suggested approach for the development of oral presentation skills.

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4.2 Passion level in the passion project

After completing the course, the anonymous survey for 27 students of the experimental group included one specific question "How interesting and captivating did you find the project?" in order to analyse the passion level they felt when preparing and presenting the project. The obtained results (in percentage) are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The results of the survey on the level of passion

Survey question	%
1. I was deeply interested or passionate about the area I have investigated	67
2. I was somewhat interested in the area I have investigated	30
3. I was indifferent about the area	3
4. I was disinterested in the area	0
5. I felt irritation about the area	0

The research demonstrates that the majority – 97% (67% – deeply impressed and 30% – interested) considered the assignment motivating, exciting and captivating, which, probably, entailed more developed public speaking self-efficacy and better academic performance. 3% of the respondents expressed lack of concern about the task, while no students showed negative emotions.

The students expressed their emotional condition about the assignment, stating *"I unexpectedly felt so absorbed in the topic that I even didn't follow the time of the day"*,

"I was so impatient and couldn't wait to share the information I had found", *"I'm just so glad that I managed to find such an interesting content, and I'm also so pleased with myself that I bragged about all to my friends and mom"*.

The students commented not only on the area they analysed but also in the open communication during the first two stages of work: *"We felt real excitement discussing the topic and proving it is worth exploring! We even voted!"*.

Some of the students noticed that they felt no shyness or shame when speaking English and even making mistakes because they were so much involved: *"I really didn't expect that I could speak in public. My English isn't good enough but I had important information to tell"*.

The participants also indicated that the work they did including searching, reading, analysing, translating and understanding, and also paraphrasing and summarising made them remember and use their knowledge of the language: *"It was so difficult at first to read and collect all that stuff but by the time we were to show up I felt I had learned a lot of new words"*.

Negative feedback was more related to external factors: *"Electricity was often turned off, I could not concentrate and the sirens were often wailing, it was hard to think about studying"*.

5 Discussion and limitation

1. The first result of our study was that such a learning strategy as the passion project has a significant impact on academic achievements. Scholars believe that well-chosen learning strategies and tools significantly affect students' willingness to learn more deeply [25], [44], [47], [48], [49], [50] as well as the success they make in solving more complex problems [33].
2. The results of our study also demonstrate the impact of positive emotions on academic performance, with a strategy such as the passion project as a mediator between passion, positive emotions, engagement, self-confidence at the time of learning, especially in the condition of emergencies, optimism, and improved learning outcomes. This finding is consistent with the results of other studies [29] – [32], [51]. Although, it should be noted that the emotional lift during the execution of the passion project as the only factor may not be enough to ensure significant academic success.
3. As assumed in our research and revealed in the results of this study, the passion-project strategy and positive emotions could be the mediators in the relationship between students' self-efficacy and academic performance. This is in line with the results of previous studies [34] – [38], [43]. Our research strongly suggests that the passion project and self-efficacy are related and that passion revealed by students in project creation influences the expectations of self-efficacy in protection against stress in emergencies, predicting also academic performance, and being a contributing factor to students' success.

The findings of our study educed a strong link between the passion-project strategy, positive emotions of self-efficacy (harmonious passion, joy, satisfaction, hope, pride of

capability to complete the task, feeling of self-success and confidence), and academic performance.

Students can study poorly not because they cannot or do not want to, but because they do not believe that they will really succeed in it. A learner can be captured by a certain type of activity, given the opportunity to choose a task topic, causing his interest and emotional upsurge, and thus reducing stress levels, this can presumably affect the improvement of academic skills, determining the learning outcome. In the current conditions, the passion project can be considered a distractor from the stressful reality in which students are forced to study.

It should also be assumed that self-efficacy determines the learning achievements of students even more than their academic abilities and knowledge. But self-efficacy is situational, so the choice of a learning strategy and specific tasks, such as the passion project, should be a priority among opportunities that contribute to improved performance in stressful situations, and may become a target of future research.

The results of this research should be supplemented in future studies, considering some limitations. First, this study only considers the participants of one university and the type of project that may not be generalised to other types of assignments or events. The current research suggests the future opportunity to explore sources and levels of self-efficacy that have not been explored.

6 Conclusion

Education in emergencies is drawing the attention of researchers nowadays. Educators are trying to find pedagogical means of response considering the intervention principles suggested by psychologists for application to people affected by disasters and mass violence. This study presents an investigation of the passion project as one of the activities which can presumably help to establish a sense of normalcy and support students psychologically.

Our theoretical design suggests the implications of using the Passion Project to increase engagement and generate positive emotions and a sense of self-efficacy to improve academic performance in the face of emergencies. The results of this study showed that students in the experimental group who were passionately involved in the project became more creative, inquisitive, and engaged in learning, believed in their self-efficacy, and showed higher rates of language development. The students of the experimental group have higher grades obtained in four aspects: content, coherence and cohesion, vocabulary richness and adequacy, and grammatical correctness. This fact assured the researchers to come to the conclusion that the passion project could be employed as an effective learning activity to get students involved, and achieve better results in developing oral presentation skills in the course of learning English as a foreign language in times of emergencies. The definite connection has been observed between passion as a positive emotion, a feeling of self-efficacy in the course of creating and presenting the students' findings, and learning outcomes.

During the experiment students were engaged in a sustained and self-directed research project and a positive emotional environment was built which can be considered productive for more efficient learning.

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