The Use of Project to Enhance Writing Skill

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Abstract—This paper explores the use of project work in a content-based instruction in a Rajabhat University, a teacher college, where student teachers are instructed to perform teaching roles mainly in basic education level. Its aim is to link theory to practice, and to help language teachers maximize the full potential of project work for genuine communication and give real meaning to writing activity. Two research questions are formulated to guide this study: a) What is the academic achievement of the students' writing skill against the 70% attainment target after the use of project to enhance the skill? and b) To what degree is the development of the students' writing skills during the course of project to enhance the skill? The sample of the study comprised of 38 fourth-year English major students. The data was collected by means of achievement test, student writing works, and project diary. The scores in the summative achievement test were analyzed by mean score, standard deviation, and t-test. Project diary serves as students' record of the language acquired during the project. List of structures and vocabulary noted in the diary has shown students' ability to attend to, recognize, and focus on meaningful patterns of language forms.

Keywords—EFL classroom, Project-Based Learning, project work, writing skill.

I. INTRODUCTION

CHANGES are suggested by some thinkers to be a result of a dynamic struggle of technology, communication, telecommunication, including the forceful competition in trade [1], [2]. The struggle between these forces results in the globalization of, for instance economic activity (e.g., international markets, customized production technically tailored to individual preferences), new patterns of economies via the presence of coordination between enterprises themselves (e.g., the emergence of open-up free markets), and a collapse of dependency on singular kinds of expert knowledge (e.g., the acknowledgement of the value of local wisdom and scholars in Thailand) [3]-[5], [35]. These changes call for new qualities and skills from a future workforce such as responsibility, initiation and capacity to work in groups [6]. The future workforce needs to be able to compete and succeed in a society where the success in such dynamics relies on the knowledge of its workforce to drive innovation and entrepreneurship of the society. Dalin and Rust state that, equally important to the ability to possess such skills, it is important to master at least one language, and ideally many, foreign languages [3]. English is imperative in the globalized world.

English is not only a prime language in a variety of fields – science, technology, commerce – but also an international language which plays an important role in education [7], [8]. It is a subject of learning for countless schoolchildren and has earned an interest from language teachers and educators at all educational levels. English including arts, mathematics, economics, science, geography, history, and government and civics, is considered one of the core subjects essential for students to succeed in work and life in 21st century [9]. College students whose English falls short of the required standard do not receive their diploma, and white-collar workers expend energy on English learning as it is pre-requisite for promotion. English becomes a gatekeeper to education, employment, business opportunities and economic prosperity [10].

These themes brought Thailand the need for change through re-examination of the country's educational system and set the stage for alternations in teaching and learning at the classroom level [11]. The demand raises concerns among language teachers to restore the aim of language education – to communicate in the language. According to Woods, when one say someone communicate in a language, it means the person is able to produce the language acceptable in its grammar [12]. He/she does not only know grammar, vocabulary, and rules of use --of what and how to say to whom-- but also is able to compose sentences to make statements of different kinds for different purposes [13].

Responding to the world demands, National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Thailand has launched to set out guidelines for the educational system to ensure consistency in both standards and award titles granted by institutions all over the country. Programs developed within this framework are recommended not only to lead to knowledge, generic skills and professional expertise associated with studies, but also reflect the mentioned demands – graduates should have the ability and commitment to engage in lifelong learning, ability to use information technology and take initiative in individual and group activities, as well as capacity for effective communication [14].

English proficiency is considered as one of the educational commodities needed to move the country upward in economic achievement [3]. The launch of the Qualifications Framework has imposed a set of changes, in effect, sends a message that university faculties are viewed unfavorably in terms of professional teaching practices, and are expected to introduce the new teaching and learning procedures to equip tertiary students with the skills, English communication in particular,

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demanded by this changing world. By no means, this study has no attempts to assess the teaching competence of the tertiary faculties; rather it is to provide support for in-service teachers at all educational levels to further the successful integration of the new language teaching approaches at a classroom level.

II. PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

A. Definition and Characteristics

Within the Communicative Language Teaching framework, in which the interactive nature of communication is essential to meaning-making as interlocutors attempt to get across and understand each other's message during the negotiation of the message, Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach lends itself to the integration of language- and content-learning objectives because language use and explicit attention to language-related features (e.g., forms, vocabulary, skills) are needed at various points in the exploration of themes. In project work, a sequence of activities is introduced in multiple stages of development for the success of project [15]. These activities are combined in working towards an agreed goal and centered on a theme, or topics, relevant to the specific content being studied. This sequence of activities is viewed as creative tasks, involving combinations of task types: reading, ordering and sorting information, comparing and problem solving [16], [17]. Students are involved in seeking answers to questions they have formulated by themselves, or in cooperation with their teachers, and proceed with investigation of an in-depth study on a selected topic. Participation in conversations, discussions, observation and investigation strengthens students' understandings on the areas from which the topics are drawn [18], [19]. They learn to learn from each other and view their peers as links in a chain via exchange of information and negotiation of meanings to achieve the agreed goals.

B. Project-Based Learning and Language Instruction

Language is used at various points in a project as students negotiate plans, analyze and collect information as well as discuss ideas [17]. Use of language evolves from works and rise naturally from within in response to needs [20]. Language is used as a tool for communication and functions as a vehicle for acquiring knowledge [21]. These prominent characteristics (e.g., processing and making sense of knowledge, use of language as communication, learning a language via content, collaboration with peers and teachers) make PBL the natural language learning context, in which students have opportunities to recycle known language while focusing on topics or themes, rather than on specific language features. Language is contextualized and presented in the way that "the task of language learning becomes incidental to the task of communicating with someone…about some topic" [22]. Placing an emphasis on communicating information, students use complex communication skills ranging from receptive skills (e.g., reading) and productive skills (e.g., writing) to processing skills (critical and creative thinking). Linguistic features found in texts students read are likely to appear at some point in their written project report. It is also possible that one would have heard students use 'real' and 'mix', for instance, talking about their topic and recast these words in their written report as 'authentic' and 'integration', respectively. The use of linguistics over the course of the project to construct and participate in types of academic discourse shows evidence of students' language acquisition.

C. Outcomes of Using Project-Based Learning

Despite its benefits reported in relevant literature and a synopsis of the beneficial outcomes of using project work in language teaching and learning, many English teachers do not fully exploit its benefits [23], [24]. A project work requires effort to plan, search for interesting topics, conduct research, write and present a report. Under the pressure of the mandatory schooling timeframe, English teachers are more concerned on a detailed analysis of texts, explanation of keywords and the meaning of the text. Time spent on pre-requisite skills (e.g., planning projects, conducting library search, synthesizing collected data, and presenting findings) for project work could be better used for teaching specific reading and writing strategies to handle unfamiliar test questions and accurate structured composition. Also, it is reported that the short of expertise in non-linguistic disciplinary raises language teachers' concern about their incapability of providing content guidance to students. They feel more comfortable with traditional delivery of language content – lecture on knowledge about English and emphasize the accuracy of language use [25]. Beckett and Slater found that students' evaluations of project in academic class were negative [26]. They felt projects distracted them from learning what they needed to know to advance their language education. The tasks (e.g., planning projects, conducting library search, synthesizing collected data, and presenting findings) were thought to be not worthwhile pursuits in language classrooms [26], [27]. Language classes in the students' view should be limited to the language components, namely English grammar and vocabulary, rather than research and cooperative work.

The claims overlook the rationale behind project-based learning – the concept of experiential learning – which is based on the sense-making process of active engagement via 'learning by doing' [28]. Having a process and product orientation, project-based learning involves students in a variety of individual or cooperative tasks [24], of what, when, where, and how to research topics being studied. Considerable choices in regard to project nature and extent of the content (e.g., interest of students, the environment, things in everyday life, content of the studies or ideas from the school subjects) expose students to diverse texts, interact with numerous types of writing styles, word choices and sentence patterns. These serve as model examples of various types of academic language that may be specific to content areas or genres [29] critical to the academic success of learners. The final outcome of project (e.g., board display brochure, theatrical performance, article writing) serves as a focal point

for students, who create product, have a real reason for creation and communication.

III. PARTICIPANTS

The research was carried out for 14-weeks in a content-based undergrad course called Evaluating and Developing Teaching Innovation. The reserach was carried out during regular class hours in The Faculty of Education at a Rajahbhat University, a teacher college, preparing student teachers to perform instructional role mainly in primary and secondary schools in all subjects. The class equipped students with the foundational knowledge of language teaching approaches and methods, English in particular. There were 38 fourth-year English major students as participants whose English proficiency was lower intermediate. As these researchers were their English instructors in previous semesters, it was possible to observe and closely monitor student teachers' progress. The students are equivalent in nature both in socio-economic and academic background. Project work was not a compulsory requirement in the class: various form of final product could be done in any form as of their interest. Article review was agreed among class discussions because it incorporates authentic material and therefore authentic communication opportunities [24]. The students have a real reason for writing in the content of disciplinary they are studying.

IV. METHOD

This paper reports a preliminary study of the use of project work for developing academic writing in the context of content learning in the areas of language teaching and learning approaches/methods. Thirty-eight fourth-year English major students in The Faculty of Education at a Rajabhat University in Bangkok participated in the study. Based on the review of the literature, project-based learning is an appealing tool in the design of language learning activities to involve students in a variety of individual and cooperative tasks [15], [24], [30]. A sequence of activities in project-based learning is structured in the rungs of a pedagogical ladder so as to enable students to reach a higher level of writing performance [31]. This should result in increased writing performance and accuracy on forms (structure and vocabulary). Two research questions are formulated to guide the study.

a) What is the academic achievement of the students' writing skill against the 70% attainment target after the use of PBL?

b) To what degree is the development of the students' writing skills during the course of PBL?

Researcher hoped this study would lead to a better understanding on creating vibrant language learning environments that require active student involvement for their own writing development. Findings are expected to give language teachers ways to allow for genuine communication, and give real meaning to classroom activities

The project work in this study is characterized by the primary features of the project development structures commonly found in other projects [23], [25], [32], and [33]:

agreeing on a theme for the project, determining the final out, planning the contents and the way of carrying out the tasks, preparing for the demands of tasks, gathering needed information, analyzing/organizing collected information, presenting the final outcome, and reflecting on the work done. In addition, this model integrates the stage of attention arousal to strengthen students' interest in the project via the use of perceptual arousal (e.g., opposite point of view, use of humor to lighten up the topic) and inquiry arousal (e.g., role-play, questions that challenges critical thinking) [34]. The project was a two-month long semi-structured project, designed and organized by both teachers and the students. A detailed description of how the project was implemented in this study was as follows:

Step 1 includes choosing a suitable topic for the project, generating interest and a sense of commitment via the use of perceptual arousal and inquiry arousal. To facilitate topic initiation, an umbrella topic, connected to studied content, was given. A list of related topics was not only provided but also served as guiding examples for ideas. The list is optional.

Step 2 requires negotiation between class and the teacher for the choices of the final outcome of the project, namely review article, as well as the audience for the project work. Choice reasons were shared among class.

Step 3 asks for determining the content and structuring the project. Students and the teacher agree on the scope of information needed to gather, sources of data collection, tentative timeframe, and roles of each group members.

Step 4 prepares students for the demands required by a project work in both content and language via variety of teaching (e.g., lectures on relevant approaches and methods, workshop for summary writing, reflection writing and lesson plan design).

Step 5 lets students leave the classroom for gathering information from sources agreed in Step 3. They are instructed to share information among the others and discuss in teams for a consensus as to which information should be used/discarded. The sources are saved for a reference list.

Step 6 brings the students back into the classroom and let them sort out the gathered information – analyzing, and organizing for writing up a review article.

Step 7 lets students submit to the teacher the final outcome based basis on agreement in Step 2. Students are allowed to rework their writing until their intended message was clearly communicated. Teacher feedbacks on content (teaching approaches and methods), and language (structures and vocabulary). The feedback serves as guidance for correction. Common grammatical errors are listed and correct use of the structures is provided.

Step 8 gathers students' reflections on the group processing whether or not groups function well in regards of effectiveness in contributing to collaborative efforts to complete the project work [35]. Also, students reflect on the language they acquired during the process of article review writing.

This series of tasks with specific objectives prepared students for the content, skills, and language demanded by the project work. The objectives were designed to direct students

toward the shared goal – project completion. This allows students to become fully engaged with learning through activities that immerse students in meaningful ways for language use for real communication.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

This research on the use of project to enhance student teachers' writing skills in a Rajabhat University aimed to explore the integration of project-based learning into foreign language instruction in a content-based course. The data source for this study included the course syllabus, lesson plans, students' writing work, and adapted project diary. The data was collected by means of an achievement test, students' writing works, and project diary adapted from one in Beckett and Slater's The Project Framework [25].

The researcher analyzed the course syllabus for content and lesson plan design. Students' written works were collected two times in Step 4 (see Section V. Method). The researchers identified the sentences (or sentence parts) they wanted the students to correct during revision. When graded work is returned with error labels, students then revised their work. Printouts were collected for progression of revision, instead of only the latest draft or the final product. The summative achievement test measured correctness of structure/vocabulary at sentence level in writing work collected in Step 7 (see Section V. Method). The scores in the achievement test given were then analyzed by mean score, standard deviation and t-test. Self-reported project diaries were used for students to record samples of newly learned vocabulary and structures they often had trouble with.

VI. FINDINGS

This section reported the findings resulting from the use of project to enhance writing skill. It aims to answer the two research questions as follows.

A. What is the Academic Achievement of the Students' Writing Skill against the 70% Attainment Target after the Use of Project?

TABLE I
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND T-TEST OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT
OF THE STUDENT WRITING WORKS

Students	Mean	S.D.	t-test	sig
38 Year-fourth English majors	28.6053	3.1153	101.699	0.000

Table I shows that the 38 fourth-year English major students improved their writing. Achievement means of the group in regards of grammatical correctness at sentence level is 28.6053 points out of the 40 total scores, and standard deviation is 3.1153 points. Comparing to the 80% attainment target, it is found that there were significant differences at 0.05 (t=101.699, P-value=0.000).

B. To What Degree is the Development of the Students' Writing Skills during the Course of Project?

From students' writing work, common grammatical errors are listed and categorized into groups. Findings in each group were reported from highest to lowest frequency: subject-work disagreement, pronoun-antecedent disagreement, incorrect pronoun case, incorrect verb tense, dangling sentence, comma splice and long complicated series (i.e., semicolon needed between the elements of series), respectively.

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