

Abstract

This empirical study provided an in-depth examination of Thai students' English language proficiency, their learning skills and their self-confidence during the application of project-based learning (PBL) in an EFL learning context. The study examined whether PBL could enhance Thai university students' English language proficiency, their learning skills and self-confidence. The method of teaching and learning English language through PBL was a contrast to the current teaching of English in Thailand where it is treated as a subject, not a medium of communication.

This is a mixed research study utilising both quantitative and qualitative instruments to collect data from participants. The study was conducted in an EFL classroom in a major regional Thai university. Data were collected from 26 third year students majoring in English enrolled in *English for Tourism* course. The data were derived from four quantitative instruments including TOEFL® PBT, a writing test, a speaking test and an observation schedule and the rich information was obtained from five qualitative instruments including student surveys, project diaries, open-ended questionnaires, field notes and work-in-progress discussions. The research instruments were utilised for one semester. To investigate the English proficiency of different levels of students, the students were divided into three groups (high, medium and low groups) based on the raw scores collected from the overall results of the three pre-tests (TOEFL® PBT, a writing test and a speaking test).

The results of the study showed that PBL had a statistically significant effect on the development of low and medium achievers' English language skills, with exception of the structure and written expression of the low achievers. The high achieving students showed progress in speaking and writing but their listening and reading skills showed no statistically significant improvement at the end of the study. Findings for high achievers are equivocal because the finding from the TOEFL tests, that no significant gains were made, is not supported by the evidence from their diaries, discussions with the teacher and the observer's field notes. It should be noted that even though the nature of the TOEFL test can distinguish the English abilities among test takers, it is generally used by many universities and institutions for making admissions decisions (ETS, 2010). The findings

indicated that PBL enhanced their learning skills (teamwork, higher-order thinking and presentation skills) together with self-confidence. Their overall improvement in English proficiency is a worthwhile achievement, particularly when it is linked to significant improvements in the students' learning skills and self-confidence in the use of English.

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 ever been exposed and subjected to a background of traditional forms of teaching and learning. The implementation of learner autonomy focusing on the process of learning, problem solving and building knowledge will contribute to a successful learning outcome for Thai students. Given the culture and classroom behaviour of Thai students, PBL requires a gradual shift in teaching methodology designed to suit the background of both the teacher and learners. These adjustments will enhance the effectiveness in the application and implementation of PBL in a foreign language classroom.