Renewing foreign language activities to support holistic student development in a technical university

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Abstract

With reference to most job advertisements, soft skills and personal attitudes are basically in high demand today. The significance of soft skills development concerning graduate employability has urged many higher education institutions to refocus their attention on a more holistic student development. The present study is intended to explicitly examine the renewed foreign language activities and their relevance in fostering holistic student development in a technical university. The strength of these language activities and their application to student development are elucidated along with a related contextual praxis. This study, therefore, suggests that foreign language lecturers should embrace a shared vision of seamless learning environment with other faculties not only to empower students to develop the relevant soft skills but also to cease compartmentalising student success in today’s higher education.

**Key words:** Holistic student development; foreign language teaching and learning; project-based learning; soft skills; technical education

INTRODUCTION

While the traditional education emphasises academic excellence, Omar, Abdul Manaf, Mohd, Che Kassim, and Abd Aziz (2012) and Robles (2012) reveal that, to date, academic qualifications alone are no longer sufficient to secure jobs both locally and internationally. Moreover, Ooi and Ting (2015) further affirm that “most job advertisements specify one soft skill or the other, and the most frequently mentioned is communication skills which encompass language proficiency, communicative ability, and interpersonal skills” (p. 10). According to Robles (2012), technical or hard skills are trainable from an employer’s perspective but soft skills are relatively difficult to be developed in the workplace. Many potential hires lack the soft skills required. As employer surveys have evidently reflected...
dissatisfaction with the extent to which these soft skills are fostered in higher education, universities must, therefore, reform themselves in response to this increasing pressure concerning graduate employability (Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven, & Furnham, 2010). In the context of technical education, Wolfe (2004 cited in Acosta, 2010) enumerates the types of knowledge and skills graduates frequently use in their subsequent professions. Teamwork and communication are among the top few required in the profession. Contrary to the traditional beliefs, professional or soft skills and personal attitudes are basically in high demand on the job market today. The significance of these soft skills development has urged many higher education institutions to refocus their attention on a more holistic student development. This has indirectly led to student development reform in higher education.

With reference to Quinlan (2011), existing curricula in higher education overemphasise on instrumental and economic goals and thus overshadow the development of people. Besides, Reif (2007) reveals that student affairs practitioners are solely responsible for overseeing students’ well-being and development throughout their campus life besides ensuring effective student engagement through meaningful campus experiences. This division of oversight of student development has created a rift between the functions of academic and student affairs and the gap between them remains prevalent in today’s higher education. What is religiously delivered in the universities contradicts what the real world actually seeks. In response to this challenge, changes in policies and practices should be adopted to transform universities (for this study, the language classrooms) into places of relevant learning, rearticulating, therefore, their positive relationship with students and society (Strange & Banning, 2015). This study is thus prompted to examine the renewed foreign language activities which are meant to support student development in a technical university. A theoretical foundation of the language activities is established within the context of language teaching and learning which comprises both second languages (SL) and foreign languages (FL) domains. Besides, a framework for understanding the practical features of the language activities based on the context and student needs is also made explicit. It is hoped that the renewed version of foreign language learning activities would be able to empower students to develop the relevant soft skills in the current educational landscape and may contribute useful insights to address the aforementioned challenges.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION
This study is underpinned mainly by two theoretical models, namely student development theory and constructivist learning theory upon which the renewed foreign language activities are based.

Student development theory
Among the theories of student development in higher education, the renewed foreign language activities incline towards the theory of student involvement. According to Astin (1999), student involvement is defined as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). Astin’s involvement theory is supported by five basic postulates. Firstly, involvement refers to the investment of energy, both physical and psychological, in various objects. These objects signify campus experiences and/or academic situations. Secondly, this involvement occurs along a continuum where different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object. Thirdly, involvement can be measured quantitatively as well as qualitatively. In other words, quantity does not always equate quality. The degree of learning and development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement. Lastly, the effectiveness of
any educational practice is directly related to the level of student involvement.

Besides, Pintrich and De Groot (1990) suggest that students who believe their study is interesting are more actively engaged in the learning process and more persevering in their academic work. Therefore, to arouse students’ interest and attention, the language activities must engage students with clear and specific purposes that are closely related to their campus experiences or academic situations. In other words, clear and specific purposes are believed to be motivating and often mediate student participation towards a higher level of performance (Nava Olmos, 2009). Besides, positive expectancies for success must be established through meaningful challenges and achievable goals whereby previously acquired knowledge and skills can be applied. Activating prior knowledge and accomplishing challenging tasks, to a certain extent, promote student positive spirits that support their intrinsic feelings of satisfaction (Williams & Burden, 1997). Tangible extrinsic rewards may also produce a certain degree of satisfaction. Often, with proper planning, the language activities are able to provide valuable learning experiences and satisfactions among students. All these aspects help elicit quality time and energy from students that in line with Astin’s statement: “The extent to which students can achieve particular developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains” (p. 522).

Nonetheless, Astin’s second postulate mentions, different students approach activities differently. Some are motivated to enrich their knowledge base and develop mastery for self-improvement. Others are more motivated to demonstrate their ability to earn a positive self-image (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). In this regard, the language activities design must accommodate students’ diverse needs (Cabrera Méndez, 2011). Besides providing new learning experiences to students, the renewed language activities are designed to meet the expectations and needs of students from diverse backgrounds and learning styles. More authentic learning environments are also created for students to engage in tasks that they are likely to encounter in the real world. These real-life contexts are believed to motivate student involvement as well as promote reflective and collaborative learning (Anaya & Martín Peris, 2006). Attention to student diversity fosters not only the acquisition of social skills and prosocial behaviour but also the development of tolerance, acceptance and problem-solving skills as well as real-life experiences across different physical spaces and settings (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2012).

**Constructivist learning theory**

The renewed foreign language activities also subscribe to student-centred learning and collaborative learning models that are grounded in constructivist learning theory. According to Ertmer and Newby (2013), “both learner and environmental factors are critical to the constructivist, as it is the specific interaction between these two variables that creates knowledge” (p. 55). In other words, students (learner factor) construct knowledge from their experiences and interactions occurred in realistic settings (environmental factor) to facilitate higher levels of cognition.

**Student-centred learning.** With reference to Machemer and Crawford (2007), “student-centred learning, as the term suggests, is a method of learning or teaching that puts the learner at the centre” (p. 9). This concept has been carefully defined as:

The perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs
and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners) (McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 9).

In student-centred learning, the roles of teachers have undergone a major transformation. Teachers have stopped being a mere transmitter of knowledge and becoming a mediator in its construction. Besides, students have grown to be active learners, managing their own learning flexibly and autonomously. This indirectly raises their awareness of being able to learn independently and becomes a stepping stone towards learner autonomy (Ikonen, 2013; Tanyeli & Kuter, 2013). Henson (2003) outlines six important dispositions in relation to student-centred learning, they are:

a) experience-based learning: Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s constructivist theories, as well as Dewey's and Kolb's models of experiential learning, affirm its importance in education
b) students’ qualities and dispositions: the analysis of student needs has become an integral part of curriculum development (Castellanos Vega, 2010)
c) students’ perceptions: students’ beliefs and interests often lead to a higher level of performance, hence, today’s learning is a “shared responsibility” (Chocarro, González-Torres & Sobrino, 2007, p. 86) between lecturers and students
d) students’ curiosity: it is generally believed that the incitement of students’ curiosity about their surrounding reality through meaningful and engaging activities will promote effective learning
e) affective learning: it has a decisive influence on student learning processes as Henson (2003) claims, “learning is best when it involves emotions” (p. 15)
f) free from fear learning environment: Henson (2003) uses the word ‘fear’ but we believe that a ‘pleasant environment’ with pertinent “affordances” (Van Lier, 2004, pp. 90-91) and achievable goals can facilitate and encourage learning

The renewed foreign language activities attempt to meet these key concepts of student-centred approach that focus on learners. On the one hand, these activities offer a variety of real-time stimuli that challenge students’ capabilities: Learning to learn, problem-solving and decision-making skills, among others. And, learning goals set are able to enhance student metacognition (Locke & Latham, 2006). On the other hand, the language activities also create an affective space for students to foster mutual support, trust, relationships and interactions (Jiménez Luna, 2005), and at the same time promote interpersonal skills. Another prominent feature of these language activities is student expectations and needs are taken into consideration since the initial stage. In sum, the concept of student-centred learning is clearly favourable in improving the quality of student development as this approach concerns all the participating learners.

Collaborative learning. According to Lillo Zúñiga (2013), collaborative learning corresponds to a process in which all group members negotiate with one another, share responsibilities, exchange opinions, make decisions and reach a final consensus in a coordinated manner. The group dynamics constitutes the primary means for knowledge construction, translating the effectiveness of collaborative work into a final outcome. It is suggested that learning collaboratively can improve students’ problem-solving strategies (Bruner, 1985), promote greater retention (Johnson & Johnson, 1986) as well as foster critical thinking (Gokhale, 1995). In this respect, the renewed foreign language activities seek to provide a collaborative learning platform for students to work together to achieve shared goals. It is believed that students learn more effectively when they learn collaboratively.
Along the process, they are exposed to ample opportunities to synthesise, analyse, and evaluate ideas collaboratively. As mentioned earlier, this collaboration is beyond student-student level; it is extended to a lecturer-student partnership.

The challenge in making collaborative learning effective is “in developing the students’ interaction skills, promoting collaborative problem solving, and providing students with emotionally and intellectually stimulating learning environments” (Sharan, Shachar & Levine, 1999 cited in as Nussbaum et al., 2009, p. 148). It is also crucial to engage students with specific and challenging purposes associated with their learning and needs in order for collaborative learning to be effective. To increase the effectiveness of a collaborative learning approach, Johnson and Johnson (1994) underline the following five conditions: Positive interdependence, individual and group accountability, promotive interaction, appropriate use of social skills and group processing.

The language activities also act as collaborative scaffolding that prompts social interactions among students, supports construction, modification and reconstruction of hypotheses, encourages joint problem solving and hence leads to a richer knowledge building on a common platform. According to Van Lier (2004), this notion is rooted in Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) that suggests learning with the assistance of others can be a better indicator than what the learner can do alone where the learner’s mental development is concerned. In other words, Vygotsky’s constructivist theory emphasises the importance of social interaction experiences in cognitive development (Blake & Pope, 2008). These interactive experiences are considered parts of the scaffolding that provide a sense of security for students, especially the less proficient ones, enabling appropriation of jointly constructed knowledge and therefore group cohesiveness. In short, learning is not only an individual activity; it is indeed a mutual social construction. Hence, the renewed foreign language activities allow students to support and learn from one another, apply different strategies to retrieve information, assess their own difficulties and ask for help whenever necessary, assume responsibility for their own learning and attempt to make quick decisions while working collaboratively. As a conclusion, scaffolding in a true collaborative context where students with varying levels of abilities compensating one another can make learning more effective and successful.

**METHODOLOGY**

The challenge, therefore, is to renew the format and the content of traditional foreign language activities to support holistic student development from an academic perspective. The research methodology can hence be divided into three main sections: (1) renewal of foreign language activities, (2) research targets and (3) procedures.

**Renewal of foreign language activities**

Previously, foreign language activities were coordinated entirely by the thoughtful professionals. Students, on the other hand, relied heavily upon lecturers’ instructions and remained passive in their learning process. Foreign Language Unit of this campus hence implemented rapid reforms in the semesterly foreign language activities to replace the outdated and inadequate practices. All foreign language lecturers agreed to focus more on student development, especially in terms of soft skills development. At this juncture, it is imperative to reiterate that the main objective of this study is to support student development from an academic perspective and not to improve the linguistic aspects of the curricula per se.
This study adopted a project-based learning (PBL) approach. According to Thomas (2000), a true PBL encompasses five criteria, they are: Centrality, driving question, constructive investigations, autonomy, and realism. The PBL adopted in this study only fulfilled four of these five criteria except the centrality because the foreign language PBL forms part of the curricula in the research context. The structure of the project was based on Ribé and Vidal (1993) model that consisted of three stages. The first stage is termed ‘inspiration and foundation’ and it indicates the opening of the project including the thematic orientation and foundation work. The second stage, ‘preparation and execution’, focuses on planning and running the project collaboratively. The final stage is ‘presentation and evaluation’ and it involves procedures for presenting the project publicly followed by feedback and evaluation. All projects involved careful walk-through of all the components in each stage based on the nature of the themes chosen. These components may vary from project to project and this helps spark creativity and innovative capacity of lecturers and students.

In general, the renewed foreign language activities allow students to collectively decide the type of activity they desire, whom to work with (form their own working groups), how to go about (applying various strategies), what (opinions and suggestions) and how to communicate (smaller groups or open discussions). Within the stipulated timeframe, students work collaboratively with their peers and lecturers to make the activities successful. To further elucidate the renewal process, in particular, a comparison was made between the traditional and renewed foreign language activities as shown in Table 1. Enumerated in Table 2 are features of the renewed foreign language activities in relation to the Learner-Centred Psychological Principles (McCombs & Vakili, 2005) including the factors (domains) important to learning.

Table 1. Comparison of traditional and renewed foreign language activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Foreign language activities</th>
<th>Justifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mode of learning</strong></td>
<td>Linear (rote and dependent)</td>
<td>Spiral (creative and self-directed) To foster a culture of creativity in the improvement of teaching and learning (Smith, Nerantzi &amp; Middleton, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mode of delivery</strong></td>
<td>Instructional-based; teacher-directed</td>
<td>Collaborative and engaging tasks Involved is able to help students become aware of their own needs and set their own goals, this will eventually lead to learner autonomy (Ikonen, 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Freedom of choice</strong></td>
<td>Restricted or no choice; decision-making is centrally based</td>
<td>Students’ decision; decision-making is shared by all Having choices allows students to gain control or ownership over their own learning. This, in turn, helps them develop a sense of responsibility and self-motivation (McCombs, 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td>Teacher-centred; separate disciplines</td>
<td>Learner-centred; integrate disciplines Integrate disciplines, including affective learning (Gano-Phillips, 2010), to enable students to make connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student participation</strong></td>
<td>Students are passive absorbers of information and authority</td>
<td>Students are active participants and planners Active participation greatly reduces spoon-feeding phenomena in student learning (Abu Samah, Jusoff &amp; Silong, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>Mostly hard skills</td>
<td>Mostly soft skills Provide ample opportunities to practice the underrated soft skills (Gibb, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment</strong></td>
<td>Summative: norm-referenced and graded</td>
<td>Formative: progress-oriented; self-assessed and benchmarked Awareness and assessment of one’s own learning relate closely to metacognitive development (Ikonen, 2013). Final product is rarely the end point</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Table 2. Features of the renewed foreign language activities in relation to the learner-centred psychological principles including the learner-centred factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of activity</th>
<th>Learner-centred factors</th>
<th>Learner-centred principles (P)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students collectively decide the type of activity they desire and opt for personally relevant learning experiences</td>
<td>Cognitive and metacognitive (P1-P6)</td>
<td>P1: Nature of the learning process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Motivational and affective (P7-P9)</td>
<td>P6: Context of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual differences (P12-P14)</td>
<td>P8: Intrinsic motivation to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P12: Individual differences in learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and teachers establish new learning and social relationship in terms of their partnership in co-organising activities</td>
<td>Motivational and affective (P7-P9)</td>
<td>P7: Motivational and emotional influences on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developmental and social (P10-P11)</td>
<td>P9: Effects of motivation on effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students encounter ample opportunities to work and learn from one another in different situations; teachers learn about student interests and learning needs</td>
<td>Cognitive and metacognitive (P1-P6)</td>
<td>P10: Developmental influences on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Motivational and affective (P7-P9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developmental and social (P10-P11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are engaged in the activity through self-assessment and constant reflection on experiences gained; teachers evaluate the activity together with students in a democratic and participatory manner</td>
<td>Developmental and social (P10-P11)</td>
<td>P10: Developmental influences on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual differences (P12-P14)</td>
<td>P14: Standards and assessment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These principles were applied as a framework to systematically and holistically assess the renewed foreign language activities from a learner-centred perspective.

Research targets

The research target for the study can be described basically in two areas: the context and the participants.

This research was conducted in one of the campuses of a local technical university where foreign languages (both Mandarin and Spanish) are compulsory subjects. The university offers a variety of foreign languages in various campuses, including Arabic, French, Korean, Mandarin, Russian and Spanish to strengthen its engagement with the world. The country consists of a multiracial population with Malay as the official language and various second languages: English, Mandarin and Tamil. In this university, the Mandarin subject comprises a total of 56 contact hours (in two semesters) set in a natural context (Manga, 2006) while the Spanish subject consists of only 42 contact hours (in one semester) within an environment that lacks natural exposures to achieve authentic communicative competence. Student learning assessments are generally based on their individual work such as assignments, quizzes, tests and examinations. In this context, the learning content is delivered to students who rely heavily on teacher direction. There may be group work in normal classrooms, but
authentic peer interaction among students is evidently scarce. Over a 14-week semester, students are also required to accomplish some linguistic activities to fulfil the maximum number of hours required. Among these linguistic activities, student development concept is newly introduced through a project-based learning approach to replace the traditional practices.

The students involved in this study consist of youth and adult from both Diploma and Bachelor programmes, aged 18-28 years, proceeded from various local and vocational learning institutions, namely Institut Kemahiran Mara (IKM), Institut Kemahiran Belia Negara (IKBN), polytechnics, matriculation colleges, among others. From these local learning contexts, the students are generally deemed to be non-participative, passive recipients of knowledge and surface learners. This corresponds with Thanh-Pham (2010) who claims that the “Confucian Heritage Culture” (p. 23) has been deeply rooted among Asian students. On the whole, the students are new to higher education and the admissions statistics shows that there are more male students enrolled in this campus every semester. Speaking of their language competence, all students possess some basic knowledge of English with a majority of low to medium proficiency (Omar, Taib & Basri, 2012). The acquisition of Mandarin may occur when students interact with other Mandarin speakers inside or outside the classroom. However, Spanish is a foreign language and students have very few opportunities to practice Spanish outside the classroom as the Spanish-speaking community available is remarkably small. Despite the fact that the existing clubs and societies in the campus provide students with myriad experiences to promote student development, a good number of students, especially the passive, reticent, unprepared as well as the commuter students, are believed to being left behind along the process.

**Procedures**

To sample students for the projects, convenience sampling technique was used. Students who had little or no experience in organising activities were highly encouraged to take part during the first two weeks of the semester. As according to Economic and Social Research Council (2012), researchers have no rights to compel student participation through any form of coercion. Research ethics encourage voluntary participation. Students were therefore openly invited to participate in the projects until the number of students required was met. After the sampling process, the sampled students carried out the projects accordingly following strictly the project structure. Observation and reflection were performed whenever necessary throughout the projects.

**Discussion**

Various projects have been organised using the renewed approach. Mandarin projects, for example, Chinese Character Writing Competition and Dictionary Challenge were carried out while the Spanish projects including Cooking Demonstration, Talent-time and Photo Contest were also conducted accordingly. However, to ensure greater clarity and a better understanding of the discussion, only one of these projects was discussed in this section as a model for the study. In this case, Spanish Cooking Demonstration Project was elaborated in detail according to the project structure.

**Stage 1 – Inspiration and foundation**

The project commenced in the first week of the semester. Via campus E-Learn website, students began to vote for the Spanish project they desired. Besides, they were encouraged to do research on the possible activities that might appeal to them. The contextualisation and
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authenticity of the collective project are believed to help create an affective space for student integrations and interactions. As Williams and Burden (1997) argue, “learning is greatly influenced by the environment in which it occurs” (p. 207), a motivating atmosphere as such was initiated in hopes of evoking student intrinsic motivation and therefore inspiring their active participation. In addition, the feasibility of the chosen project (in this instance, the Spanish Cooking Demonstration) was explored together with the students based on the objectives anticipated. At this point, students not only become active participants but also planners and problem solvers. Freedom of choice indeed allows students to gain ownership over the learning they care about. This helps develop a sense of responsibility and self-motivation towards learner autonomy (Ikonen, 2013; McCombs, 2012). Subsequently, a Student Committee was formed by way of convenience sampling towards the end of the second week of the semester. After the number of committee members required was met, a briefing was given by the respective lecturers. The Student Committee began to work together according to the ground rules as incorporated in the following stages.

**Stage 2 – Preparation and execution**

During this stage, the lecturers observed closely the project, monitoring, guiding, facilitating and working collaboratively with the Student Committee for six weeks until the event day. The communication was not limited to face-to-face sessions, but extended to a wider range of ICT devices, for example, email, Facebook, mobile apps, among others as students today are the key consumers of technology, especially the Net Generation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) who are defined by their high dependence on the media and their technological multitasking capabilities. Information technology not only has become an important component in the ecology of modern living, but also a strategic enabler for student development and learner autonomy (Lobato Fraile, 2006).

Additionally, Hockly and Álvarez (2005) state that “no matter how autonomous the students may become throughout the project implementation, the teacher assumes responsibility for the learning process as a whole and reserves the right to intervene to help, advise and set new objectives” (p. 77, own translation). By acknowledging the student interests and capabilities, lecturers’ role as facilitators at this stage is to enable students to discover possibilities in learning and decide what they want to explore in the given context (Lobato Fraile, 2006; Vázquez López, 2009). Spoon-feeding ideas and suggestions are no longer a plausible practice but linguistic and affective supports have to be always afforded. For this project, students decided themselves the posts they wanted to hold in the Student Committee and lecturers attempted to provide appropriate support for them to explore new experiences and challenges.

The project was designed in such a way that the preceding phase fed the succeeding. The previous input provided students with the relevant knowledge to inspire their creativity and innovation in the project. During this initial preparation stage, students’ strategic actions were empowered from establishing new connections with their own resources and developing personal operating models to managing the work plans based on previous experiences. Besides learning strategies, the project also promoted organizational and methodological strategies including declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge (Lobato Fraile, 2006). In this regard, exploring Spanish cuisine and recipes, defining specific roles and responsibilities of team members, organising meetings, orchestrating workflow, making decisions, assessing resources, resolving conflicts, managing changes, among others were encouraged.
During meetings and discussions, freedom of expression, discussions and feedbacks on the project progress fostered effective interactions between students and lecturers. Besides, students were provided opportunities to learn how to respect different opinions, analyse metacommunicative elements and therefore enhance their communicative competence. Feedbacks from the meetings allowed students to become more aware of what they have known and what they have not known. According to Hernández and Ventura (1998), students process feedbacks internally as well as externally. Internal process summarises what they have done and what they have learned while external process compares the feedback in different situations to create meaningful connections between concepts. These processes afford new resources for the students including a conceptual map, mind map, Gantt chart, among others. Broadly speaking, the sharing of different aspects of the project urged students to revise their respective working plan and make necessary changes. In our opinion, this may further incite student interest and curiosity about the surrounding reality and to mould their worldview, motivations and expectations (Miquel, 2003).

At the later execution stage, the project equates to action. This action allows students to learn how to manage the resources of diverse nature and complexity, including human, financial, material and technical resources (Figueroa Miranda, 2005). In this project, students worked outside the classroom, both autonomously and collaboratively, communicating with authentic informants comprising peers, teachers, student affairs practitioners, administrative staff and others. The act of soliciting or exchanging information not only constitutes discovery learning but also helps overcome potential student passivity in their learning process. It is suggested that only belonging to a group does not guarantee effective teamwork. It is crucial that the collaborative process involves a confrontation of different perspectives and the final negotiation of a shared point of view (Mazzoni, Gaffuri & Gasperi, 2010). This project deliberately created a collaborative climate for each member to feel like an integral part of a whole. The subcommittees, therefore, became a small laboratory of trial and error for students to construct their own communicative skills and social identities. While teamwork was vital since the initiation of the project, independent learning was not forgotten either. This project also attempted to promote Directed Independent Learning (DIL) where students were concurrently engaged, enabled, facilitated and supported by lecturers and the appropriate learning environment to achieve diverse learning goals. As Thomas, Jones and Ottaway (2015) affirm, “DIL is integral to students’ development as autonomous learners and their graduate attributes” (p. 8).

Before the Spanish Cooking Demonstration event day, the Student Committee started a day earlier to refine and rehearse their final plan. The core committee then held a discussion with the lecturers to avoid any inadvertent mistakes in the subsequent stage.

Stage 3 – Presentation and evaluation
On the event day, the Student Committee was required to be at the venue early to polish the final preparation. All members assumed their specific roles accordingly in the Spanish Cooking Demonstration. They were encouraged to continue improving the final stage of their project before the other participants started to appear. During the event, they were provided opportunities to learn how to think critically to resolve any unforeseen problems and to decide on the best reactive solution on any matters that might arise. The event ran from 10am to 4pm and the lecturers supervised closely the event with minimal interference.
Public speaking has always been a daunting experience for many students. It is not entirely true that they cannot perform. Often, it was their nerve that overcame them into a state of silence with a blank mind, dry mouth, fast heartbeat and sweaty palms. Furthermore, entertaining and ushering distinguished guests such as the Head of Campus, Deputy Deans, and Section Heads pose great challenges even for the lecturers, what more for the students. Therefore, an ideal presentation is rarely expected. Making mistakes during the presentation, from our point of view, is a very important step for both lecturers and students. As Wendt (2009) suggests, mutual trust will be improved if teachers are able to lead students to the edge of their ability, but not past it. Failure itself is learning and it is important for innovation. If students value and learn from their failures, figure them out and fix them, they will be successful ultimately. Based on these accounts, the project evaluation or debrief came much later after the event.

Despite the main objective of this project is to support holistic student development, the observation indicates that several tasks of the project paid attention to some basic communicative skills in the target language (Spanish) as detailed below:

**PRESENTATION:** Student Committee welcomed the crowd and introduced themselves in the target language: name, age, origin, languages spoken, etc.

**LINGUISTIC:** student prior knowledge regarding some linguistic features was activated, such as vocabulary, word and phrase formation (greeting, self-introduction, food ingredients, cooking verbs, thank you notes, etc.).

**SOCIOLINGUISTIC:** students were exposed to various expressions in different sociological contexts (formal and informal); the adequacy of meaning and appropriateness of the form for different communicative functions (the usages of *usted* and *tú*, etc.).

**STRATEGIC:** students were encouraged to strategically employ verbal and non-verbal communication (facial expressions and gestures) to compensate for communication failures due to inadequacy in one or more areas of communicative competence.

This project, in some ways, complemented the development of student linguistic and communicative competence in the formal classroom for the beginner level (Chamorro, 2009). As a result, the variety of tasks allowed students to embrace the extensive use of varied strategies and reflection on different competencies.

Project evaluation is an instrument that measures the degree of achievement of the objectives set at the beginning of the project (Figueroa Miranda, 2005). Hence, a post-mortem meeting was held about a week later to evaluate the project. To continue encouraging student involvement, the evaluation of the project was a joint venture between lecturers and students where both the processes and the results were evaluated in a democratic and participatory manner. At this point, the project continued to advocate student-centredness. On the one hand, the evaluation allowed students to develop argument skills, practising the ability to assess the veracity and suitability of an opinion and adduce grounds to support the validity of their propositions (Lobato Fraile, 2006). On the other hand, it allowed lecturers to assess the level of student interest and success in organising the project, hence the strength of the adopted approach. Towards the end of the evaluation session, a self-assessment was also performed to verify students’ achievements in their own learning. Students were encouraged to reflect on what and how they have learned during different moments throughout the project because different learning experiences offer different realizations to different students.
A successful execution was not the only goal of the project considering the fact that the implementation of any educational practice did not always guarantee the achievement of all its potentials. Lecturers’ reflections revealed that this project fostered not only student development but also staff and school engagement. Multiple learning opportunities were made available for lecturers as well as policy makers to respond to the challenges in shaping a learning environment more conducive to holistic student development. Table 3 summarises the features of Spanish Cooking Demonstration and the relevant skills involved (Voogt & Pareja Roblin, 2010).

**CONCLUSION**

Student development is a continuous process that can be sustained by various personal or situational motives. According to Marsh (2012), emergent educational proposals incline towards learner-centricity that emphasises on inclusion, innovation and integration while promoting competence in rich learning environments. There are indeed many ways to afford appropriate student development and enrichment opportunities to the diverse student populations. Adopting a project-based learning approach in the foreign language context, as Omar, Taib and Basri (2012) claim, “can rejuvenate the learning environment, energise the curriculum with real-world relevance and spark students’ desire to explore, investigate and understand their world” (p. 39). Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that students may not surely develop the necessary skills through these potential activities. In the renewed language activities, the students were provided with relevant learning opportunities to empower themselves to develop the desired soft skills. It is indeed a preliminary effort from the foreign language lecturers to embrace a shared vision with other faculties to support holistic student development.

**Limitations of the study**

The limitations of this study are basically due to the boundaries of the inquiry. The study focuses on a setting where Mandarin and Spanish are compulsory foreign language subjects and the students are predominantly males. Although the experimental design and process may yield results useful to similar settings, it is beyond the study to generalise its findings to other foreign language learners worldwide. A successful

Table 3. Summary of features of Spanish Cooking Demonstration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of activity</th>
<th>Spanish Cooking Demonstration</th>
<th>Relevant skills involved (See Voogt &amp; Pareja Roblin, 2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students collectively decide the type of activity they desire and opt for personally relevant learning experiences</td>
<td><strong>Stage 1</strong>&lt;br&gt;It is believed that a motivating environment not only inspires student active participation but also encourages their creativity and innovation.</td>
<td>Creativity and innovation&lt;br&gt;Communication and collaboration&lt;br&gt;Information literacy&lt;br&gt;Technology literacy&lt;br&gt;Flexibility and adaptability&lt;br&gt;Social and cross-cultural skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and teachers establish new learning and social relationship in terms of their partnership in co-organising activities</td>
<td><strong>Stage 1, 2 and 3</strong>&lt;br&gt;At all stages, negotiation between facilitators and learners is encouraged. Learning is seen as a collaborative enterprise.</td>
<td>Communication and collaboration&lt;br&gt;Technology literacy&lt;br&gt;Flexibility and adaptability&lt;br&gt;Social and cross-cultural skills&lt;br&gt;Leadership and responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Renewing foreign language activities to support holistic student development in a technical university

Students encounter ample opportunities to work and learn from one another in different situations; teachers learn about student interests and learning needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>An ideal project execution is not the ultimate goal but engaging students in the entire process to foster a more holistic student development.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking and problem solving</td>
<td>Creativity and innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and collaboration</td>
<td>Information literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media literacy</td>
<td>Technology literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility and adaptability</td>
<td>Initiative and self-direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and cross-cultural skills</td>
<td>Productivity and accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and responsibility</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Students are engaged in the activity through self-assessment and constant reflection on experiences gained; teachers evaluate the activity together with students in a democratic and participatory manner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Successes and failures make no sense if they are without active exploration, dynamic inquiry and proper debrief (self- and collective assessments).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking and problem solving</td>
<td>Communication and collaboration</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Social and cross-cultural skills</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Integration of the intervention (renewed language activities) into one’s repertoire of foreign languages learning requires proper adaptation and application; therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the effective scope of the study. In summary, this study serves as a knowledge base for further research in seeking plausible ways to optimise campus experience from an academic point of view, which will in turn help strengthen the foundation for holistic student development in general. Future studies can be conducted concerning student perceptions on the language activities to further verify the effectiveness of the renewed approach. From our point of view, it is indeed viable and beneficial to students, teachers as well as institutions if holistic student development can be integrated into the fabric of institutional improvement plans that involve both student affairs practitioners as well as academic professionals. To all educators, nothing is more rewarding than producing successful and well-rounded individuals that aptly fill the needs of the real world.

Also adding to the problem is the perennial tension between teaching and research as universities push for more research while at the same time burdening its teachers with a heavy teaching workload causing teachers to struggle suggest Azam, Mohaida, & Zainurin (2013, p. 60). This in turn affects the gains made in continuous professional development courses, resulting in benefits that aren’t substantial as teachers are bogged down with work and find it difficult to prepare in order to implement what has been learned.

In the context of Adama University, Ethiopia, Seyoum’s (2012, p. 9) research reported, “overall, teachers felt that professional development had significantly increased the standard of the teaching […] and the standard of pupil learning” it also went on to state that teachers felt confident and appreciated the opportunity to ‘exchange’ ideas, giving credence to A. R. Mohd. Deni et al. (2014) notion that a collaborative approach towards continuous professional development should be considered seriously as an effective means of increasing knowledge and skill in teaching and learning. Seyoum (2012, p. 9) however did concede that teachers’ commitment to professional development was based on extrinsic factors and cast doubt as to whether teachers would continue to be intrinsically motivated to improve themselves after the conclusion of the said course, again raising doubts as to the benefits of such courses in the long term.
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