

Enhancing EFL Classroom Learning based on the Application of Generic Skills: A Case of Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology Students

Wipanee Pengnate¹ (*wipanee.pengnate@gmail.com*)

Abstract

The purposes of this research were 1) to investigate the students' English problems during their Industrial Placement and 2) to investigate possible learning activities based on a development of Generic skills used in English teaching-learning classroom

The research samples were 40 students who passed Industrial Placement and enrolled in Academic Reading and Writing course in the third semester, 2012 academic year. The samples were derived from 3 faculties namely Engineering, Business Administration and Information Technology.

The Instruments used for data gathering were an ethnographic interview and trial research project. The activity framework of Generic skills was analyzed through the context of Generic skills in higher education based on teaching-learning methods, techniques and activities.

The research findings were as follows:

1. Speaking skills were the most important problems of the workplace, followed by reading skills, writing skills and listening skills respectively.

2. Research project was used as a trial learning activity to generate the students' four key competencies of Generic skills: working with others; working with information; working with technology; and learning and development.

3. The students' opinions were shown as satisfactory attitude. However, the monitoring process of task distribution should be more concerned.

Keywords: *EFL classroom, English teaching-learning approach, Application of Generic skills*

I. Introduction

Thailand has progressively integrated into the global market through regional cooperation with neighbouring countries in many aspects under the establishment of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) with the goal of achieving an integrated market by 2015. The significance of AEC has been shown as a support towards a free flow of goods, service investment and skilled labour in order to promote equitable development and poverty reduction across the region (THE NATION, 2013). In regard to skilled labour mobility, (Wall Street English, 2013) highlights that ASEAN member countries shall adopt trade liberalization and remove all barriers to discrimination on employment. However, Unicef Thailand (2013) contends that Thai education and training standards should be revised to upgrade the skills of the labour force in order to achieve in the AEC goals.

Reported by PDN (2012), it is presented Thai educational system is needed to be improved in the fundamental of teaching foreign language to be a more systematic way. As revealed by Bangkok Post (2012), Education First (EF) survey shows that Thailand ranked 42nd out of 44 countries for adult English proficiency which is below Vietnam (39) and Indonesia (34), with Malaysia as the top of ASEAN country at No. 9. A more radical fact is moreover stated by Test and Score Data (2012) as the average of English skill level of Thai students measured by TOEFL iBT is 76 points out of 120 points, as of the year 2012. When compared to other ASEAN countries, except Brunei Darussalam, Thailand is only ahead of

¹English lecturer, College of General Education and Languages, Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology, Thailand

Cambodia and Laos. Thailand lags far behind major ASEAN countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia. According to the result of Thai students' English ability, it could be indicated that Thai students are required to improve their English skills in order to compete with other ASEAN countries. Otherwise, many might lose their jobs or find it difficult to work when AEC takes effect.

When comparing with TNI students' English ability, it found out that the students had problems of all four skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. The new learning approach, therefore, is required to uplift the students' English ability as well as preparing them for a competitive challenge of AEC. Besides, the activity which confronts a development of TNI students in an area of career advancement is highly concern.

Recently, there have been various types of teaching-learning techniques used in classroom learning. However, one interesting technique which has not been employed in TNI is called "Generic skills".

Generic skills are originally from Australia as a set of skills that are transferable within the Australian workforce (Chiswick et al., 2002). They are also known by many other terms such as soft skills, key skills, common skills, essential skills, employability skills, basic skills, necessary skills, competency skills, and transferable skills (Yassin and Hasan, 2008). According to Nabi (2003), Generic skills are divided into three categories which are personal skills, communication skills and problem solving skills. However, it is asserted by McLoughlin and Luca (2000) that Generic skills are formed into four management areas which are management of self, management of others, management of task, and management of information. This is contrary to Crosbie (2005)'s statement as the skills are listed as collaboration, communication, initiative, leadership, personal development, personal effectiveness, planning and organizing, and presentation.

Luca and Oliver (2002), moreover, point out that teaching and learning process for Generic skill development as the need for learning environment that concerns on dialogue, feedback, reflection, and task-oriented activities. Thus, learning activities are needed to be situated in a contextual environment as in a 'real-world activity'. Instructional design strategies supporting Generic skill development are, further, illustrated as Figure 1 below.

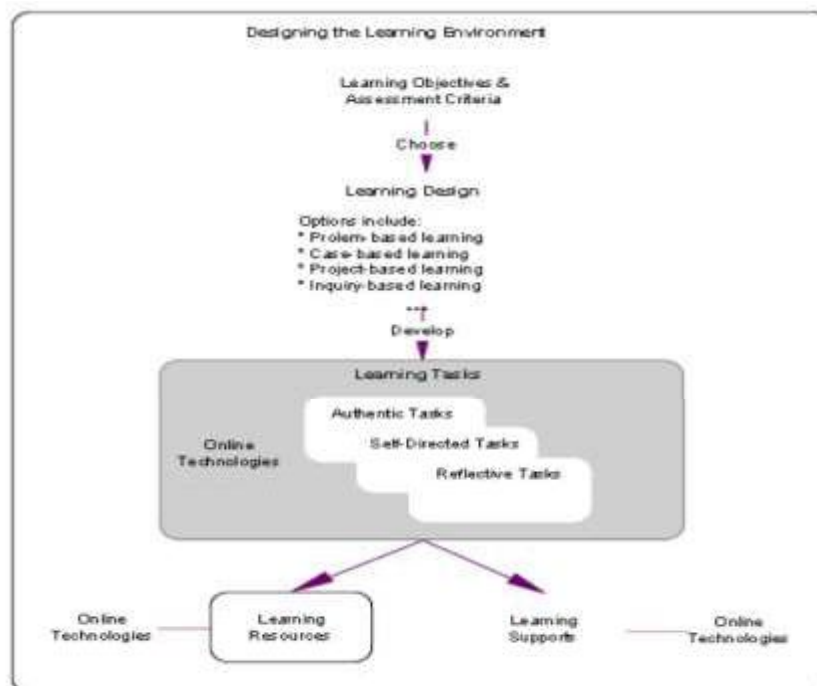


Figure 1: Course implementation framework

In brief, the main concepts of Generic skills are to focus on the development of technical ability, knowledge and qualifications. These principles are used in the design of learning activities that are integrated into a course that is delivered in learning tasks, learning supports and learning resources. As a result, the outcomes of this learning technique might assist in a development of TNI students' English ability and career advancement.

II. Research Purpose

The purposes of this study were

- 1) To investigate the students' English problems during their Industrial Placement.
- 2) To investigate possible learning activities based on a development of Generic skills used in English teaching-learning classroom.

III. Research Methodology

1. Ethnographic interviews with 40 fourth year students who passed Industrial Placement and enrolled in Academic Reading and Writing course
2. The collection of site documents and associated materials
3. Analysis and synthesis of data derived from the ethnography
4. The interpretation and tabling of findings from the ethnography
5. The assessment of trial research project based on Generic skill theory

IV. Results and Discussion

Phase 1: The results of demographic variables of TNI undergraduate students.

TABLE 1: The results of demographic variables of TNI students

Demographic data of respondents	n	%
1. Genders		
1.1 male	23	57.50
1.2 female	17	42.50
Total	40	100
2. Faculties		
2.1 Engineering	19	47.50
2.2 Information Technology	11	27.50
2.3 Business Administration	10	25.00
Total	40	100

The table presented that there were 40 participant students which consisted of 23 male students (57.50%) and 17 female students (42.50%) from 3 faculties. There were 19 Engineering students which were 47.50%, 11 Information Technology students and 10 Business Administration students which were 27.50% and 25.00% respectively.

Phase 2: the results of students' English problems during Industrial Placement

TABLE 2: The results of students' English problems

Students' English communication problems	n	%
1. Speaking skills	14	35.00
2. Reading skills	11	27.50
3. Writing skills	8	20.00
4. Listening skills	7	17.50
Total	40	100

The table presented that the highest English communication problem of the participants towards their career advancement was speaking skills (35.00%), followed by reading skills (27.50%), writing skills (20.00%) and listening skills (17.50%).

According to an ethnographic interview, the main results were ranked as follows:

Problems of speaking skills

1. *“It is difficult to make my conversation to be a right sentence structure.”*

The majority of the participants revealed that they completely forgot a sentence structure, grammar rules and vocabularies when they had to speak with their employers. Thus, they mostly just used word by word instead of making a sentence.

2. *“It is different between speaking with foreign teacher and other workers”*

Some of the student participants indicated that speaking with foreign teachers and classmates were much easier because they thought that their teachers and friends would try to understand what they were saying. However, talking with their employers and co-workers was more problematic. They had to think of a correct grammar and using a formal vocabulary.

3. *“I do not want to make a mistake”*

Few students, however, contended that they did not want to make mistakes in front of their teachers and friends. They, moreover, added that they chose to keep silent when foreign teachers asked them to discuss or share their opinions. They were not confident when speaking English with their employers as well.

Problems of reading skills

1. *“I have a problem of analysing information”*

The majority of the participant stated that the reading passages taught in the course were more varied and understandable. However, they had a huge problem when they had to analyse or summarize information given by their employers. One Business Administration student revealed that her employer asked her to summarize a company financial report as well as suggest the possible solution to save more company budget. She said it was really difficult as she spent almost a week to try to understand the report and find out the best solution for the company.

2. *“Vocabularies are more difficult”*

Some students, however, asserted that the vocabularies used in their workplaces were a lot more difficult. They had to spend many hours to look up for the meanings. This caused them to a late submission of their tasks.

Problems of writing skills

The participant answers were shown at the same direction. All of them had problems of a writing organization, grammar, vocabulary and spelling. Before finishing their Industrial Placement, all of them had to write a report to their employers. However, they found out that it was very difficult to arrange and re-arrange their ideas, then put them into appropriate vocabularies with a correct grammar. Furthermore, their reports had to be accepted as a formal paper.

Problems of listening skills

The majority of the participants agreed that listening skills were their least problem because all of them took Industrial Placement in Thailand, so the language mainly used in

their workplaces was Thai language. However, some of them said that they worked for Japanese organization, but it was not a problem because they could understand Japanese language. Although their employers spoke English with them, their accent was easy to understand. Moreover, their employers avoided using difficult vocabularies to make a clearer understanding.

According to The SUNDAY TIMES (2011), it is stated English is the most important language used in the workplace because the language is widely used in communicating around the world. Good communication in English, therefore, creates a good ambience and relationship between everyone in every organization. Further, the study reveals the importance of English language in the workplace is a top concern among employers in Sri Lanka as the majority of employers (95%) believe that better English helps improve the productivity of employees. Moreover, 66% of employers have turned down applicants due to a bad command of English.

Referring to the example of Sri Lanka, it is significance for Thailand to concern on the importance of English as a key success in ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The foremost characteristics of AEC are to envisage four challenges as: single market and production base; a highly competitive economic region; a region of equitable economic development; and a region fully integrated into the global economy (ROBYSCAR, 2012). Consequently, according to AEC, the true importance on the language of trade in the region will be emerged, and the nations that cannot participate in this AEC will be left behind. Over the past decade, countries like Vietnam and Indonesia have spent substantial sums of money in generating language-teaching capacity (The SUNDAY TIMES, 2011). Besides, Malaysia and Singapore are already way ahead of the rest of the ASEAN members. Thus, it is time to uplift Thai educational standard to ensure that the nation is ready to take on the challenges on AEC launched in 2015.

Phase 3: the results of students' trial research project of Generic Skills in Academic Reading and Writing course

Generic skills can be developed among students through many types of activities. In Academic Reading and Writing course, great emphasis is placed on developing the collaboration skills, communication skills, creativity and critical thinking skills through a project-based learning. Thus, the students had an experience of cooperation with team members and develop their own learning skills. They also can learn to control their emotions when facing unfavorable situations, and thus improve their ability to solve problems. The characteristics of Generic skills used in research project activity were demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Characteristics Of Generic Skills Used In Research Project.

Working with others	Working with information	Working with technology	Learning and Developing
Communicating ideas and information	Collecting, analyzing and organizing information	Using technology to search for information from websites and search engines	Planning and organizing
	Using statistics		Self-management
	Solving problems		Learning to learn

Table 4: Possible Learning Outcomes Gained From Research Project

Initiative	The ability to assess and initiate things independently.
Communication	the sharing or delivering of information or news through verbal and non-verbal forms
Teamwork	The combined actions of a group of people to work together to achieve a goal or complete task
Technology	The use of scientific knowledge to achieve practical outcomes
Problem-solving	The use of skills, knowledge and/or experience to formulate a solution to a problem
Self-management	The ability to complete an unsupervised task
Planning	The ability to decide or organize a task in advance
Learning	The ability to gain new skills and knowledge

Through the research project, the students' main task was to focus on collaboration. They had to discuss about research topic, research methodology, results, discussion and conclusion with their team. The theme of research project was to study the problems of English learning of TNI students, and then find out the possible solution to solve their problems. Therefore, the project required a hard work of English skills as the source materials for project, such as article, journal, books and interview, were collected only in English language. The students had to interview at least 20 students from different faculties and majors, and then report their findings in a formal written form. Finally, they had to present their research project by PowerPoint Presentation, and be ready to be asked for question. At the end of the project, the students had to submit all evidences- recording of an interview, journals and articles used as a reference. In addition, all students were required to share and express their experience towards a research project they had done.

According to students' reflections, it was found out that the project was an impressive learning experience because they were given invaluable opportunities to use English in an out of the classroom. The experience reinforced their confidence to use both written and spoken English to communicate and helped them understand more about other students' English problems. Moreover, they had to work as a team in order to synthesis and analysis all information they received from various sources, and information from an interview stage. However, the most difficult parts of the research project from the student interview were an introduction part and a discussion part. For an introduction part, the students were confused how to search for information as well how to avoid plagiarism it. Similar to the discussion part, the students had spent most of their time to analyze the results as well as find out the best solutions with lots of theories to support their ideas. Finally, almost all the students from an interview said that it would be a good experience if they could do the research project in other subjects as well.

On the contrary, there were some points needed to be solved and concerned by teachers such as the students' work distribution, variation of IT skills among students, and the dominant students who took control over introvert students. Therefore, teachers' monitoring should be addressed for the next research project.

A significance of research based is stated by The University of Western Australia, the University verifies that graduates from higher degree by research programs are highly employable across all fields of study. The reason of a high rate success in employment is that the generic skills required for success in a graduate research degree are the same skills that are in high demand by employers. In particular, successful completion of a research degree indicates to a prospective employer that the students have excellent project and personal

management skills. This includes the ability to think independently and critically, solve problems and communicate effectively (The University of Western Australia, 2013).

V. Conclusion

The most important problem of English skills derived from the students who had experience of Industrial Placement was speaking skills, followed by reading skills, writing skills and listening skills respectively. Therefore, the objective of this study was to investigate the learning activities to support the students to prepare them for career advancement, and to endorse the nation prosperity. The notion of Generic skills, hence, is demonstrated as one of the contemporary learning techniques based on the development of collaboration skills, communication skills, creative and critical skills, management skills and problem-solving skills. Through a form of research project activity, 40 students who passed Industrial Placement and enrolled in Academic Reading and Writing were required to demonstrate four characteristic of Generic skills as 1) to work with others 2) to work with information 3) to work with technology and 4) to learn and develop their own knowledge. Excluding a written submission, the final stage of the project was a PowerPoint presentation. The vital outcome gained from the project was the students' abilities to work effectively in authenticity. However, to be a students' successful learning experience, teachers should concern on students' monitoring as the value of working collaboratively is as important as getting the job done.

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