

Using task-based learning focusing on Thai culture to promote English writing ability of tenth grade students

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Abstract

The objectives of the study were to examine the effects of teaching English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture on students' writing ability and their task performing ability and to explore students' opinion. The samples were 30 tenth grade students enrolled in the English course in the first semester from Chongmaew Wittayakom School in Lumthamenchai District, Nakhon ratchasima. The research instruments were English writing ability test, task performing scoring rubric and a questionnaire. The data was statistically analyzed using mean, standard deviation and t-test.

The results showed that the students' post-test mean score of English writing ability after learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture was significantly higher than the students' pre-test mean score at the 0.05 level. In addition, the students' task performing abilities were at good levels. Moreover, the students had positive opinion of learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture.

Keywords: Task-based learning / Thai culture / writing ability

Introduction

Four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing are important when learning English; especially writing. Writing is essential as it is the basic skill for higher education. Writing enhances students' grammar, idioms, and vocabulary that students learn to understand and write stories based on their purpose. In writing, students also practice the language in more embedded forms. Writing is one of the important tools used to distribute one's updated knowledge and communication in several means such as writing postcards, notes, letters, keeping dialogue journals and preparing monthly English newsletters. Writing can be a tough activity for students, even when the writing activity is in their first language. Learning to write fluently and expressively is the most difficult of the four macro skills for all language users regardless of whether the language in question is a first, second or foreign language (Nunan, 2004 : 35).

Although writing skills are very important, transferring knowledge and ideas through writing is not an easy task; especially when the language used is a foreign language. The learning of writing is a complex activity requiring remarkable practice and effort especially as a second language (Rodby, 1987). Apparently, learners are so worried about many aspects in writing such as tenses, punctuation, spelling, and organization, that they forget about the ideas in the writing. On the other hand, they might forget the

proper grammar to be used when they focus on ideas. The frequently found problem is that students do not know what to write about or how to initiate their writing (White and Arndt. 1997). Moreover, when the learners face writing difficulties, such as how to use suitable organization for the writing purpose and how to choose appropriate vocabulary, they can't find solutions for the problems themselves. Moreover there are many factors which influence the students' writing difficulties that could be linked inappropriate teaching methodology.

From the two-year experience as a teacher at Chongmaew Wittayakom school in Nakhon ratchasima province, and from the achievement results shown in tests and classroom activities, the researcher found that more than 50 percent of tenth Grade students had problems with English writing ability; and that they did not have an understanding of the English language deemed appropriate to their grade level. After consulting with experienced teachers in the school, it was concluded that weak students did not have the necessary motivation for learning English and they did not think that English was important; so they failed in the English courses.

The researcher plans to use task-based leaning together with Thai cultural content to promote English writing ability because Thai culture is the content that students are familiar with in their daily life. Students' writing abilities might hen improve as the real world which is appropriate for task-based learning processes.

Task-based learning provides many advantages in teaching English because it offers authentic language experience in the classroom. Task-based learning focuses on learners using language naturally in pairs or group work, allowing them to share ideas (Nunan. 2004 : 10). Task-based learning is a practical approach to the learning process, employing various activities and challenges for learners to think freely and increase their competence. It offers several advantages by helping learners develop cognitive processes, creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Many learners state that when their teachers assign a variety of tasks for them to perform, they have the opportunity to use language communicatively. They also indicate that doing tasks within their team is pleasurable, and this helped their learning (Lochana and Deb. 2006 : 140-164). Task-based learning frameworks, combined with tasks and texts, provide learners rich exposure to language plus opportunities to use language in more meaningful forms. Throughout the task cycle, emphasis is on learners' understanding and expressing meaning to complete tasks (Willis. 1998 : 148). Problems in learning might arise when students have some basic knowledge of the language, but lack opportunities to communicate. For this reason, the researcher finds it appropriate to enhance the content of tenth grade English curriculum by teaching through task-based learning. The researcher then decides to use Thai cultural context as appropriate to teaching Thai ESL students for some simple reasons : a) The students have background knowledge in Thai culture as it is the part of their life. b) It is easy to understand the utilization of language as applied to a culture familiar to the student. As such, the researcher hopes that using Thai cultural content in teaching English through task-based learning will promote the students' English writing ability.

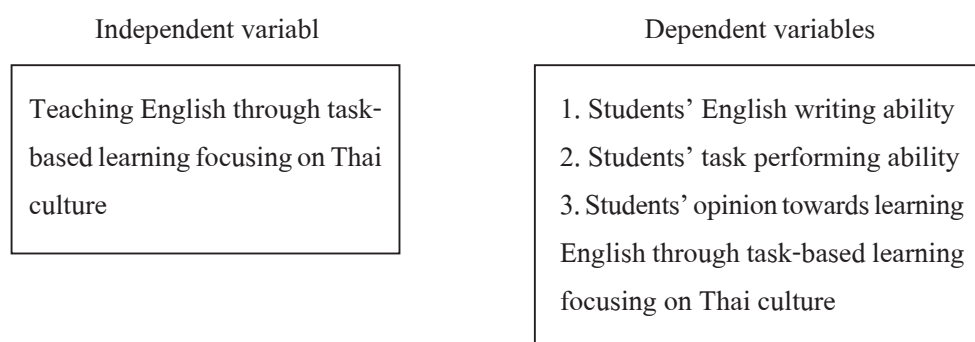
Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the effects of teaching English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture on students' English writing ability.
2. To investigate the effects of teaching English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture on students' task performing ability.
3. To explore students' opinion towards learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture.

Conceptual framework

This study is pre-experimental; one group pre-test and post-test design. The conceptual framework was shown in figure 1.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework



Hypothesis

The English writing ability post-test mean score of the students who are learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture is significantly higher than the pre-test.

Methodology

Population and Sample

The population in this study was 60 students of tenth grade at Chongmaew Wittayakom school, Lumthamenchai District, Nakhon ratchasima province in the first semester of academic year 2014. The samples were 30 students enrolled in the English course in the first semester selected by using cluster random sampling.

Research Design

This research was pre-experimental design; one group pre-test and post-test design. It was conducted at Chongmaew Wittayakom School, in the first semester of academic year 2014. The experimental design is as follows :

Figure 2 Experimental Design

O_1	X	O_2
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O_1 = represents measurement for students' English writing ability before the treatment.

X = represents teaching English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture.

O_2 = represents measurement for students' English writing ability, task performing ability and opinion towards learning English after the treatment.

Research Instruments

There were two categories of research instruments: experimental instruments and data collection instruments. The experimental instruments were eight lesson plans and eight Thai cultural lessons. The data collection instruments were the pre and post English writing ability test, task performing scoring rubric and a questionnaire of students' opinion towards learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture.

Data Collection

The samples were given a writing ability pre-test in order to check their background knowledge relating to English writing ability before learning English through task-based learning using Thai culture. Teaching English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture consisted of eight lesson plans, were then used in the experiment for eight weeks (two hours per a week). While teaching each lesson plans, the researcher also checked students' task performing ability. After completing all the eight lesson plans, the samples took a writing ability post-test to assess the effects of the experiment. The students' task performing ability was assessed during their last lesson. They also had to answer a questionnaire to explore their opinions towards learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture.

Data Analysis

The data from the English writing ability pre-test and post-test was analyzed using t-test for dependent sample. The data from the task performing ability and students' opinion towards learning English was analyzed by using mean (\bar{X}) and standard deviation (S.D.).

Results

1. Students achieved significantly higher average scores on the English writing ability post-test than the pre-test with the statistically significance at 0.05 level as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The comparison of the students' English writing ability demonstrated on the pre and posttests focused on 5 aspects of before and after learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture.

Aspects of English writing ability	Total score	Pre-test \bar{X}	S.D.	Post-test \bar{X}	S.D.	MD	t	Sig
1. Content	6	1.60	0.50	3.40	0.72	1.80	14.84	.000
2. Organization	4	1.27	0.52	2.77	0.57	1.50	12.04	.000
3. Vocabulary	4	1.17	0.46	2.70	0.54	1.53	14.70	.000
4. Language use	4	1.00	0.46	2.57	0.50	1.57	13.71	.000
5. Mechanic	2	0.70	0.36	1.08	0.35	0.38	4.89	.000
Total	20	5.73	2.30	12.52	2.68	6.78	21.17	.000

* p < .05

The results from table 1 showed that the scores of the students' English writing ability post-test of each aspect : content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanic were higher than pre-test mean scores with the statistically significance at 0.05 level. In addition, the scores of the students' English writing ability post-test of overall aspects were higher than pre-test mean scores with the statistically significance at 0.05 level.

2. The results from task performing scoring rubric

Table 2 The mean score of task performing ability in five aspects of tenth grade students.

Aspects of task performing scoring rubric	Total score	\bar{X}	S.D.
1. Contribution to group goals	4	3.33	0.48
2. Task accomplishment	4	2.67	0.48
3. Consideration of others	4	3.00	0.59
4. Contribution of knowledge	4	3.17	0.70
5. Group Cooperation	4	2.83	0.38
Total	20	15.00	2.03

The results from table 2 showed the mean score of the students' task performing ability during learning the lesson plan while focusing on five aspects. The findings showed the contribution to group goals mean score was 3.33. Task accomplishments mean score was 2.67. The considerations of others mean score was 3.00. The contribution of knowledge mean score was 3.33 and the group cooperation mean score was 2.83 respectively. The results from the total of five aspects of students' task performing ability mean score was 15.00. This could be concluded from the total mean score of students' task performing ability was in good level.

3. The results from the questionnaire

The results from the questionnaire exploring the students' opinion towards learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture showed that the students' agreement with total of 10 questions and had a statistical rating of mean = 4.24 with S.D. = 0.68. This showed that they agreed that task-based learning focusing on Thai culture helped them learn and write English better. In addition, through the open ended questionnaire, students' reported that they were satisfied with task-based learning focusing on Thai culture because they were encouraged to plan before writing the paragraph in the task sheet and had opportunity to contribute to in the group. As a result, they believe that task-based learning focusing on Thai culture helped them increase their writing ability.

Conclusion

The study showed that task-based learning focusing on Thai culture could develop students' English writing ability. The implementation of learning Thai culture provided students with the opportunities to use their experience, background knowledge to better create their writing task. In addition, task-based learning could help them to do the task in their pair or group. Moreover, students had positive opinion towards learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture. The study indicated that the samples' English writing ability has improved after learning English through task-based learning focusing Thai culture. Thus, we can see that task-based learning focusing on Thai culture could promote the students' English language learning and writing ability.

Discussion

In this study, the use of task-based learning focusing on Thai culture had an effect on students' English writing ability as it can be seen that the students' post-test mean scores of English writing ability after learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture was significantly higher than the students' pre-test mean score. The success of the using task-based learning focusing on Thai culture for boosting English writing ability is discussed in the following paragraphs.

In conducting this study, the students were explicitly taught by using every steps of task-based learning: pre-task, task cycle and post-task. The pre-task mode introduces the class to Thai cultural topics, the tasks and topic related words and phrases. Task cycle offers learners the chance to use whatever language they have already known in order to carry out the task. The post-task includes two components: language analysis and practice. In other word, students had a chance to practice learning Thai culture through the process of task-based learning systematically and regularly. For example, during pre-task, students were encouraged to do written tasks that were evaluated by using the criteria of knowledge of subject, substance, and relevance to the assigned topics.

This study was consistent with the study of Al-Jarf (2005) who investigated the effects of Task-Based Language Teaching on EFL freshman students' writing skills development in Saudi Arabia. It indicated that students' writing ability significantly improved as a result of Task-Based Language

Teaching. The study also concurs with Chimroylarp (2007) who indicated that students with both high and low proficiency improved most in the areas of grammar. Students in this study also made significant improvement in vocabulary. The reason was probably due to the principles of task-based instruction that primarily focused on conveying meaning, when students could get the message across during the task cycle. In doing so, they would get a chance to analyze and practice vocabulary and structure that they become fluent in using vocabulary. This resonates with Ruso (2007) who studied the influence of task-based learning on students' classroom performance and motivation in EFL classrooms. During the course of the study, the researcher used diaries, interviews and questionnaires to generate data. The finding of the diary studies indicated that tasks have been beneficial for vocabulary learning. The researcher thus found that learning vocabulary while watching a film or while listening to a song becomes more current and lasting.

During the writing process, it was found that the students accessed knowledge about vocabulary and sentence structure to help them construct paragraphs; they already used it in daily writing situations. Throughout the study, the researcher observed students' learning in each activity (step of task cycle). It was found that learning was reinforced when the students had a chance to share their task with their friends. When students created the writing tasks, they were able to use more-authentic writing processes to achieve the task. Each step of writing process helped them to write ever more fluently. In addition, they could complete the exercise in each task sheet, because they had already been doing the step as they did the task. As such, the researcher found that, when teaching English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture, students could apply the knowledge to use in daily writing situations.

Teaching English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture was important for organizing the knowledge that students acquired while simultaneously experiencing learning Thai culture, along with leaning English. The students had opportunities to practice their English writing ability through Thai culture that was familiar to them. The study revealed that using contents related to Thai culture could help in teaching and learning English, and could assist students in using their authentic experience and background knowledge from daily life because the contents tended to be familiar them. Students could then access their background knowledge about Thai culture related to their life, allowing that knowledge base to support them prior to writing, so that they were be able to formulate comprehensible paragraph. This is consistent with Biemans and Simons (1996 : 6) who pointed out that learning that is consistent with concepts linked to prior knowledge is important because all knowledge learners have when entering a learning environment is potentially relevant for acquiring new knowledge. Concurrence can also be found with Dole et al., (1991), who designed an intervention where students reflected on and recorded their prior knowledge on a topic before engaging a group discussion of the topic, during which the teacher encouraged them to contribute this prior knowledge to complete a semantic map. In relation to this study, Thai cultural contents could help students built schemata and understand the process of writing. Furthermore, teaching through task-based learning focusing Thai culture helped students considered how to apply those writing strategies effectively to improve their writing in the future.

Particularly important, the active learning atmospheres were considered as one factor that may have created meaningful learning in this study because the tasks engaged in the lessons required students to take active participant roles in working out assigned the tasks. In each lesson plan, students had the opportunity to learn together with their classmates as most of the tasks employed in the study were pair work and group work tasks. From the result of the study, the process of task-based learning approach allowed students to do the task in pair and in group that helped them to have a chance to work on their own. In five aspects of students' task performing ability; the contribution to group goals, task accomplishment, the consideration of others, the contribution of knowledge and the group cooperation mean score was 15.00. It can then be concluded that students' task performing ability was at a good level. This is consistent with Weaver (1990 : 10), who indicated that the teacher can best help learning by providing learning opportunities which allows students to involve and invest themselves.

Moreover, it was found that students had positive opinions towards learning English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture. The results from the questionnaire to explore students' opinions revealed that students agreed that task-based learning focusing on Thai culture helped them learn to write English. It helped them to work in groups and increased their writing skills. In this study, the researcher observed students during learning activities and found that students were interested in working in group, exercises, and tasks. This further reinforced the notion that using task-based learning focusing on Thai culture could encourage students to learn and write English better. Furthermore, students' opinions from this study was consistent with the study of Santadkarn (2006) who investigated whether the use of task-based activities helps first-year English major students at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University in learning English grammar.

An improvement in language performance, is also reflected in that students had positive opinions on task-based learning. Students' feedback after they had engaged task-based learning activities they found the experience to be highly motivating. This was also shown in the students' behaviors during the exercises as they evidenced a proclivity for doing the tasks actively by brainstorming with pairs or their group members.

To conclude, even though teaching English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture has not been widely used for secondary level instruction, this study confirms that such modality can be successfully used in teaching writing in the secondary level classes. Using Thai cultural content motivated and encouraged knowledge of students to work together in ways that could lead to success in solving writing problems and accomplishing learning related task.

Implications

The findings showed that it is possible to improve English writing ability of tenth grade students by using task-based learning focusing on Thai culture. Based on the findings, this researcher makes the following observations and recommendations: the students' prior knowledge helped them to construct the meaning and lead them to understand the Thai culture contents. The students' prior knowledge comes

from their past experiences, culture, and their environment. Teachers should encourage them to play games or to talk about their experience as an intrinsically part of the learning process. In the steps of learning, students are required to learn both individual and group working. The teacher should encourage students to get experiences outside the classroom; and, the teacher should use a wide variety of resources for students to learn with, that are related to Thai cultural contents. The teacher should then integrate pictures or photos about Thai culture in real situations, and share and integrate information from other people as part of the learning event. Perhaps more important, learning tasks used in the learning activities should be relevant to students' interest or needs. Tasks should match students' interest. It is further suggested that the teacher should conduct a needs analysis study prior to learning through task-based learning.

Recommendations for Further Study

1. Further studies should expand with larger group of the students and longer time for the experiment.
2. Further studies should examine task-based learning focusing on other contents such as local culture, western culture or ASEAN culture.
3. Further studies should investigate task-based learning focusing on Thai culture with listening and speaking and reading to promote students' English learning.

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