PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PBL) IN EFL CLASSES OF AN ENGLISH PROGRAM AT A THAI SECONDARY SCHOOL: STUDENT AND TEACHER VIEWS

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Abstract

This research aimed to study students' and teachers' opinions towards the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) in English classes. It also aimed to find problems and difficulties that the students and teachers faced and how they coped with the challenges. A hundred and eight English program students in Matthayom 6 (Grade 12) at Yothinburana School responded to the questionnaire and ten were interviewed, while five English teachers responded to the questionnaire and participated in the interview. The findings revealed that the students and teachers highly agreed with PBL implementation in English classes. Regarding problems, the students rated high that the time teachers giving them for the projects was generally insufficient, and there were problems working in groups. The teachers opined that it was difficult to give fair assessment for an individual student in group working, and they had to sacrifice their free time to give counsel to the students on their projects. Solutions and suggestions were proposed by the students and teachers. The study may be beneficial to EFL educators to find ways to deal with challenges appropriately in implementing project-based learning.

Keywords : project-based learning, 21st century skills, project work, English teaching approach

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Introduction

As a result of the rapid growing of English education worldwide, the Ministry of Education of Thailand has attempted to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning of English so that Thailand can maintain the competitive position in the world community (Chaichompoo, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2001).

One of the educational strategies in accordance with Thailand New Education Act (ONEC, 1999) is the introduction of the English Program as an alternative study program at school in the primary and secondary levels. English programs are increasingly gaining popularity among students and parents owing to their recognition of the importance of English and their high expectation that an English program will equip students with a satisfactory level of English proficiency and consequently prepare them for successful future (Darasawang, 2007).

There are over a hundred public schools offering English programs in the secondary level across the nation. English is used as the medium of instruction and the minimum of 18 hours a week is required for teaching and learning subjects in English according to the curriculum (ONEC, 2000). Yothinburana School, located in Bangkok, is one of the leading schools that offer an English program for the secondary level of education. It was selected by this study due to its vision and mission to 'develop a superior competency in the use of English for communication' (Yothinburana School, 2018). To comply with the education policy and to provide a change from the traditional teacher-centered approach to the student-centered approach or communicative language teaching (CLT), Yothinburana School has incorporated the project-based learning (PBL) in every EFL class as the approach is considered to be beneficial to English language learning, and students can integrate the language and skills learned from PBL to other content subjects taught in English.

PBL is a systematic approach rooted from the theory of social constructivism by Vygotsky (1978), the democratic learning of Freire (1983) and the experiential learning concepts of Kolb (1984) and has become one of the most popular approaches among EFL teachers. If implemented appropriately, there are many reasons why PBL approach will effectively solve the problems of inefficiency in English teaching and learning; PBL provides a wide range of benefits. It gives learners the opportunity to successfully develop other skills such as thinking skills and cooperative skills (Fried-Booth, 2002); it has the positive effect on motivation for learners compared with the traditional teacher-centered approach (Bartscher, Gould, & Nutter, 1995; Bluemenfeld et al., 1991; Elam & Nebsit, 2012). Zhou (2012) and Taddei (2013) also pinpoint that PBL promotes learners' creativity and the habits of lifelong learning. Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajeik, and Soloway (1997) and Belland, Ertmer, and Simons (2006) assert the benefit of PBL in increasing the student's ability in working collaboratively resulting in the learner's development of social skills and empathy for others in the team.

In addition, PBL creates learner's enjoyment and increases learners' positive attitude (Bas & Beyhan, 2010; Gultekin, 2005).

PBL has been incorporated in every EFL class at Yothinburana School. EFL courses at the school consist of three main subjects: Listening and Speaking, Reading and Writing, and English Structure. An example of the project work in the Listening and Speaking class is the "News Reporting Project." Students worked in groups to find stories from the happenings around the school and created news stories. Students made video recording and presenting the news to the class taking a professional role of news reporters. One of the projects in the Reading and Writing class was "My Fable Book." Students worked individually writing a 10-15 page fable by infusing themselves as one of the characters in the story. They created a story, designed a book and exchanged the book with other friends to read and give comments before submitting it to the teachers. Another example in the English Structure class was "The Grammar Song" which students in groups chose a song to perform as a mini-concert; they needed to find the grammar points and presented the English grammar they chose from the song lyrics to the class. Students learned both the English language and other essential skills.

Despite the positive benefits, PBL implementation has some challenges about the constraints of time and resources (Grant, 2002; Stauffacher, Walter, Lang, Wiek, and Scholz, 2006), problems with group work and classroom disorder (Blmenfeld et al., 1991; Frank, Lavy & Elata, 2003; Grant, 2002), difficulty with incorporating technology into the project (Marx et al., 1997), and the challenge on attitudes and beliefs of teachers and learners as PBL can create anxiety and resistance for teachers and pressure for learners to adapt themselves to an unfamiliar student-centered approach (Frank & Brazilai, 2006; Grant, 2002; Green, 1998; Nation, 2008). There might also be problems with designing and conducting appropriate assessment (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Marx et al., 1997) and the challenge with demanding workloads for both students and teachers (Stauffacher et al., 2006).

After reviewing the nature of PBL and its benefits and challenges, the researcher, as an English teacher, had the interest in investigating various aspects of incorporating PBL into EFL classes in an English Program of the secondary school level. The study will shed more light for teachers interested in implementing PBL approach. Being informed of students' and teachers' opinions and problems in PBL is beneficial to educators to design and initiate the projects and to make informed decisions in choosing and using a certain approach appropriate to the contexts. For these reasons, the following research objectives were formulated.

Research objectives

1. To study students' and teachers' opinions towards the implementation of PBL of M 6 English class students in the English Program at Yothinburana School

2. To find problems and difficulties the students and teachers faced when implementing PBL in English classes

3. To find out how the students and teachers coped with the challenges

Research Methodology

1. Participants

Two groups of participants were gained from convenience sampling.

First, a total of 108 students, 58 females and 50 males, aged 17-18, majoring Science and Mathematics, English and Mathematics, and English and Japanese or Chinese from five classes of Matthayom 6 (Grade 12) of an English program at Yothinburana School responded to the questionnaire. Two from each class volunteered to be interviewed.

The second group consisted of five English teachers, three females and two males, aged 20-40, with 0-15 years of experience as an EFL teacher. Three teachers were bachelor's degree holders and two had a doctoral degree. Two teachers speak Thai, one speaks English and the other two speak Filipino as the native languages. All responded to the questionnaire and participated in the interview.

2. Research Instruments

Two types of instruments were used: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

To ensure the research content validity, the instruments were created, validated, revised, and tried out before administering. The IOC (Item Objective Congruence) indices were used to improve the questionnaire and the interview questions to eliminate irrelevant and insignificant words, terms and questions. This was in accordance with Nunan (1992) who suggested that the questions are designed based on the purposes of the questionnaire and should contain well-defined, clear, simple and comprehensible language. Also, ethical issues were ensured by obtaining consents from all the participants and their parents or guardians as suggested by Yin (2014). The participants were confirmed of their anonymity, and their participation was totally voluntary.

3. Data analysis

The data was collected during May and June 2018. The questionnaire results were analyzed with the mean range interpretation as follows (Srisa-ard, 2013): 4.51-5.00 = very high, 3.51-4.50 = high, 2.51-3.50 = moderate, 1.51-2.50 = low, 1.00- 1.50 = very low. The interview results were categorized by content analysis.

Research Results

The research results are of two types: quantitative data and qualitative data.

1. Quantitative data

Two parts of the results are in response to the first two research objectives.

The first part revealed the student and teacher opinions towards PBL. It was found from the rating scale that, on average, students highly agreed with the implementation of PBL in English classes (mean = 3.71). Their top five aspects include: project work enabled them to work collaboratively in a team (mean = 4.00), the projects made them develop problem-solving skills (mean = 3.99), they liked to use a variety of materials from different sources (mean = 3.93), they used a lot of creativity while working on the projects (mean = 3.91), and they could use 21st century skills in doing the projects (mean = 3.90). The items rated moderate agreement involved the enjoyment in assuming different roles in the classroom (mean = 3.47), their being the center of the learning, not the teacher (mean = 3.32), and their freedom in choosing to do the projects of their interests (mean = 3.15).

The teachers' average mean score was slightly higher than that of the students (mean = 4.26). They strongly agreed with three items: students could use integrated 21st century skills in doing projects (mean = 4.80), PBL gave opportunities for students to experience real-life tasks outside the classrooms (mean = 4.80), and the focus of their teaching was on the students, not the teachers (mean = 4.60). Additionally, they agreed at a high level with fourteen items in the questionnaire. Only one item received a moderate level of agreement i.e., students have freedom in choosing to do the projects of their interests (mean = 3.20), which is the same as the students' opinions who also ranked this item the lowest.

The second part was concerned with problems and difficulties the students and teachers faced when using PBL in English classes.

On average, the students had a moderate level of problems or difficulties in undertaking PBL (mean = 3.00). They highly agreed with two items: the time teachers give me for the projects is not usually enough (mean = 3.81), and there are a lot of problems working in groups (mean = 3.43). They disagreed that PBL wasted their time of learning (mean = 2.46), and nor did their parents complain about their working on the projects (mean = 2.30).

The teachers shared a similar opinion with the students; they saw the difficulties at a moderate level (average mean = 2.63). The highest ranked problem was about the oversized of the class (mean = 4.20). Two items that were ranked equally as highly agreed i.e., it was difficult to give fair assessment for an individual student in group working and they had to sacrifice their free time to give counsel to the students on their projects (mean = 3.60). In contrast, they disagreed that they didn't get support and encouragement

from their boss or the school (mean = 2.00), and PBL wasted their time of teaching (mean = 1.60).

      2.　Qualitative data

From the open-ended part of the questionnaire and the interview, the results follow:

The students realized the benefits of PBL involving enjoyment in working in groups, an alternative way of practicing English, opportunities for creativity, updating knowledge about the world current situations. They had problems concerning limited time for the projects due to their preparation for university entrance exams, some complexity of the projects, some difficulties in working in groups, worries and concerns about grading and getting comments from teachers, and limited freedom in choosing the projects of their own interest.

To gain the answers for the third research objective, the students offered some solutions to the challenges they faced. For example, they accepted their role for an attempt to have better time management, while they should give justifiable reasons in requesting teachers to give fewer projects in their last year of high school study.

Teachers obviously appreciated the benefits of PBL and suggested ways to cope with five main problems as: 1) letting students group with peers who they felt comfortable to work with, 2) gaining more training in PBL teaching, 3) convincing themselves and students to see project work as a tool for the 21st century life, 4) using various sources for assessment including rubrics, self and peer assessment to triangulate with teachers' assessment, and 5) reducing their workload by expecting projects that need less consultation time.

Discussion and Conclusion

Projects were found to enable students to acquire the English language along with other skills and knowledge. The students found that project work developed their collaborative skills, and working together was more enjoyable and relaxing than working alone. This was in line with the study of Fried-Booth (2002) and Bergh et al. (2006), who state that PBL is student-centered and provides students opportunities to work collaboratively in a team. When students find PBL in their EFL class enjoyable, meaningful and memorable, it increases their motivation. Richards (2015) states that PBL, as a type of active learning method, results in the positive attitude, interest, and willingness to learn English leading to an increase in students' motivation which is a significant stimulant to enable students to have desire for learning (Gardner, 2007). It is highly essential for students in an English Program to acquire English language and other knowledge from various sources from working on the projects and to further apply them with other content subjects, which is in

accordance with the educational policy and curriculum of English Program education in Thailand (BEC, 2008). Moreover, making students realize benefits of learning will certainly motivate them to learn (Brown (2014). Other skills fostered by PBL relate to the 4Cs of the 21st century: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.

For teachers, PBL gives them opportunity to learn how to be creative and expose themselves to more activities, broader information and knowledge and also to prepare themselves to be a successful teacher with skills needed in the 21st century.

Apart from the benefits of PBL, the problems and difficulties the teachers and students faced may be caused by Thai educational culture which is principally exam-oriented and teacher-centered (Pennington, 1999). Thai students focus mainly on their grades and academic content to prepare themselves for the university entrance examination. Therefore, they found it difficult to manage time to finish the assigned projects and to meet with team members to work on the projects. The problems with large class size and oversized groups also often make classroom become disorderly and obstruct teachers' attention to individual students and hinder the student's learning progress and activities.

The possible solution to the problems of PBL suggested by both students and teachers is to have deeper intellectual collaboration (Markham, Larmer, & Ravitz, 2003). They can share their knowledge and information and make PBL achievable. Students need to acquire knowledge from various sources and become autonomous learners, while teachers are required to develop themselves in learning new skills essential for the PBL approach. The traditional teacher professional development may not be sufficient for teachers to implement PBL. They need to be equipped with the other skills according to their new roles in PBL.

Recommendation

It is worthwhile to examine opinions of a larger number of students and teachers in the similar or different learning program setting or in different levels and/or in different contexts to generalize the findings. Furthermore, the future research may investigate the students' English proficiency in relation to PBL through the pre-test and post-test, but only when PBL is used as the main or sole teaching approach in a class. In addition, apart from EFL classes, it would be interesting to have a comparative study of PBL efficiency in English classes and in other content subjects. Lastly, besides students and teachers, opinions of other stakeholders namely school administrators, parents or policy makers of PBL should be included in the study to triangulate different views on PBL.

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