

## **ENHANCING ENGLISH SKILLS THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of the most critical problems in teaching and learning English at tertiary level in Thailand is students' lack of adequate language background to carry out tasks required in studying English. In an attempt to deal with this challenging problem, the study investigated learners' opinions about (1) the implementation of project-based learning in a language classroom to encourage learners to apply their language skills and knowledge of their specific field of study to complete a task, and (2) how project-based learning may enhance their four skills of English (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing). Forty-seven undergraduate students taking an English course on Information Science were required to work in groups to complete an interdisciplinary-based project. A semi-structured interview was used to elicit students' opinions about the implementation of the project and how such a project may enhance their English skills. The interview data were qualitatively analyzed. Results of the study revealed how the interdisciplinary-based project should be implemented in a language classroom to enhance the learners' English skills.

### **Introduction**

English instruction in Thailand aims to improve students' language proficiency (Wongsothorn, 2003) and equip students with useful learning processes and strategies to enhance the use of English for social and academic purposes (Ministry of Education, 2004). To reach these goals, Thailand has adopted a learner-centered approach and focused on communicative language teaching as key approaches to facilitate the language learning process and improve communicative competence in order to prepare Thai students for regional and international workplaces. Even though curricular and lesson plans have been designed to implement these key approaches in language instruction, one of the most critical problems encountered by teachers especially at the university level is students' lack of adequate language background to complete tasks required in studying English (Chayanuvat, 2007). Therefore, it seems inevitable for many university teachers that they have to review basic knowledge such as grammar usage over and over again before they can proceed to English for daily routines and academic purposes.

In reality, however, studying English does not necessarily focus on syntactic accuracy or competency in grammar usage. Instead, giving opportunities to students to use

as much English as they can in real life contexts should be critically considered, especially for Thai students who have limited chances not only to be exposed to native English speakers, but also the opportunity to use English in their real life settings. To deal with this challenge, language teachers in Thailand need to employ an appropriate English teaching and learning method that should encourage students to use language with an emphasis on communicative purposes in real world settings, rather than solely focus on accuracy as in traditional teaching. In other words, the students should be encouraged to convey messages more than be concerned about grammatical rules when they use English for communicative purposes.

Project-based learning (PBL) seems to match this English teaching and learning need. PBL is simply defined as “an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop” (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998, p.1). PBL is different from traditional instruction because it emphasizes learning through student-centered, interdisciplinary, and integrated activities in real world situations (Solomon, 2003; Willie, 2001). In particular, PBL activities can be characterized as follows (Fried-Booth, 1997; Simpson, 2011; Srikrui, 2008; Stoller, 1997):

- focuses on content learning rather than on specific language patterns,
- is student-centered so the teacher becomes a facilitator or coach,
- encourage collaboration among students,
- leads to the authentic integration of language skills and processing information from multiple sources,
- allows learners to demonstrate their understanding of content knowledge through an end product (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a bulletin board display, or a stage performance), and
- bridges using English in class and using English in real life contexts.

More importantly, PBL is both process- and product-orientated (Stoller, 1997). Students have opportunities to use several skills (e.g., problem-solving, creativity, teamwork, as well as language) at different work stages, so the work and language skills are developed (Brunetti, Petrell, Sawada, 2003; Solomon, 2003). Since PBL is potentially motivating, empowering and challenging to language learners, it usually results in building learners’ confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improving students’ language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities (Fried-Booth, 1997; Simpson, 2011; Solomon, 2003; Srikrui, 2008; Stoller, 1997; Willie, 2001). Learning becomes fruitful for learners because they exhibit their abilities to plan, manage, and accomplish projects through their content knowledge and language skills (Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2004).

Similar to many EFL contexts, PBL in Thailand is not new in teaching and learning English. There is an increasing number of PBL-related research in Thailand. Chayanuvat (2007), for instance, explored the implementation of PBL in a basic English course aiming to develop students' four skills for communicative purposes. Her questionnaire data revealed that more than 50% of the students were confident that PBL can help improve their English although most of them (74%) were not ready for PBL in their English class. Srikrai (2008) examined English-minor students' opinions about conducting an interview with native English-speaking teachers (NEST). She found that the students perceived the value and the benefits of completing the project. They also learned about different cultures from the NEST and learned how to work cooperatively with classmates. They gained more motivation and confidence in using English, especially in listening and speaking skills. Simpson (2011) investigated whether PBL could enhance English major students' English language proficiency, their learning skills and self-confidence in an English for Tourism course. Both qualitative and quantitative data showed that PBL had a significant effect on the development of the low and medium ability groups of students. The high ability students showed progress in speaking and writing, but not for their listening and reading skills. The findings also indicated that PBL enhanced their learning skills (teamwork, higher-order thinking and presentation skills) together with self-confidence. The study concluded that PBL could be an effective means of teaching English as a foreign language and that it can be successfully employed with students who have only been exposed and subjected to a background of traditional forms of teaching and learning.

The PBL research studies in the Thai context to date have tended to focus on teaching English as a subject and using PBL with no emphasis on content knowledge of students in their fields of study (e.g. engineering, business, or agriculture). There has been little evidence supporting the effectiveness and implementation of PBL in an English class where the English language is linked to students' content knowledge. For this reason, the present study aims to investigate opinions of Thai learners of English toward the implementation of PBL, in the form of an interdisciplinary-based project, in a language class and their opinions about how PBL can enhance their English skills.

### **Research Questions**

In an attempt to encourage Thai learners of English to apply their language skills and knowledge of their specific field of study to complete a language task, this study was guided by two research questions.

1. What are Thai university students' opinions about the implementation of problem-based learning, in the form of an interdisciplinary-based project, in an English language class?

2. What are Thai university students' opinions about how problem-based learning can enhance their four skills of English (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing)?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The study included 47 undergraduate students, 36 females and 11 males, majoring in Information Science and enrolled in an English course at a Thai university during the second semester of the 2009 academic year. All the students were second year students who had taken and passed two foundation English courses offered in the 2008 academic year. They were young adults with an average age of 20.

### ***An Overview of the English for Information Science Course***

English for Information Science is a 45-hour English course designed for Information Science students. The main objective of the course is to have students practice the four English skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) for understanding through materials (e.g., newspaper, print) on Information Science. The course was first offered to Information Science major students in the second semester of the 2009 academic year. Lessons focused on integrated skills and authentic materials used in different types of media (e.g. newspaper, blogs, and websites). Grading of the course relied on five scores: attendance and in-class participation (10%), midterm examination (30%), final examination (30%), speaking tests (10%), and group project (20%).

### ***An Interdisciplinary-Based Project***

As a requirement of the course, one interdisciplinary-based project was planned to be used to allow the students to apply both knowledge of Information Science and their language skills in completing the project. Devoting 20% of the class scores to this project, the teacher asked the students to work in a group of three or four to create a unique presentation on the theme: *The Role of Information Science in Our Society*. The presentation project could be performed in a number of ways (e.g., a video presentation, a play, a showcase, a website, a chart, a card board, or a PowerPoint presentation) as long as their work demonstrated use of Information Science knowledge and language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) they had learned from the English class. For example, a group of students developed a website presenting information about digital libraries and asking web visitors to share their opinions about digital libraries. Another group created a TV program and videotaped interviews with other students on campus about the role of Information Science in their daily life. Another group of students presented a stage performance reflecting the negative effects of Information Science on Thai

families. Evaluation criteria were based on three areas: content of the presentation, language, and creativity. All projects were scheduled to be presented in the final week of the course.

### ***Instrument***

The semi-structured interview was used in order to allow the participants to reconstruct the details of their experience with the presentation of the interdisciplinary-based project through a series of open-ended questions that enabled the interviewer to build upon and explore the answers to each question. The semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to supplement other relevant questions to obtain more information, apart from a written list of guided questions. The interviews were conducted in the students' native language (i.e., Thai) to avoid a language barrier in conveying a message.

### ***Procedures***

Since the interdisciplinary-based project required students to work collaboratively, students were asked to form their teams on a voluntary basis. There were a total of 13 groups (two groups of three members and 11 of four members) representing 13 projects in this English course. After introducing the theme of the project, every group of students was asked to interpret the theme and decide how they would present their ideas on the role of Information Science in society. Each group had two weeks to work on their presentation before performing or presenting their project in class. After their presentation, each group was interviewed about their project using the guided questions which were related to project title, presentation style, and students' satisfaction with the presentation, benefits and obstacles in doing the project. Interview data were recorded, fully transcribed, and translated into English by a research assistant. For reliability purposes, the translated data were double checked and corrected by the researcher.

### ***Data Analysis***

Transcripts from the interviews were coded by themes related to project implementation and skills enhancement issues.

## **Results**

### ***Students' Opinions about the Implementation of PBL, in the Form of the Disciplinary-Based Project, in an English Language Class***

PBL was implemented as the disciplinary-based project in the English for the Information Science course in order to encourage the students to use the English skills they had learned in class as a medium to present content and exchange information in the field of Information Science. The interview data revealed four

major issues concerning the implementation of the project. As shown in Table 1, the implementation-related issues include presentation schedule, balance of language and content used in the project, students' language skills preparation, and project recommendation. Some students (e.g., students of Group 3) thought that the presentations should not have been scheduled in the final week because the students had to do presentations in other classes as well. Due to time constraints, students of Group 5 felt dissatisfied with their project. Regarding the balance of language and content learning, the students believed that they used both language skills and content knowledge to carry out their project. Some were surprised by their own ability to find information and do their presentation in English. However, one group of students was not confident with their language in doing their presentation. They preferred some lessons to prepare them to do a presentation in English. Finally, most students thought that the interdisciplinary-based project should be retained in the English course because it was appropriate and useful for them.

Table 1: Examples of Interview Data on Implementation-Related Issues

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Interview Data Examples</b>
Presentation schedule	G3: "We had a lot of works and many other assignments from different courses to do." G5: "We're not happy with it. We didn't have much time to prepare and rehearse. There were a lot of assignments to do."
Balance of language and content	G2: "We did the project from what we have studied: Information Science. We use it in our daily lives." G7: "We applied our IT knowledge in the project." G11: "Doing the final project like this is useful because content knowledge we learned could be applied in this project."
Language skills preparation	G1: "Our presentation level is moderate....there should be lessons in advance."
Project recommendation	G3: "Yes, I think it's beneficial and applicable. It relates to what we have studied." G6: "I think it's appropriate because you can apply it from your background knowledge: Information Science and present it in English." G8: "We intended to do the presentation at our best. We were so proud." G9: "I think there should be a report to hand in.... Slides and the report should be combined. There is limitation of time in presentation. If the report consisting of scripts is included, it might be clearer."

*Note:* G stands for Group. For example, G1 represents interview data from Group 1; G2 represents interview data from Group 2.

***Students' Opinions about How the Implementation of PBL, in the Form of the Interdisciplinary-Based Project, Enhanced Their Language Skills***

Based on the interview data, the students believed that their language skills were enhanced. Table 2 shows some of students' opinions about skills enhancement. Most of them thought that the interdisciplinary-based project helped them practice their reading, writing, and speaking skills. At the preparation stage of their presentation, the students believed that their reading skill as well as vocabulary knowledge was enhanced when they searched for information from different sources because they had to read and compare a lot of information before selecting what was appropriate for their project. Their writing was also enhanced when they prepared their Power Point slides or cardboards and when they wrote scripts for their presentation. For example, students of Groups 9 and 10 used both reading and writing skills to complete their work. In addition, their speaking was definitely enhanced when they rehearsed their speech as well as at the presentation stage when they performed or presented their project. Students of Group 4, thought that they applied speaking skills when completing their project. Apart from the four language skills, translation seemed to be another skill the students used a lot in doing the project. For example, students of Groups 3 and 10 read information in Thai and translated it into English when preparing for their presentation. None of them said that the project helped them with their listening skill.

Table 2: Examples of Interview Data about Skills Enhancement

<b>Interview Data Example</b>
G1: "We thought about what sentences or speech we were going to write in the project."
G3: "We searched for information which was written in Thai. Then we translated it into English."
G4: "We read some information before posting it on the blog... We thought we applied the speaking skill. Some words we have never spoken before such as <i>in addition</i> ."
G6: "[We learned] English language and technical terms relating to library."
G7: "I haven't thought that many skills can absolutely apply for it. In the past, My English was not really good. It's now better, and it's really fun. ... Our English language skills are better, I suppose."
G9: "Speaking, reading, and writing summaries"
G10: "[We used] translation, writing, and reading both Thai and English texts"

*Note:* G stands for Group. For example, G1 represents interview data from Group 1; G2 represents interview data from Group 2.

## **Discussion**

In the current study, PBL in the form of the interdisciplinary-based project was implemented in the English for Information Science course to encourage the students to link their language skills to their content knowledge. The most interesting finding regarding the implementation of the project-based activity was that the students found a balanced use of their language skills, knowledge about Information Science and information technology skills in their project.

This finding corroborates findings from a large number of studies in this field, which show that PBL activities allow students to integrate language skills and content knowledge to complete the projects (Fried-Booth, 1997; Simpson, 2011; Solomon, 2003; Srikrai, 2008; Stoller, 1997; Willie, 2001). However, this study has been unable to demonstrate a good implementation plan. The finding showed that the students needed better preparation for English presentations. A possible explanation for this might be that even though the students practiced English skills in class, they were not familiar with doing an English presentation in front of the class. Thus an adjustment of the implementation plan and an addition of instructional activities regarding English presentation practice are needed for future implementation.

With respect to enhancement of students' language skills, the findings of the study are consistent with those of Srikrai (2008) and Simpson (2011) who found that students' language skills were enhanced through project-based activities. In the present study, the students perceived that their reading, writing, and speaking skills, as well as vocabulary knowledge and translation skill, were improved because they used these skills to acquire, analyze, and synthesize information as they worked on their project. These findings indicate that authentic integration of language skills and processing information from a variety of sources can enhance language skills, and this mirrors real-life tasks (Stoller, 1997).

## **Conclusion**

This study explored learners' opinions about how PBL in the form of the interdisciplinary-based project can be implemented in a language classroom to encourage learners to apply their language skills and knowledge of their specific field of study to complete a task. It also investigated learners' opinions about how the interdisciplinary-based project enhanced their language skills. The analysis of students' interview data revealed project implementation and skills enhancement issues. The students believed that the implementation of this project was appropriate for the course because they can apply both their knowledge of Information Science and English skills they learned from the English class when they carried out the project. They found that the project can help them aware of their own English ability and improve English skills in real life contexts. They also suggested future



implementation of the disciplinary-based project in the English course. However, the students' opinions have revealed some limitations of the study. The teacher did not provide the students with good preparation to carry out their presentations and enough time to help them prepare their project. So, better-planned implementation procedures in these two aspects are needed.

The study provides two important pedagogical implications. First, it is reasonable to include such a disciplinary-based project in an English class especially in EFL contexts where opportunities to use English are limited. Second, since PBL can encourage learners to use language skills learned from the English class and support learners' confidence in using English, using the project as part of the grading system seems reasonable. However, this study is an exploratory investigation about enhancement of learners' language skills through PBL. Generalizability of the study is thus limited. Future studies may focus on using a variety of project-based activities in the classroom and using other measures to examine learners' language skills enhancement.

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