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Project-based Learning and Its Validity in a Thai EFL Classroom

Cameen Kettanun[a*]

[a]*Bangkok University, Bangkok, Thailand*

Abstract

Project-based learning is often said to promote the intellectual and social development of students, for it requires them to actively participate in the process of acquiring knowledge and skills with limited teacher supervision. The success of project-based learning, therefore, depends almost entirely upon the ability of students to be initiative and to function with a degree of autonomy. Literature has shown that most Thai students prefer to remain within the comfort zone of the traditional EFL classroom, where the teacher's intense guidance is dominant and appreciated. Thus, this study seeks to ascertain to what extent the project-based learning can be applied to an actual English language classroom in Thai culture. The subjects of this study were 21 third-year students, who were part of the 2013 Communication Arts Outstanding Students Program at Bangkok University. The subjects took pre- and post-tests before and after the treatment respectively to provide data for a t-test analysis of the difference between their pre-existing English language levels and their levels at the end of the 12-week program. As the subjects progressed in the project-based learning process, they were also asked to keep journals and were interviewed to reflect on their learning experience in order to provide data for qualitative content analysis. Findings indicated that the project-based EFL classroom yielded not only positive learning outcomes, but also helped the students to improve their cognition, work ethics, and interpersonal skills. Further studies were recommended to provide more empirical contributions with the objective of proving the effectiveness of project-based learning in EFL classrooms in other cultural contexts.

*Cameen Kettanun Tel: +2342525355
E-mail address:* cameen.bkk@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Bangkok University has recently launched an intensive campaign to brand itself as a creative institution of higher learning. After viewing the inadequacy of how knowledge is possessed by students in the 21st century, the university has sought to mold itself into an open venue for the innovative ideas and imaginations of students.

The foremost belief here is that creativity is the key to efficiency in the modern world for young citizens. As a result of this campaign, teachers in all faculties have been mobilized to develop pedagogies that are congruent with the overall creative image of the university. Furthermore, to conform to the quality assessment criteria stipulated by the Thai Higher Education Commission, the university issued a strong request for the integration of learning activities that promote the cognitive skills, moral attitudes, interpersonal skills, and research skills of its students. Teachers, therefore, must ensure that all of these requirements are enforced accordingly no matter what their field of study may be.

The attempt of teachers to fulfill the creative goals of the university and comply with the quality assessment criteria has brought project-based learning into noticeable status at Bangkok University. First proposed as a hopeful alternative to the dysfunctional traditional classroom-bound teacher-centered techniques, the project-based pedagogy has gained momentum as a sought-after teaching practice with which overachieving teachers vibrantly experiment. At the Language Institute, however, the project-based learning method remains less trustworthy even though the notion of student-centered learning has been at the forefront among its many missions. This skepticism has its roots in the feasibility of pedagogical techniques as well as the consistency between the underlying assumptions of project-based learning and the characteristics of Thai students. Based on (Beckett, 2002), project-based instruction was conceived in American culture. The presence of American values is evident in the learning process that encourages students to be initiators, self-directed practitioners, risk takers, problem solvers, and decision makers; teachers, thus, merely act as facilitators.

Thai students, nevertheless, have been shown to be at the far end of these traits. (Mackenzie, 2002) concluded from his interviews with Thai teachers that Thai students were characterized as unwilling to communicate due to their upholding of "a culturally-based seniority system and shyness (p. 59); in addition, they are attached to "rote memorization" (p. 59). (Parivudhiphongs, 2001) pointed out that since teachers in Thai culture are highly respected as knowledgeable and authoritative figures, Thai students are trained to believe in their teachers unquestionably. Typical Thai students are not willing to ask teachers questions in the classroom, shun contradicting their teachers, and become silent at the presence of teachers in order to show respect to the teachers and avoid offending them. (Thongprasert and Cross, 2008) confirmed in their study that Thai students accept control of their teachers, and prefer the traditional teacher-directed classroom. (Raktham, 2008) shared her agreement as she described:

Students pay close attention and carry out all instructions given by the teachers. As a result,
Thai students rarely take any initiative in the classroom; rather, they tend to wait to be told
what to do. Even when asked to make a decision, they might simply ask the teacher to
make the decision for them as they trust and rely on their teacher's experience. (p. 22)

Owing to this doubt over its practicality, project-based learning appears inadequate to secure its place at the Language Institute. To heighten confidence in the application of the project-based instruction, a large volume of empirical studies are needed in order to prove its worth and relevance to the demands of both the university and the Thai Higher Education Commission. This study, therefore, volunteers to examine the potentiality of the project-based approach in an English language classroom in Thai culture. A 12-week long experiment was conducted in an EFL speaking class at Bangkok University to ascertain two research questions: 1) To what extent do Thai student participants improve their speaking ability? 2) In what other areas do these students improve? Findings will serve as empirical evidence that can be used to judge the validity of project-based learning in the teaching of English performed in a culture hardly aligned with underlying assumptions of the approach. Despite the improbable generalizability, the results will remain contributory to the incessant search for the best possible teaching method that most likely ensures the optimal effectiveness of an English language program.

2. Participants

The 2013 class of third year Communication Arts students in the Outstanding Students Program at Bangkok University was purposively chosen for the study. Out of 21 students who gave consent to take part in the experiment, 9 were male, and 12 were female. All participants had passed the three required basic courses before enrolling into this last English course that focused on the improvement of speaking skills.

3. Methodology

3.1. Methods and procedure

To achieve the purposes of the study, the researcher employed 1) pre- and post-tests, 2) ongoing assessments, 3) question-guided journals, and 4) unstructured interviews to collect necessary data. The project-based process used in the study followed the project work stages reviewed by Fragoulis (2009); those stages include *speculation, designing the project activities, conducting the project activities,* and *evaluation*. In the first class meeting, the researcher introduced the project-based learning, described its benefits according to literature, clearly explained the purposes of the experiment, and asked students who were willing to participate to sign the consent form. After that, student participants were asked to take a speaking test, in which each of them gave a five-minute impromptu talk on a provided topic of his/her choice. Each talk was measured in five areas, namely, clarity, pronunciation, fluency, comprehension, and content. The first stage, *speculation*, which calls for a decision regarding the topic to be investigated, and an initiation of stimuli to motivate students' engagement in the project assignments began in the second week.

The second class meeting started the *speculation* stage as it involved a distribution of the course syllabus that described the four required projects that participants would need to complete, namely, an investigative report on a social issue, a feature story, a sales message, and a situation comedy. Since student participants majored in Communication Arts, the project genres were adapted from the basic purposes of mass communication, which are to inform, educate, persuade and entertain (Camp and Satterwhite, 2006; Dontigney, n.d.). The syllabus also included evaluation criteria, class schedule, and the time duration in which all projects were expected to be finalized and presented to the class. The third stage of project work, *designing the project activities*, was also carried out in this week. That is, in this same class meeting, the researcher repeated benefits of the project-based learning according to literature, and how it would be done effectively. Then, students were asked to choose either to work individually, in pairs or in groups of four. They were finally asked to brainstorm about the plans regarding the following questions:

        1) What issue do you think you would love to study?
        2) What would be the objectives of your study?
        3) Why would you want to study the issue with those objectives?
        4) How are you going to get information to achieve the objectives?
        5) When will you start and finish each project?
        6) What project will you do first, second, third and last?
        7) When will you present each project to the class?

The researcher helped student participants to decide the topic, set the scope of the first project, and respond to all questions in order to ensure that students would be on the right track and would not lose their focus once they did their fieldwork. A list of questions to guide their journal writing and presentations was also distributed. The researcher answered students' questions, clarified their doubts, and suggested sources of information as well as research tools for their effective use. Students then were encouraged to come to class to report on their progress with the researcher face-to-face, and to seek assistance if needed.

The third and fourth stages, *conducting the project activities* and *evaluation*, respectively, were combined; these stages lasted 10 weeks. During these weeks, students did the field work; they implemented their plans and activities that they had planned. They then gathered information, processed, and synthesized it in order to get the final products. They visited class to discuss difficulties and solutions with their peers and the researcher. They also had the researcher assess and confirm their works; then they presented the projects to the class according to their plans. As the course focused on speaking, written papers were not required. Their presentations were evaluated based on

the criteria adapted from (Brown, 2001) six categories of classroom speaking performances; these categories included the following:

- Imitative – how often they read from the notes
- Intensive - how much they could produce language by themselves
- Responsive – whether the language they used was authentic
- Interactive: Transactional – whether they could convey facts and opinions effectively to the audience
- Interactive: Interpersonal – whether they could use irony, humor and other sociolinguistic dimensions in their presentations
- Extensive – how well-planned the overall monologue was

Their responses to the questions by the researcher and fellow students were evaluated in the same areas of those employed in the pre-test, namely, clarity, pronunciation, fluency, comprehension, and content. They then were asked to hand in their journals on those projects they had finished. Unstructured interviews were conducted every two weeks to allow each student to further reflect unrestrictedly on the project experiences. All these steps were conducted in English; they were informed of the deduction of their score if any Thai word was included.

3.2. Data analysis

The scores from pre- and post-tests were calculated on SPSS using t-test to find paired samples correlations. The presentation scores were recorded in students' portfolios to appraise their improvements. Their reflections in interviews and in journals on the guided questions relating to each project were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. In this analysis, based on (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico, 1998), the content of written texts was "reduced to units in order to measure it" (p. 58). *Thematic units* (Krippendorff, 1980) were chosen as they were considered to best yield answers to the research questions. The analysis started from coding the information in the journals and interview transcriptions to see repeated patterns; the information that shared common attributes was placed into groups; categories were then built and labelled to accommodate the data classification.

4. Findings and implications

4.1. Research question one: To what extent did Thai student participants improve their speaking ability?

The t-test results indicated that the scores in the post-test were significantly higher at 0.05. This means the 12-week project-based treatment given to the participants enabled them to exceed their prior speaking ability shown in the pre-test. In the post-test, all students were marked as communicating their intent more clearly as well as pronouncing more understandably and correctly. Their speeches flew better as they verbally expressed the content of their projects and themselves in a more comprehensible manner. Table 1 shows the t-test results.

Table 1: t-test-results: p<.05

Mean	SD	t	df	Sig
.943	.465	9.284	20	.000

The t-test results were supported by the constant improvements recorded in students' learning portfolios. In their first week, participants were reluctant to speak English; they frequently switched back to Thai language in their interactions with the researcher. Their speeches were brief, and contained limited vocabulary; their communication in English appeared very difficult. Then in the weeks leading to the end of the program, gradual improvement persistently occurred. Based on the criteria adapted from Brown's (2001), which was described earlier, students performed better in all six categories by the end of the experiment. Table 2 summarizes the improvement of

students' performances.

Table 2: A summary of students' performances at the end of the program

Categories	Descriptions of students' performances
Imitative	Participants depended less on notes when speaking.
Intensive	Participants depended less on the textbook expressions; they could produce language better by themselves.
Responsive	Participants could use their own words more frequently when speaking. They became more authentic and original when they responded to questions.
Interactive: Transactional	Participants showed their understanding of the difference between facts and opinions in their speeches. They used expressions to signify facts and opinions more correctly. They could give more opinions.
Interactive: Interpersonal	Participants made jokes, analogies, and made fun of the situations they fell into more frequently in their speeches. They knew how to choose appropriate words to communicate better. They interacted more with the audience.
Extensive	Their monologues in presentations were more strategically planned.

Findings from two sources confirmed each other to testify that students speaking ability improved significantly after taking part in the project-based learning.

4.2. Research question two: *In what other areas did these students improve?*

Results from the qualitative content analysis suggested that participants improved in the following areas:

4.2.1. Cognition.

To finish the projects, participants first needed to select what information deserved their attention; they needed to compare and contrast the data they obtained in order to decide what could possibly be used to accomplish their goals. As one student narrated in an interview that in completing the investigative report, he needed to decide whose accounts were more convincing, and therefore should be selected to inform his work. Another student reflected: "People I talked to gave me so much information; I wanted to include all into my feature story, but I guess I can't. What should be my focus?" All students' reflections agreed that in finishing their project works, they entered into the process that involved selective attention, classification, synthesis of ideas, and decision making. Participants' later reflections showed more assertiveness in the choice they made as one interview revealed: "We brainstormed the topic—what product will we sell? And we think that the product we should sell in the sales message should be the product that we all know well." Their problem-solving skills also increased as their projects progressed. This is noticeable in their journal accounts that initially contained complaints about data collections and the discouraging tone they used in describing problems and how they had difficulty solving them, but in later journal records and interviews, students sounded increasingly effortless and rather confident in their handling complicated situations. One student, in gathering information about the life of a taxi driver, described, "We asked the guy if we would be able to follow him around a bit to see what he usually does in a day; he turned us down. He didn't even

want to talk to us. One of us then went to buy lunch for him, and we offered to pay for a long ride while he's talking." Other reflections also displayed their creativity in finding solutions to complete their work.

4.2.2. Work ethics.

Reflections from both journals and interviews showed participants developed stronger work ethics. They learned to be more responsible and disciplined; as one account showed: "Some of us arrived late, so we did not have time to film the whole place. There was not enough light, and we didn't bring any spotlight—and those mosquitoes. We could not finish as planned—I was upset, yes. So we talked it over about it—kind of confronted. The next day, we all got ready early, and had more time well spent. Hope they'll be this responsible next time too." Besides, they were concerned more about integrity as they gradually tried to do paraphrasing in their citation of online materials. Work quality was also emphasized as shown in one reflection: "Feature story is our last project. We did our best to make sure that our story is interesting enough for people to see; we want to upload it onto YouTube. We edited the film several times. Get the language edited as well." In addition, they learned to divide work among themselves as described in one account: "We thought we should stick together, but it didn't work; so we decided to assign responsibilities. Like…he'll get information; she'll write the script; the rest of us will help out with the (movie) shooting…" Other students' words all indicated that working on projects necessitated their reinforcement of work ethics among themselves.

4.2.3. Interpersonal skills.

In pairs and groups, students learned to maintain relationships with one another; as indicated in one reflection: "Two of us blew up, so I told them to find something to drink and come back. I myself tried to control my emotions. Sometimes I felt so irritated, but I just smiled." Whether working individually, in pairs or in groups, all participants needed to learn to create rapport with informants in order to obtain information. As one account goes: "Our lady informant seemed to love to talk about herself, so we asked her about her life before having a cancer, how she felt, and how she reacted to others around her—let's say, we let her talk about her feelings and pride. We just listened—it's so long, but we kept listening." Moreover, students accepted in their interviews that they learned to use communication techniques to create harmony among themselves and with others more. One description exemplifies how group members used the persuasive technique "just plain folk" to encourage cooperation: "Me too—I don't have a good English language background; I know what it's like and how it feels to want to say something but can't. But I'm trying, so let's try together—we're the same." Students' reflections also showed their attempt to negotiate to achieve their goals; as evident in an interview: "We wanted him to edit our work, so we asked if we could wait for him in the evening after his work; he said he'd be very tired, so we asked if we could give him one page at a time, and we asked him to introduce us to anyone he thought could help us. Well, it's expensive to go to a translation shop, you (the researcher) know." Other participants' accounts were also in accord about their application of interpersonal skills to the closure of their projects.

5. Discussion and implications

The project-based experiment in a Thai EFL classroom at Bangkok University yields a successful result. The favorable learning outcomes probably stem from, firstly, students' exposure to individualistic cultures brought to their homes by the mass media, and the Internet as all students in the interviews said that they were regular television viewers and Internet users who enjoy international programs and Hollywood entertainments. It is probable that the intense exposure enables them to adapt to the individualistic values that shape up the project-based learning style more easily. Secondly, students became more motivated by the freedom they had in their choice of the topics and in making their own plans; the motivation is evident in one student's description: "I chose to do the feature story on Pixar Animation Studio because I love animation movies they produced. I really wanted to know more about them, so I read about the studio on the Internet. It's all in English, but I tried my hardest to understand it." Moreover, participants felt more confident about their own ability as they progressed in the process; as one student

put it: "I was afraid to speak because I didn't know what word I should use. I didn't speak English that much; afraid to lose my face. But now see how I talked in the presentation—now I know I can speak English. I feel good. I'm so proud of myself." Students also said in the interviews that they felt that they could communicate in English better, and they appreciated being in the project-based class.

The success of project-based learning in this study implies that skepticism should give way to a serious experiment of the approach; the cultural impact is not as intense as feared due to globalization of technology that seems to leave nothing unseen. As testified by this study, project-based learning, if implemented right, will allow students to have a chance to actually use integrated language skills to accomplish tasks. This purposeful and meaningful use of language will make language learning more fruitful as it encourages authentic learning experience that will help to motivate students to independently seek knowledge and continuously improve their language ability; it stimulates autonomy and life-long learning in addition to increasing English language competency. Besides, in doing the projects, students can also sharpen their cognitive skills, and interpersonal skills as well as develop their work ethics that will prove useful in their future careers. Hence, it is not an overstatement to conclude here that the project-based learning deserves more recognition in the English language classrooms in Thai culture.

6. Recommendations for further study

A full-scale experiment to compare the project-based classroom with the traditional one should be undertaken. Besides, an investigation of the relationship between the success of project-based learning and students' language ability should also be conducted. Future studies may also examine factors that lead to the success and failure of project-based learning in different cultures.

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