

Ways to Develop English Proficiency of Business Students: Implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) Approach

Dr. Wipanee Pengnate

College of General Education and Languages

Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology

1771/1 Pattanakarn Road Suanluang Bangkok 10250, THAILAND

E-mail: pengnate.wipanee@gmail.com

Telephone number: +668 2491-5465

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Abstract

The purposes of this research were 1) to investigate in-depth problems of business students' English skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing, and 2) to examine the project-based activities applied by the theory of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in English teaching-learning activity.

Research samples were 30 students from Faculty of Business Administration of Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology, Bangkok, Thailand. Instruments used for data gathering were an ethnographic interview and observation. The interview process was divided into two phrases. The first phrase was the students' English skill problems, and the second phrase was the students' assessment on the project-based activity.

The research findings were presented as 1) listening skills were considered as the most problematic skills, followed by speaking, writing and reading skills respectively, and 2) A trial project-based activity applied by CLIL demonstrated a high level of students' satisfaction as the students were able to gain various types of knowledge and skills.

Keywords: English teaching-learning process, Teaching EFL classroom, CLIL approach

1. INTRODUCTION

According to competitiveness in the economic and technological sectors, ten countries located in South-east Asia have been assembled to develop an area for free trade and services under the name of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) which will be commencing in 2015. The ten countries of AEC, which consist of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam, will be challenged in trade liberalization and employment level. Under the vision of “one vision, one identity, and one community”, AEC endows with four goals which are: 1) Free trade and service area, including investment, labor, and capital; 2) Competitive advantage, including tax and policy development; 3) Sustainable economic development, including SMEs supports; and 4) the world economic integration, including FTA (Free Trade Agreement) planning with other countries, and production network (Suttipun, 2012).

Among those necessary working skills, English language proficiency is, however, one of the most important skills as it is a fundamental language used in this era of globalization (Kanitpong 2012). Take India, individuals who are a good command of English earn significantly higher relative wages and better occupation outcomes even for the same level of overall education. As stated by The SUNDAY TIMES (2011), the importance of English in the workplace is a top concern among employers in Sri Lanka as 95% of employers believe that better English helps improve the productivity of organization, and 66% of employers turn down applicants due to a bad command of English. Therefore, the improvement in English language proficiency is an essential key characteristic to ensure that Thai workforce will be beneficial from the economic liberalization. Nevertheless, to facilitate the improvement, it is crucial to understand the roots of English problems in Thai student as well as investigate the learning activities to enhance Thai students' human capital in order to achieve in this competitive era.

This study, thus, focused on the case of business students as this group was considered as a major source of prospective skilled labor for AEC market in order to find out their English problems as well as generate the learning activity which supported the students' working skills and English skills in an authentic situation.

This study is categorized as follows: Section 2 provides empirical findings on the level of Thai students' English language proficiency and a theoretical framework of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Section 3 demonstrates the purposes of this study. Section 4 is the research methodology used for this study. Section 5 presents and discusses the results from an ethnographic interview and the project-based activity applied by CLIL. The last section is a conclusion of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEWS: Level of Thai students' English language proficiency and Theoretical Framework of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

According to Education First (EF) survey, it is found out 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 (Bangkok Post 2012). Test and Score Data (2012), moreover, presents the average level of Thai students' English skills in measured by TOEFL iBT, held in 2012, as 76 out of 120 points. When compared to other ASEAN countries, except Brunei Darussalam, Thailand is only ahead of Cambodia and Laos. Thailand lags far behind major ASEAN countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia. According to the result of Thai students' English proficiency, it could be indicated that Thai students are required to improve their

English skills in order to compete with other ASEAN countries and achieve in an international stage. Otherwise, many might lose their jobs or find it difficult to work when AEC takes effect.

Moreover, the low level of Thai students' English language proficiency might be disadvantageous as Cummins (2005) proves that the demand for English language and communication is steadily rising. Therefore, in order to increase the motivation of students, the development and dissemination of new methods of language teaching are illustrated as a requirement for English language teaching. The methods, furthermore, should be learner-focused, practically oriented and more applied to professional contexts.

One of the contemporary language teaching approaches used widely in Australia is Content and Language Integrated Learning or CLIL. CLIL is the approach that uses language to learn and learns to use languages (Liubiniene, 2008). Meyer (2010), moreover, indicates that CLIL has been gaining in popularity and is influencing ways in which various non-European countries apply the approach for bilingual education. In addition, (Coyle et al, 2010) has been used in curriculum documents in Hong Kong in order to make reference to the fact that schools are encouraged to establish cross-curricular linkage when developing their school base English program.

The main components of CLIL are divided into four groups which are Content, Cognition, Communication and Culture. Thus, the students are able to develop their own knowledge of specific subjects through a process of critical thinking skills by using foreign target- language as a medium language of learning contexts and activities. Finally, a crucial objective of CLIL is to generate intercultural awareness to students in order to prepare the students to be global players whose futures lie in the international job market (Coyle et al, 2010).

A CLIL classroom, therefore, aims to provide an access to personal and intercultural communication to support the learners' language experience for a variety of needs. Moreover, they may be exposed to different cultures perspectives on the content they are taught. Coyle (2006), further, affirms that CLIL teachers should have a good command of the foreign language as the means of instruction. It could be advantageous if the CLIL teachers are also experts in the subject-content area, and also have a deep understanding of the cognitive, socio-culture and psychological elements of foreign language learning. Jones and Jones (2008), in addition, describe that collaborative skills and self-management skills should be developed through a learning activity in order to prepare the students how to work as a team as and how to plan for a goal achievement. A more radical approach is further indicated by Marsh and Wolff (2007) who states that a CLIL model composes of three areas; language, content and strategies. Recommendation issues of the model are summed up by Jarvinen (undated) as follows:

- Provide plenty of input interspersed with focus on form
- Provide brief interventions of form-focused teaching
- Provide negotiation of form task (in addition to negotiation of meaning)
- Allow L1 use to support meaning-making and problem-solving
- Provide peer-peer scaffolding activities
- Provide opportunities for extended output and challenging interaction
- Provide task for processing and producing challenging oral output
- Ask 'quality' questions with unexpected outcome that cannot be answered in one or two words
- Provide examples of the linguistic expressions of content-related thinking skills
- Practice the linguistic expression of content-related thinking

One of CLIL activities demonstrated by Desiatova (2008) is project-based learning. Desiatova reveals that project-based learning has been promoted within English Language Teaching (ELT) for a number of reasons. Learners are enhanced to use language through varieties of communication and management, such as planning, analyzing and information discussing based on genuine learning situation and need. The benefits of project-based learning are, further, illustrated as the students can experiment with the language as something real, not as something that only appears in the books through three principles: Concern for motivation, that, is how the learners relate to the task; Concern for relevance, that is, how the learners relate the language; and Concern for education values, that is, how the language curriculum relates to the general educational development of the learner.

However, Pica (2002) contends that the teaching-learning strategies to apply CLIL with classroom learning are highly concerned as many unresolved issues are revealed. Vollmer demonstrates that many CLIL students show very poor academic writing skills, and most of them fail to verbalize subject-specific issues in an appropriate way. Hence, it is necessary to have a specialized training and very good team work between different categories of teachers for its success in exploiting the highest level of students' learning capability. Unfortunately, the notion of CLIL in Thailand has not been broadly recognized.

3. RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purposes of the study were as follows:

- 1) To investigate in-depth problems of business students' English skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing, and
- 2) To examine the project-based activities applied by the theory of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in English teaching-learning activity.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design was categorized into five phase as follows.

- Phase 1) Ethnographic interview with 30 business students about English skill problems
- Phase 2) Collection of site documents and associated materials
- Phase 3) Analysis and synthesis of data derived from the interview
- Phase 4) Design of project-based activity
- Phase 5) Ethnographic interview and observation during their project-based activity
- Phase 6) Analysis and synthesis of data derived from the interview and observation

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 1: The results of demographic variables

| Demographic data of respondents | n | % |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. Genders | | |
| 1.1 male | 12 | 40.00 |
| 1.2 female | 18 | 60.00 |
| Total | 30 | 100 |

The table presented that total number of student participants was 30 business students which consisted of 12 male students (40.00%) and 18 female students (60.00%).

TABLE 2: The results of students' English problems

| English problems | n | % |
|---------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. Listening skills | 13 | 43.33 |
| 2. Speaking skills | 10 | 33.33 |
| 3. Writing skills | 5 | 16.67 |
| 4. Reading skills | 2 | 6.67 |
| Total | 30 | 100 |

The table presented that the majority of the students had a problem in listening skills (43.33%), followed by speaking skills (33), writing skills (16.67%) and reading skills (6.67%).

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

5.1 Problems of listening skills

The majority of the student participant indicated that the accent of foreign teachers were difficult to understand. Besides, the students avoided asking the foreign teachers to repeat a question because they did not want their friends to laugh at them or looked at them as a fool. Consequently, they chose to sit behind and tried not to answer the questions. Some students argued that sound clips used in classroom was uninteresting as most of them focused on business conversation. Thus, the students required the different teaching materials of practicing listening skills such as current affairs, movies, songs or humorous clips from YouTube or other websites. Few students, however, asserted that they did not understand foreign teachers' jokes. Although the students knew that the foreign teachers tried to entertain them, they felt stressed when they had to answer these jokes.

5.2 Problems of speaking skills

The majority of the student participants agreed that they were shy to speak English in front of their teachers and classmates as they did not want to make mistakes. Therefore, they chose to be silent when the foreign teachers asked them to share their opinions. Some students said that they tried to memorize the grammar rules for their whole lives. However, when they had to speak English with others, they forgot them all. Some students added that they had little knowledge of English vocabularies, so they could use only easy words. Few students argued that the accent was their barrier to speak English as it was difficult to speak English like the way English native speaker did. Therefore, they lacked of confidence to speak English because they thought that speaking English with Thai accent was embarrassing.

5.3 Problems of writing skills

Most of the students acknowledged that grammar, vocabulary and spelling are their writing problems as they did not have an opportunity to practice writing skills. They indicated that their grammar might not be at a university level. However, some students said that they knew grammar rules, but they were not sure about a right meaning of vocabulary as the students were familiar with using Thai dictionary which, sometimes, the meaning of vocabulary translated in Thai version was not the same meaning of vocabulary explained in English version. Few students gave an interesting point of view that they had a problem of spelling because they always used Microsoft Office Word to type an assignment, and the program could correct the wrong word automatically. Therefore,

when they had to do writing exams, they could not think of the correct spelling of the word they were going to write down. Besides, additional students' opinion was about the critical thinking. When the students had a writing assignment, they tended to search for information from search engine websites. Then, they just copied and pasted the information they needed to Microsoft Word program, printed out and submitted to their teachers. This action, hence, did not help student improve their critical thinking skills at all.

5.4 Problems of reading skills

The majority of the students revealed that the reading passages from textbook were too long and uninteresting. However, if they spent time to read them carefully, they could get their main ideas and understand the points of authors. Nonetheless, they still faced the problem of reading skills when taking an examination according to time duration. They had only two hours to finish 100 items of the English examination; 25 items from conversation, 25 items from vocabulary, 25 items from reading and 25 items from grammar. Therefore, some of them found out that they failed reading part of the examination because their reading speed was too slow. Some students, further, included that although they could guess the main ideas of the passages, vocabulary was their weak point as they did not know its meaning. Few students contended that they spent too long reading the passages, and got nothing at all. However, when comparing with other English skills, they admitted that reading skills were the least problematic because the skills were not required to make an interaction with others like listening skills, speaking skills and writing skills.

From an ethnographic interview, it was found out that the real problems of the students' listening skills derived from the interview might be because foreign teachers have only one hour a week to teach both listening and speaking skills. The students, therefore, do not have an opportunity to practice enough listening materials in the class. Moreover, it is necessary for the foreign teachers to teach followed by the textbook provided. Thus, practicing listening skills do not only foreign teachers' responsibility, but it is also the responsibility to Thai teacher and the students individually.

For speaking problems, it might be because Thai students do not use English in their daily lives. The conversation used in classroom mainly focuses on business interaction, which, sometimes, does not support the students when they have to confront with a conversation in different situations.

For writing problems, it could be because of a limitation of teaching time. Thai teachers have to cover all areas of vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing. However, writing skills are required time and effort commitment between teachers and students to teach writing organization, grammar, advanced vocabulary, and formal form of academic writing style. In addition, the students have to create their writing with a critical thinking by their own without copying from other sources in order to receive a genuine feedback from the teachers.

For the last problem of English skills- reading skill problem, this might be because the textbook is based on business operation. The reading passages, therefore, accentuate the different examples of business functions by using difficult and a lot of technical terms of business vocabularies. Although the reading passages provide various business cases to study, the lack of interesting and motivating teaching approach leads to the students' learning ignorance.

According to Holden (2004) who did a research of successful strategies of learning English language in higher education, it is stated that successful learners are cognitively engaged in and aware of their role in the learning process, monitoring their learning, demonstrating the capacity and willingness to manage their own learning, seeking to create opportunities to learn, and availing

themselves of resources and opportunities for feedback. However, Pohl (2008) argues that it is necessary for teachers to set their roles to become designers of learning experiences, processes, and environments. Due to the expert nature of higher education, much evidence suggests that many college professors should prepare the students who will be motivated to be a lifelong learner and succeed in their future careers. This is supported by Gebhard (1996) who suggests that roles of teachers in CLIL are not only educators, but also facilitators. The teachers, therefore, have to ensure that the students have an unambiguous understanding the subject content and are able to increase of their skill-based focus with the abilities to achieve in their career advancement.

6. TRIAL PROJECT-BASED ACTIVITY: A CASE OF ‘IMAGE OF BANGKOK’ THEME

A trial project-based activity based on application of CLIL was used with 30 business students who enrolled in English for Communication 3 (ENL-201). The students were divided into six groups as each group had five members to work together as a team. The project-based activity used for a CLIL trial activity was under a theme of “Image of Bangkok” which all groups had to interview at least 10 foreign tourists in different tourist attractions in Bangkok, such as temples and shopping centers. The students were assigned to adapt their fields of business knowledge such as management and marketing to find out foreign tourists’ satisfactions and, then, analyze all information they received in a form of SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat) analysis.

6.1 Content

In order to achieve in this project, the student had to apply their business knowledge they had learnt to analyze SWOT analysis with the use of English language in an authentic situation. Therefore, the students were required to study theories of business knowledge as well as check their understanding with business teachers before going for an interview. The process of learning and the product of learning outside a classroom were focused as a valuable experience of the students.

6.2 Cognition

The students had to practice creative and critical thinking through analyzing of interview results in order to define Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats by means of foreign tourists’ points of view. Further, a discussion among team members based on business theories to find out a possible solution to solve the problems was highly concerned.

6.3 Communication

In each group, it was essential that communication among group members had to be clear and effective due to avoid mistakes and misunderstandings. Four skills of English were employed by the students in this activity as follows:

Listening skills were practiced through listening to teacher for instructions, listening to group members for a task distribution, listening to foreign tourists during an interview process, and listening to other groups’ presentation.

Speaking skills were practiced through speaking with teachers, group members, foreign tourists, and questions asked during a group presentation.

Reading skills were practiced through searching for business theories to create interview questions, SWOT analysis discussion derived from the interview process and other groups’ presentation.

Writing skills were practiced through a written form of interview, information report and presentation script.

6.4 Culture

Through CLIL learning, the notion of culture is emphasized as an exposure to alternative perspectives and share understandings to deepen awareness of otherness. Therefore, in this activity, the students were able to learn and understand foreign tourists' attitudes throughout the interview. They, further, had to confront with numerous challenges: some students got positive attitudes; some faced with negative criticism; and some might get nothing.

However, there were further important skills learnt through CLIL project according to students' interview and observation as presented by following points:

1. Collaborative environment. The students had to share their ideas through brainstorming, discussion and, sometimes, argument in order to finish the project within a time duration. Open-minded, therefore, was learnt by each student automatically.

2. Self-management ability. The students were required to finish the project within a month. Thus, the students' responsibility was one of vital components in order to have the project.

3. Technological advancement. The students were required to search for background information business theories and other related business case study in order to create interview questions and provide an effective discussion. Most useful information, however, was obtained from Internet websites and other sources of search engines such Google and Yahoo. In addition, a final phase of the project was a students' group presentation. Consequently, the students had to design their PowerPoint presentations to present their reports in an interesting and attractive way.

7. RESULTS FOR THE STUDENTS' PROJECT-BASED ACTIVITY

According to students' reflections, they said that the project was a memorable learning experience as they were given precious opportunity to use English language in and out of the classroom to communicate in an authentic situation. The majority of the student interview revealed that this activity increased their confidence to practice listening and speaking skills in English with completed strangers who were not their teachers and friends. Further, the background contents used for creating interview questions and theories used for discussion were based on their business knowledge. Therefore, they had a chance to communicate their business knowledge in English language outside classroom learning. Further, in order to discuss the interview results, the students had to analyze the results based on SWOT analysis in order to find out Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Critical thinking, therefore, played an important role in the report discussion.

However, there were some issues needed to be concerned for the next project activity as the business theories and a discussion of SWOT analysis should be done under an inspection of business teachers to ensure that report is validation and accuracy. The other issue was to prepare a student's problem-solving skills. Some students felt failure and wanted to leave the project when they were refused by the foreign tourists.

Referring to the results of student interview and observation, it was seen that a project is an extended task which usually integrates the use of language skills through a number of learning skills. These skills involve working towards a team working, goal setting, planning, information gathering and presentation through four English skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Besides, process of information discussion, synthesis and analysis was reported in speaking and writing forms.

Goodwin (1999), moreover, highlights that at the university level, project work encourages imagination and creativity, self-discipline and responsibility, collaboration, research and study skills, and cross-curricular work through exploitation of knowledge gained in other subjects. This is supported by Desiatova (2008) who points out that the benefits of the project work is to create connections between foreign language and the learner's knowledge seeking as it enhances the use of a wide range of communicative skills which enable learners to utilize their subject knowledge both from in an out classroom. Project-based activity is, therefore, discussed as one of the most famous learning activities to increase and diversify the learners' existing knowledge as well as to learn and understand other people's attitude.

8. HOW TO PREPARE THAI STUDENTS FOR ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

There are plenty of useful recommendations to uplift a standard of Thai educational system for a challenge of AEC in 2015 as described follows (ASEAN Economic Community: AEC, 2012; THE NATION, 2012).

Firstly, it is imperative to develop a curriculum at both the high school and college level on the cultures of AEC nations. This will require related quality teacher training to prepare educators to teach this curriculum effectively.

Secondly, it will be valuable to provide Thai students to have more opportunities in student internships in AEC countries. This could be a practical way to improve the student academic fields with working skills. Furthermore, the students will learn how to work effectively with other people from other countries. Indeed, well communication in English is one of the most important skills to be emphasized.

Lastly, more Thai students should be encouraged to do field research focused on other AEC countries in order to increase knowledge-based about other AEC nations' history, cultures, traditions and occupations.

9. CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal of this study was to find out the learning technique to challenge the students with though-encouraging tasks, which are practical and oriented to assist them to empower their academic knowledge and thinking process through the competency of English skills. The related crucial outcomes were the success of students' capabilities to work in Thailand and in other countries.

The notion of Content and Language Integrated Learning or CLIL, therefore, is stated as one of the contemporary learning techniques based on a development of academic content, a practice of cognition thinking, an effective used of foreign communication and intercultural awareness. However, to achieve in this learning technique, it is essential for teachers to manage their classroom learning with an application of authentic learning activity. Therefore, not only four CLIL elements-Content, Cognition, Communication and Culture, are developed, the student will also have an opportunity to experience of collaborative environment, self-management and technological advancement. However, CLIL teachers have to re-check the student knowledge of specific subjects before doing the project, and prepare the students in case of failure.

In this way, CLIL could be drawn on to the whole year instruction of one or more subject, or the teaching of a module on a specific topic, or as part of a regular course, with the installation a 'hunger to learn' in the students. Finally, it might be concluded that the more Thai students' competencies are the better chances of Thai students to achieve in a globalization era. Thus, a progression of Thai students in knowledge, skills and language is the first step to support the nation's achievement in AEC stage and to bring prosperity to Thailand in an international stage.

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