

## **Students' Reactions to Task-based Learning**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, task-based teaching has received a great deal of attention both in the literature and in real situations, especially at university level. Task-based instruction is claimed to be a very effective and powerful approach to learning. However, task-based learning may be difficult to implement with Thai students who are accustomed to traditional types of classroom learning and who may be resistant to innovation. This paper examines the reactions of students coming from traditional learning backgrounds to task-based teaching.

### **Introduction**

Traditionally, language learning has been viewed as a syllabus of structure which presents a series of 'ready-to-learn' lessons arranged from easy to difficult. Fluency and accuracy are the ultimate goals of this type of learning (Foster, 1999). In contrast, the task-based approach has been developed to provide an environment allowing language learners engage themselves in meaningful activities, such as problem-solving, discussions, narratives, and information-gap activities. Learners acquire the target language through a more natural process and errors do not signify bad learning or failure in language learning (Ellis, 1994). In other words, the emphasis is placed on meaning rather than form. Sometimes, ill-formed language may be used to complete the tasks. Skehan (1996 cited in Foster, 1999) points out that this problem may not occur if learners have enough time to plan before they begin each task. If so, the complexity, accuracy and fluency of the language they use will be increased as well. In addition, task-based instruction is learner-centered, that is, it requires individual and group responsibility and commitment on the part of students. Within a task-based approach, teachers have to change from traditional roles to more creative and innovative ones (Krahnke, 1987). Proponents of task-based teaching claim that it yields great benefits for both teachers and students.

The National Education Act of 1999 and increasing demands for educational reform have led to pressure for large-scale changes in education in Thailand over the past two years. The terms "learner-centredness" and "innovation" have become talking points among national leaders, educators, teachers and even parents throughout the country. The trends towards new and innovative ELT curricula have been encouraged in Thailand since the late 1990s especially at the tertiary level. A number of Thai universities have expressed concern about existing EFL programs and have made great attempts to promote more effective EFL curricula. King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) is one of the leading universities in curricular innovation, and task-based language teaching is the innovation chosen for the development of the new EFL curriculum.

## **An innovative EFL curriculum at KMUTT**

As a university of technology with undergraduate programmes primarily in science and engineering, the previous EFL curriculum of KMUTT consisted of EST courses which were organised around discrete discourse functions and focused on specific skills. The School of Liberal Arts which provided the English support courses was dissatisfied with them and, as a result, proposed a completely revised curriculum. The proposed curriculum contains two preparatory task-based courses: Fundamental English I (LNG 101) and Fundamental English II (LNG 102), for which students are placed according to their proficiency, followed by a course-length project and a content-based adjunct course (Watson Todd, 2000). The first two courses, Fundamental English I (LNG 101) and Fundamental English II (LNG 102), were taught for the first time in the first semester of the academic year 2000.

These two courses are based around large-scale tasks like Newspapers, Library, Resourcing, Problem-solving and so on. The following is an outline of a typical task on these courses. Another description of a typical large-scale task can be found in Watson Todd (1999).

### **An Example of a Task-based Unit**

#### **Library Task**

Aims: 1. To introduce the library as a resource because there is no fundamental course that teaches students how to do library search and resourcing  
 2. To enable students to make use of the library effectively  
 3. To introduce basic presentation skills

Duration: 2 weeks (8 periods)

Content: 4 Lessons

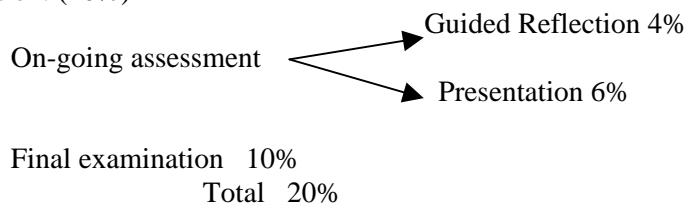
Lesson 1 General information about the library

Lesson 2 General search on selected topics

Lesson 3 Finding a book of interest

Lesson 4 Presentation

Evaluation: (20%)



#### **Lesson Plans**

Lesson 1: General information about the library

- Teacher starts with warm up activity (30 minutes)
- Teacher elicits general information about the library from the students.(30 minutes)

- Students work in the library in groups of 3 finding information to complete a worksheet (library questionnaire 1-3). Each group works on a different worksheet. Students hand in their work in next lesson.

#### Lesson 2: Library search

- Teacher gives feedback to library questionnaire 1-3 (20 minutes)
- Teacher takes students to the library to attend a lecture given by library staff. The lecture focuses on how to conduct a library search.
- Students work in groups of 3 to complete Library Search Questionnaires.

#### Lesson 3: Finding a book of interest

- Students present the information found in their library search.
- Teacher gives feedback (20 minutes)
- Teacher explains how to make use of sections of the books and how to use them effectively e.g. content pages, indexes, pictures, graphs etc. so that they can get something useful and understandable from the book. Teacher provides examples (30 minutes)
- Students (groups of 3) are assigned to choose a topic of interest, go to the library and find a book of their choice, borrow or photocopy sections from the book they think are useful and relevant to present to the class.(20 minutes) Guided questions for presentation:
  - What is your book about?
  - How do you know the general information without reading the whole book?
  - How did the text organization help you to get the general information?
- Students complete “Guided Reflection” form.
- Teacher prepares students for their presentations (30 minutes)
- Teacher talks about the assessment of the presentation according to the Presentation Assessment form.

#### Lesson 4: Presentation

- Students in groups of 3 give presentations.
- Teacher and students evaluate the presentations

From this sample task, we can see that the students take on much of the responsibility for learning, that students are given chances in their learning, and that discovery learning takes precedence over teacher-centred deductive learning.

### **The process of curricular innovation**

The process of innovating the new curriculum at KMUTT has been implemented by full-time staff of the Department of Language, who are the users of the new curriculum. The aims of involving language teachers in the innovation process are to decrease any negative perceptions of language teachers that might occur, and on the other hand, to raise their awareness of the benefits of the innovation and to promote sense of ownership (Watson Todd, 2000). Because of this, teachers’ attitudes towards the new courses are overwhelmingly positive (See Kongchan and Phichaiattanasophon, this volume).

### **The focus of the study**

While teachers’ attitudes are important, we must also consider the views of students regarding any innovation, and in this paper, I will discuss students’ reactions to task-

based learning, which differs greatly from the traditional classroom learning students are used to. Such reflections are very important in determining the success or failure of the innovation, and we should not assure that students will automatically respond positively to any innovation (see Shamim, 1996). Evaluations of students' reactions to curricular innovation are a crucial part of the curriculum innovation process, and this paper, aims to fulfil this part of curriculum innovation.

## Methodology

Post-course guided journals were used to gain insights into students' attitudes and feelings towards the two preparatory task-based courses which were first taught in the first semester of the academic year 2000. The first three guiding questions for the journals ask students to recall their experience of language learning at secondary level. The remaining three items encourage students to reflect on the new task-based courses. These items were written in Thai to enable students to reflect on their learning by themselves without any teacher interference.

### Post-course Guided Journal

#### Students' Reactions to Task-based Learning

1. Thinking back to secondary school, describe how you learnt English.  
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2. Thinking back to secondary school, describe how you felt about English courses.  
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3. Thinking back to secondary school, describe what sorts of things you learnt in English classes.  
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4. Thinking about the current English courses (LNG 101/ LNG102), describe how you learn English.  
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5. Thinking about the current English courses (LNG 101/ LNG102), describe how you feel about English courses.  
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6. Thinking about the current English courses (LNG 101/ LNG102), describe what sorts of things you learn in English classes.  
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### Students' reactions to task-based learning

Most of the students described their high-school language learning as following a teacher-dominated chalk and talk approach. Grammar and language skills were the main elements of the English Language syllabi. Mostly, students felt bored with teacher-centered lectures, drills and the emphasis on grammatical accuracy. However, there were some positive views concerning high-school language learning. Some students felt that it was satisfactory since their teachers were very skillful in implementing fun activities in the classroom. In addition, they felt more fun when studying speaking and listening with non-Thai teachers.

In contrast, students' reactions to the task-based courses were overwhelming positive. Some important themes emerge from students' journals.

Firstly, most of the students preferred a learner-centred self-directed approach to a spoon-feeding handout-based one. For example:

“ดี ทำให้ได้ฝึกทักษะไปโดยไม่รู้ตัวและเพราะทุกอย่างต้องเรียนรู้ด้วยตัวเองจึงจำได้แม่นยำกว่าที่จะมีแต่คนคอยสอน”

(Good! We are allowed to practice English without realizing it. As we have to learn everything by ourselves, therefore, we know it by heart. It's better than spoon-feeding method)

Secondly, they were taught to learn “how to learn” rather than simply to memorize facts for tests. For example:

“รู้สึกว่าการเรียนที่นี้สามารถนำไปประยุกต์ใช้ได้จริงเป็นเพราะว่าระดับมัธยมจะสอนเพื่อให้นักเรียนสามารถสอบเอ็นทรานส์ได้ จึงไม่ได้เน้นการนำไปใช้”

(I feel that what we have studied from this course can be applied to real-life situations. This may be because learning English at high-school level aims at enabling students to pass the University Entrance Examinations not for real-world use.)

Thirdly, they enjoyed co-operative learning as well as peer and teacher feedback that encourage close, interactive relationships between teachers and students. For example:

“เป็นการเรียนที่นักเรียนสามารถมีส่วนร่วมในการสอนทำให้มีโอกาสในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ และการเรียนการสอนก็เป็นแบบภาษาอังกฤษทำให้สามารถฝึกการฟังไปด้วย”

(This kind of learning encourages students to participate in selecting activities that allow them to use English in class. Additionally, English is the medium of teaching, and as a result, students can practice listening skills.)

Another important theme is that their language proficiency was raised and their critical thinking skills were also promoted. For example:

“รู้สึกดีและสนุกมาก คิดว่าเป็นวิธีการเรียนที่ได้ประโยชน์ดี ได้ฝึกทักษะในหลายๆด้านด้วยตนเอง รู้สึกต้อง  
ตื่นตัวตลอดเวลา”

(I feel good and have a lot of fun. I think that this kind of learning is very useful since I have chances to practice language skills by myself and I have to be active all the time.)

“ในช่วงแรกรู้สึกทำงานจะหนักมากเพราะยังไม่ชินกับการเรียนแบบศึกษาด้วยตนเองแต่มัน ก็ให้ประโยชน์  
มาก(ซึ่งมันแตกต่างจากมัธยม คือเราสามารถที่จะเลือกทำข้อเรื่องที่เราน่าสนใจแล้วไปค้นคว้าทำให้เราเข้าใจมากขึ้น) ต่อ  
มาก็รู้สึกชอบวิธีการเรียนแบบนี้มากขึ้นเพราะมันทำให้เราพัฒนาความคิดตนเอง”

(At the beginning of the course, I felt that it was a very hard work since I was not accustomed to a self-directed learning method. However, it provided lots of benefits. (It was totally different from high-school learning in that we could select any topics we were interested in and conducted research on those topics. Consequently, we understood our topics better.) Now, I like this kind of learning more than I used to as it helps develop our thinking skill.)

Finally, they realized the application of what they studied in class to real-world situations. For example:

“เรียนโดยการศึกษาค้นคว้าด้วยตนเองแล้วนำไปประยุกต์ใช้ ส่วนมากจะเป็นการสนทนากัน แลกเปลี่ยน  
ความคิด เป็นการเรียนโดยใช้การพูดภาษาอังกฤษเป็นส่วนมาก”

(We study by using a self-directed learning method and how to apply what we have learnt to situations in our daily lives. Most of the lessons are concerned with speaking and sharing ideas using English as the medium.)

“ส่วนมากไม่ได้เน้นไวยากรณ์เหมือนในสมัยมัธยมปลาย แต่จะเน้นการนำไปใช้ในชีวิต มากกว่า เช่น การ  
ได้ฝึกพูด การรายงาน ทำให้คล่องมากขึ้น”

(The course doesn't focus on grammar like secondary school. Instead, its emphasis is on how to apply English in our daily lives such as speaking and giving presentations that help to improve our speaking abilities.)

A small minority of students, however, expressed negative attitudes concerning the difficulty of lessons, the number of assignments, the “strange” teaching method, inadequate resources and so on.

## Conclusion

Clearly, the innovation of the EFL curriculum at KMUTT has found great acceptance by the majority of students. This success has been influenced by a number of factors such as teachers' effectiveness in implementing each task, available resources and cooperation from other institutions and so on, not only from the curriculum itself. However, there is still some resistance from those who are afraid of change, and there is a need for some

minor changes and revision of several units. More support from the university as well as the government is also required for the long-term success of this reform.

Overall, the implementation of a task-based curriculum at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi has been a great success, both for teachers and for students. It is hoped that this new curriculum may provide a model of English teaching and learning for other universities in both Thailand and the region. I therefore recommend all language teachers in Thailand to welcome this 'changing time' for nationwide curriculum innovation with a new perspective. As educational philosophy changes, the roles of teachers and students change. Our roles have changed from ordinary teachers to become changing teachers, that is teachers who change something. We should not change only materials and teaching methods. Our attitudes and beliefs should be changed as well. If we cannot do that, it would be impossible to change our students to accept their new roles as independent learners.

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