

## **Recent MA Research at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi**

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As many readers know, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) offers an MA in Applied Linguistics. One of the requirements of the program is that participants complete a 6-credit classroom-based research project for which the research is conducted during teaching practice either at KMUTT or at a local secondary school. The classroom-based research, which follows the principles of action research outlined by Allwright & Bailey (1991) and Nunan (1993), is frequently of such value that it deserves a wider audience than that normally accorded to an MA project.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to convey something of the quality and focus of recent postgraduate research at KMUTT through six brief reports. Full versions of these and other MA projects are held in our Main Library. For further information, including a complete listing, please contact the Librarian at the following e-mail address: [info@lib.kmutt.ac.th](mailto:info@lib.kmutt.ac.th)

### **Using novel homework assignments to increase students' motivation in completing homework**

***Namon Srithipan (1996)***

Working with first-year graduate students at KMUTT, Srithipan noticed in the first half of the term that several students did not complete their homework, and of those that did, many did not seem to enjoy doing so. She therefore planned to investigate whether "novel homework assignments" could motivate students to complete (and hopefully to enjoy) their homework.

By "novel homework assignments" Srithipan means assignments with four distinguishing characteristics: interest, challenge, open-endedness and content focus. To this end she chose three kinds of assignments, namely values clarification, a creative task and problem-solving.

Simply by counting the number of students completing homework, the novel homework assignments seemed effective. The number of students completing homework rose from just over 80% to over 90%. As a check, Srithipan gave one further "non-novel" homework assignment after the experiment which less than two thirds of the students completed. In addition, the quality of the completed novel homework assignments was more than satisfactory and the students expressed

positive feelings and increased motivation through a questionnaire and their diaries.

Srithipan argues that all four of the characteristics of novel homework assignments were important in increasing students' motivation, and links these characteristics to the purpose of assigning homework. She distinguishes three main purposes which homework can serve. The first is reinforcing what the students have learned in the lesson, which suggests a behaviorist philosophy. The second is to prepare students for the next lesson, fulfilling Ausubel's (1963) notion of cognitive structure. The last purpose is to set homework for students' general development, where there is no specific language focus, which suggests a more humanistic inclination.

Of these three purposes, Srithipan's novel homework assignments fall into the third category. However, Srithipan argues that, although the novel homework assignments increase students' motivation, they should not be used exclusively since the first two purposes may be more appropriate in some contexts.

### **Does evaluating peers' oral task presentations improve the quality and language use of the evaluator's future presentations?**

***Preethi Piyabhadra (1995)***

Focusing on oral presentation skills, Piyabhadra investigated the effectiveness of a fairly unusual approach. Hypothesizing that observing and evaluating another student's presentation would raise the observer/evaluator's own awareness of presentation skills, he decided to examine whether this raised awareness would have knock-on effects on the observer/evaluator's own presentations.

Teaching engineering undergraduate students at KMUTT, Piyabhadra set up the following experiment: after initial training in peer evaluation techniques, the subjects observed and evaluated two sessions of their peers' presentations. There were then three further sessions of presentations during which the subjects gave at least one presentation themselves and continued to evaluate their peers' presentations. Throughout the experiment, data were collected using evaluation forms, interviews, diaries and video recordings with transcriptions.

The results indicate that, firstly, the subjects' awareness of presentation skills had been raised, especially in terms of the need for interaction with the audience, preparation, use of visual aids and variety. Secondly, out of the seven aspects of presentation evaluated, the subjects had improved five aspects of their performance (interaction, use of visual aids, variety, confidence and preparation) but two aspects showed no change (fluency and accuracy). These findings suggest that, while Piyabhadra's approach had beneficial effects on delivery and presentation skills, the language skills involved in presentations require a different approach and may only show clear improvement over a longer period of time.

### **Individualizing vocabulary learning by using Double Language Texts Activity** ***Haruethai Panprem (1995)***

Faced with the common problem of students forgetting vocabulary items they had encountered on class, Panprem explored an innovative vocabulary learning technique with Matthayom 2 (Year 8) students at Wat Phutthabucha School.

Firstly, considering the need to stimulate interest and encourage to self-reliance, Panprem decided to allow the students to choose the vocabulary items they wanted to learn. Secondly, bearing in mind the students' low level of competence in English, she acknowledged the necessity of using their first language. Thirdly, she argues for the importance of context in vocabulary learning.

Combining these three factors, Panprem devised a technique she calls "Double Language Texts Activity". After students had chosen the concepts they wished to learn in English, they used a Thai-English dictionary to find the English word to express the concept. They then constructed a Thai sentence which included the English word, thus providing a meaningful context (L1) for the new vocabulary item (L2). Finally, it was anticipated that by swapping sentences with friends, students would learn several vocabulary items meaningfully and memorably.

Judging by the results of pre- and post- tests, most students showed an improvement in their retention of vocabulary items encountered, but the increase in scores was not significant, perhaps because of severe time constraints in the post-test. From their diaries, students indicated that constructing Double Language Texts facilitated learning and stimulated creative thinking. There were problems with the technique, however, due to insufficient preparation of the students in using dictionaries, and because of differences in Thai and English syntax. Nevertheless, Panprem argues that, overall, Double Language Texts are a valuable and innovative technique for expanding low-level learners' vocabulary.

### **Using self-assessment in technical writing** ***Winai Jhankasem (1994)***

In view of the unsatisfactory writing performance of a group of Computer Engineering students at KMUTT, Jhankasem decided to use a self-assessment technique (SAT) to encourage more awareness and individual responsibility for developing their writing skills. However, realizing that awareness-raising of this kind is a gradual and not always smooth process, he took the unusual step of focusing his research on problems arising from the use of the SAT in this context.

Subjects in the study were trained to assess their own writing on five criteria (content, organisation, vocabulary, language and mechanics) and to record their

scores and comments on a self-assessment form. Additional qualitative data were collected from a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and the teacher's diary.

Findings indicated that major problems for the teacher in adopting the SAT were how to decide on appropriate assessment criteria (and their weightings) and how to select suitable practice exercises. The subjects also found the criteria to be a problem: they had trouble applying them to their own writing and felt that five criteria were too many. Their relatively weak background in grammar also inhibited an effective application of the SAT. Nonetheless, all subjects expressed positive attitudes towards the technique since it increased their motivation and self-esteem, and promoted a better learning atmosphere.

Given these benefits of self-assessment as a learner-centred technique, Jhankasem sees potential for its application in other language skills such as speaking and reading. However, in order for the benefits to be realized, the method requires patience and an appropriate entry level of grammatical knowledge.

### **Using vocabulary-card-box technique to help less-able learners retain vocabulary taught in class**

***Issariya Tassana-ngam (1994)***

The problem of how to remember new vocabulary is a perennial one for language learners. Tassana-ngam found that the inability to recall words learned in class affected less-able students in particular: it reduced their reading comprehension ability and discouraged them from further learning. To deal with the problem, she chose the vocabulary-card-box technique as developed by Davis and Rinvolucris (1990), anticipating that the technique would not only help the students retain new words in long-term memory but also encourage independent learning skills which they could apply in other areas.

Subjects were asked to use any of the following ways to record a new word on a vocabulary card: drawing, double contextualisation, affective responses and graphic design. The cards were filed into a box under four sections: words known well, words forgotten, words learned recently and words learned less recently. The subjects were instructed to review these vocabulary items at regular intervals, rearranging the cards in the box as necessary.

Results from pre- and post experimental vocabulary tests showed that forgetfulness in learning new vocabulary decreased by half. Affective data obtained by questionnaire and interview revealed that a significant effect of the technique was an increase in learners' confidence, responsibility and independence in dealing with the target language outside the classroom. Tassana-ngam's study was thus able to demonstrate the positive effect of a learning technique both on product

(retaining vocabulary more effectively) and process (fostering qualities required for continued independent learning).

Though the subjects expressed some reservations about the amount of time involved in the technique and the boredom experienced in working alone, Tassana-ngam believes that these problems could be overcome through regular feedback sessions and training in peer correction techniques.

**Students take on the teacher's role: Using peer teaching to promote learner independence**  
***Pisamai Supatranont (1993)***

A standard requirement of the speaking skills component in university language courses is for students to prepare and deliver an oral presentation of some kind. However, Supatranont noticed that the students giving oral presentations in her class were using a "reciting" fashion: their presentations were more like performances for the teacher's benefit rather than genuine attempts to communicate with their listeners. Moreover, the lack of response from the audience led the teacher to assume responsibility for eliciting feedback, thus reducing the participants' involvement even further.

Convinced of the importance of feedback as an essential element of genuine communication (Johnson, 1990), Supatranont decided to use a peer teaching technique to encourage the students to give their oral presentations more communicatively and in a manner less dependent on the teacher. Presentation groups were formed and asked to assume a 'teaching' role by becoming more aware of their peers' understanding of the content, their attention levels and their involvement in the presentation. The group members exchanged ideas about how to present their talk in a way that would capture the interest of the audience. They also took on responsibility for classroom management and eliciting feedback.

Results showed a significant change in the students' styles of presentation: they were highly interactive, using creative approaches such as simulation, personalization and cartoon strips to raise interest and involvement. They were also more attuned to the audience's level of comprehension and succeeded in eliciting a strong response in the form of questions and feedback. The participants themselves expressed highly positive attitudes towards the peer teaching technique: they enjoyed working together as a team and valued their increased independence from the teacher. Supatranont concludes, accordingly, that a learner-centred environment is more conducive to communicative interaction in the classroom.

## References

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