Utilization of Content-Theme-Based Instruction: An Overhaul of English Language Learning for Non-native English Learners

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Abstract

Teaching and learning English in international programs in an EFL nation as Thailand are uneasy tasks for both teachers and learners since English courses are provided parallel with content courses that use English as a medium of instruction. It causes an urgent demand of high level of English proficiency applying in the study; therefore, not only English communicative skills are required, but also English academic skills are demanded. As a result, a teaching approach integrating both content and language teaching and learning as Content-Based Instruction (CBI) approach was selected to develop academic reading and writing skills of Thai EFL undergraduates studying in the international programs aiming to investigate effectiveness of CBI approach in developing Thai EFL undergraduates' academic reading and writing skills. The study was carried out at Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai, Thailand. Pre-and post-tests and a semi-structured interview were used to examine their academic reading and writing skills improvement after the use of CBI in the classroom. The research findings indicate that the students got better results in post-test of academic reading and writing skills, and the students thought that this approach of teaching enabled them learn

pleasantly by not worrying too much on grammar as other academic English courses they used to study. As CBI approach enabled the students improved the skills at the end of the course and generated good feeling when learning, it can imply that CBI approach is effective in teaching academic reading and writing skills at tertiary level in this particular context.

Keywords: Content-Based Instruction, academic reading and writing, English as a medium of instruction

1. Introduction

Academic skills are important tools for tertiary students, especially students studying in the international programs of the study, in which English is used as a medium of instruction. Effective participation in academic texts comprehension and assignment writing depend on abilities to read, interpret and critically evaluate texts (Nambiar, 2007); therefore, it is also commonly recognized that a successful learner is often a successful reader. It is an undeniable fact that learning and thinking processes can be enhanced by the reading ability of learners (Nambiar, 2007; Wei & Onsawa, 2006). Academic reading is thus an important language skill for obtaining knowledge and collecting information for learning English as a foreign language (EFL) both for education success and professional development that's why reading ability in understanding English effectively is regarded as an important skill for EFL students at all levels (Wei & Onsawa, 2006). It supports development of overall proficiency and provides access to crucial information at work and in the university (Komiyama, 2009).

Moreover, academic writing skill is also important for the students to transfer and present their comprehension or capability academically (Sengupta, 2002). It is also a crucial skill for student's education and professional success as a lifelong process to transfer thoughts and feelings for communication. It also enhances language acquisition because the learners practice to use words, make sentences, and write any pieces of texts to communicate their ideas effectively and to support grammar and vocabulary they are learning in the class (Anderson, 2002). Using writing as a learning tool during reading leads to better reading achievement and that using reading as a vehicle for elaborating on ideas and understanding opposing views leads to better writing performance (Thomas, 2000).

In Thailand, the universities are relevant to EFL concepts as we have Thai language as our own mother tongue language. Most Thai students have problems with all English skills since they rarely use it in both class and daily life, especially academic English skills that require accuracy (Keyuravong, 2002; Wiriyachitra, 2002). Moreover, it can be said that Thailand has not achieved much where teaching English is concerned. Many different methods of teaching have been implemented. When the results are unsatisfied, the new method is replaced by one another (Changpueng, 2009; Darasawang, 2007; Wiriyachitra, 2002). At the moment, they are about to step into the career world or further education, and very soon, they will be in it. Academic English language skills are very important to them. This is a crucial factor which has contributed to the research problem. In fact, these students have faced with content and language learning as two main goals to achieve. Over the last two decades, there have increasingly been interests in integration of English language learning with content teaching and learning in public educational sectors in Europe and other parts of the world (Banegas, 2012; Moate, 2010), including Thailand. Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is one of content-language integrated approaches used to teach both content and language. It is as an effective alternative approach to teach Thai EFL students because the students can develop their language skills as well as gain access to new concepts through meaningful content by the use of CBI (Heo, 2006, p. 26). Several research confirm that it can also be a good alternative in developing the students' academic reading and writing, especially in Thai contexts where English is as a foreign language. Furthermore, it involves in increasing the

students' English academic reading and writing ability, including the English language proficiency and motivation after learning through framework of it (Liaw, 2007; Suppakitjumnong, 2006).

Mae Fah Luang University (MFU) is a public international university in Thailand where English is used as a medium of instruction, and the students are multinational students. This study would like to investigate the improvement of Thai EFL students' academic reading and writing skills and their satisfactory toward learning academic reading and writing by the use of CBI, Theme-base Model due to the belief mentioned in Kim (2005) that the theme-based model is the most successful in EFL contexts. Therefore, the ARW course was taught by an English language teacher.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Samples

There was an intact group of 120 subjects from 4 sections selected from 974 students of 32 sections who enrolled Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) course as a compulsory course in General Education (GE) course group at Mae Fah Luang University (MFU) in Chiang Rai, Thailand. These subjects were Thai EFL students that were non-English major at MFU with the average age of 18. All of them have low level of English proficiency, that is, they got less than 50% of the Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) scores when entering the university, and the ARW is the fourth English course in their tertiary education. They had already studied two courses focusing on integrated skills (Intensive English I and II) and a communication course (English for Communication) before enrolling the ARW course.

2.2 Research Instruments

In order to achieve the purposes of this study, an experimental research, the one-group pretest-posttest design, was employed. The research instruments of this research study were categorized into three categories:

2.2.1 Instructional Instrument

Instructional instrument in this study is a set of instructional material designed based on the principles of CBI approach, Six-T's (Themes, Texts, Topics, Tasks, Thread, and Thread). Consequently, the instructional materials of the course were designed under the same theme of 'Globalization' so as to serve the demands of multi-major students from different schools at MFU.

The texts used in the course were voluntarily selected by the lecturers of four content courses (ASEAN Studies, Introduction to Information Technology, Introduction to Thai Culture and Creative Thinking and Inquiry Skills for Everyday Use) all the subjects have to study. Before using in the CBI course, those texts were adjusted to match with language focus taught in the course such as adding some examples as clues for academic reading strategies practice, putting more punctuation and complements in some sentences in helping the subjects see how to guess the meanings of words from context and adjusting the structure of text to serve taught writing focus. It can be said that the input of this research study was comprehensible

and authentic. The subjects learned and practiced the academic content they have to face in their real lives and skills necessary for their study in the content courses. As a result, sub-topics used in the instructional material arranged following the main theme and situations were additionally generated to support academic reading and writing skill practice of each lesson and made a connection between content and language focuses of the course. All sub-topics appeared in the course content are linked to each other in order to present the connection of academic reading and writing skills used in real academic situations. Furthermore, activities designed in each lesson supported both content and language learning by encouraging the subjects' interaction with each other.

2.2.2 Summative Assessment Tools

Pre-test and post-test were used as tools for assessing the subjects' academic reading and writing skills improvement. The tests cover four main points: academic reading strategies, paraphrasing and summarizing, citation and referencing and informative paragraph writing. The main points focused in this study were defined as necessary skills for the students' learning in content courses by four content-course lecturers interviewed before designing the ARW course.

2.2.3 Follow-up Tool

Semi-structure interview questions were used to gain the in-depth information of the subjects towards the effectiveness of CBI approach in developing their academic reading and writing skills.

Each research instrument was validated by three experts. A pilot study was done for pre-and post-tests with 28 Thai EFL students in the particular context. The result of Reliability Coefficient is alpha .696, which indicates that the instruments used have high reliability, meaning that the effect of errors of measurement was small.

2.3 Data Collection

The data was collected in the ARW course for 15 weeks, 3 hours per week, in the study area, Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai, Thailand. The procedures of data collection were as follows:

2.3.1 Pre-test Session

Week 1: The teacher introduced the course in the first hour. The research samples took the pre-test for the rest of 2 hours to measure their academic reading and writing proficiency before the treatment.

2.3.2 Treatment Session

Week 2-4: Academic strategies were learned and practiced by the subjects. Those strategies focused on guessing the meaning of the new words, finding main ideas, reading comprehension and making inferences.

Week 5-7: Paraphrasing and summarizing processes were emphasized in the classroom.

Paraphrasing steps were firstly presented by starting from sentence level to short text; then the subjects learned about summarizing processes and its importance to academic writing.

Week 8-10: APA style of in-text citation and referencing were introduced because it is the standard citation used in all content courses. The authentic texts with the use of APA in-text citation and referencing were presented.

Week 11-13: Informative paragraph writing was focused. The paragraph structure was firstly taught, following by how to combine paraphrasing, summarizing, citation and referencing into the written text.

2.3.3 Post-test Session

Week 14: The research samples took the post-test.

2.3.4 Follow-up Session

Week 15: The semi-structured interview was employed at the end of the course with ten percent of the subjects (twelve students). Each interview lasted 20-25 minutes. The interview data were recorded using the electronic voice recorder.

2.4 Data Analysis

The pre-test and post-test were graded by two English language teachers who have at least 10 years of teaching experience using the provided answer key in checking academic reading strategies part of the test. Moreover, the writing part was graded by holistic scoring scale of Weir (1990). The mean scores of both tests were compared by using Paired-Sample T-test.

The answers from the subjects were analyzed by using content analysis. The counting frequency of occurrence such as their feelings and problems was counted as a tactic for generating meaning from the collected data for this study (Cohen, 2007). Therefore, after the interview, the data from the audio tape recording were first transcribed and categorized into six headings involving objectives and course content, teaching methodology, activities and exercises, evaluation criteria, the teacher, academic reading and writing achievement and additional suggestions.

There were two raters who verified the analysis of the interviews. The first rater was the researcher of this study, and the second rater was an English lecturer who has experience of doing research and teaching English for approximately 15 years.

3. Results

It was found that the subjects' academic reading and writing skills were improved by the use of CBI approach as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Difference between Pre-and Post-Test Mean Score

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.
Pre-test	120	9.7250	2.33340	-60.780	.000
Post-test	120	25.6500	2.56561		

According to Table 1, from a total score of 40, the subjects' total post-test mean score is 25.65 (S.D. =2.56), which is higher than their total pre-test mean score: 9.72 (S.D. =2.33). The Sig. (2-tailed) value showing the difference between the pre-test and post-tests score is .000 that is less than .05. Because of this, it can be concluded that there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test score and post-test score. Since the Paired Samples Statistics box revealed that the post-test mean score was greater than the pre-test mean score, it can also be concluded that the post-test mean score was significantly higher than the pre-test mean score.

Furthermore, the subjects' in-depth information towards learning academic reading and writing skills through the use of CBI was revealed in the interview process. The findings from the semi-structured interview reflected similar results to the findings pre-and post-test mean score, that is, after studying academic reading and writing by the use of CBI approach, the subjects revealed that they have been more knowledgeable in terms of academic skills. Moreover, studying the ARW course enabled them be confident in their English skills and ready for other content courses studying and learning.

The findings from semi-structured interview showed that the subjects satisfied with the integration of content and language teaching and learning. The samples of subjects' opinions are presented in the following statements:

It was really interesting course. It was wonderful that I learned academic skills in entertaining way. It was really real because the content used in the course was what I faced with in other content courses. (Interviewee#2)

What a surprise! It was absolutely different from what I thought before beginning the ARW course. It was really fun and entertaining. The content of the course was similar to what I studied in other courses. It was such a good connection. (Interviewee#7)

It was such a good idea for generating this course. Since we are studying in the international programs, we have to use English in our class since the first day of our university's lives. I believe that there are not any courses preparing us better than this course. We can learn other courses' content and English language in the same time. It was such an innovative way of teaching. (Interviewee#8)

Moreover, some subjects thought that the integration of content and language teaching and learning was authentic.

Learning language through content in the ARW course was really similar from what happened in our lives. Since we are studying in the tertiary level, we have limited time spent for language learning because we have to focus on our major courses. The ARW teaching and learning processes taught me how to manage learning activities and balance content and language learning. It reminded me to realize that I can learn language while learning content as well. (Interviewee#6)

In terms of teaching methodology, the subjects disclosed that instructional processes were relaxing; they did not feel that they were studying the serious issues as academic ones. The

following sample statements of the subjects could be really good confirmation:

ARW course in this semester was different from what my senior said to me. The teacher's teaching steps were smooth and appropriate with the content and activities. Most importantly, it was so relaxing; I was never serious in the class but my academic reading and writing skills were improved a lot. I love this course because it is like sunshine of my English study. (Interviewee#1)

I did not think that I was learning academic skills while following the teaching processes of my teacher. Her characters were friendly, and she made very serious skills like academic reading and writing skills were as easy as communicative skills that are not far from my real life. Her teaching stages supported my learning a lot. It was systematic but relaxing. (Interviewee#9)

However, some subjects presented negative opinion toward the teaching methodology as illustrated below:

I want the teacher re-plan the step of content analysis to see linguistic points. It was a good procedure to see what language points embedded in the content, but low proficiency of English of mine caused me not easily follows my friends and class. It was sometimes too fast for low-proficiency student as me. (Interviewee#12)

As for kinds of activities they liked, it was found from the analysis that most of the subjects liked group work and different types of group work activities at each teaching stage. For example, about half of the subjects liked the collaborative activities the teacher used as a basis for individual tasks.

I like group work because we can brainstorm. Many times I could not see the linguistic point in the taught content; my friends helped me finding it that helped our learning steps were processed appropriately. Therefore, we could see the way people think. I like it when the teacher asked us to compete with other groups. We got together in our groups very well and we could compare our work to other groups' work. (Interviewee#11)

I felt better when doing the individual assignments at home since I already saw other people's ideas from group work. It shortened my thinking process and saved my time to think about some details of task. Most individual assignments of mine brought the ideas from group work to adapt in my own idea and presented mine. I like it. (Interviewee#10)

Group work was bad at first since I was not familiar with some friends in the group, so the ideas were not shared well in the first two classes. However, it was a lot better when we were familiar with each other. (Interviewee#3)

Furthermore, the subjects agreed with the evaluation criteria of this course because they were clear and suitable. They also thought that explaining the evaluation criteria before evaluating their achievement was suitable.

I think the evaluation criteria are suitable because we can see our problems in reading writing ability clearly, especially citation that is new but necessary for your study.

(Interviewee#4)

The evaluation criteria are clear, and it helps us know which parts we need to improve. (Interviewee #5)

Interestingly, the subjects had positive opinion toward the teacher. They agreed that the teacher prepared the course content and teaching assistance appropriately and her methodology helped the subjects understand the lessons easily.

The teacher is friendly and pays attention to all of the students. She can help us improve reading and writing skills and other necessary skills such as paraphrasing and summarizing and citation and referencing. (Interviewee#8)

The teacher is a friendly and flexible person. She sometimes spoke fast, but she would speak slowly whenever she realized or some students told her. Her teaching is enjoyable and easy to understand. Although I was studying academic skills, I felt like learning entertaining skills. She made difficult points to be easy. I understand what she taught, but it is difficult to adapt with what I face with in the real life. (Interviewee#11)

Some students had positive opinion toward the teacher's teaching, but they wanted more various activities. This can be seen from the following samples:

The teacher is O.K., but I think that adding more games as learning activities would make ARW more enjoyable. I am poor in English; I sometimes want something easier. I can learn slower than other friends, so when the teacher teaches the new points I spent longer time to learn than my friends. Games probably help understand the points easier. (Interviewee#12)

I am happy with studying ARW course, but I want the teacher makes the course more entertaining by adding entertainment materials such as lyrics of song, poems or quotes if possible. However, I understand that it is difficult to link them to academic issues. Anyway, I love the way she taught us and love learning the ARW course. (Interviewee#7)

After the ARW was implemented, the subjects had to be tested by post-test. The semi-structured interview was done in asking them about their satisfaction with their learning achievement. The subjects expressed that they satisfied with their academic reading and writing achievement because they thought that it may not be difficult as they felt before taking the course and it is necessary for their study, higher education and future career path. Most of the subjects said that they like reading and writing English more, especially the texts in other courses that seem academic but fun to learn. The following sample statements are what the subjects expressed about their academic reading and writing achievement from ARW course:

Before studying the ARW course, academic reading and writing skills were very far from my mind. I told myself to do the best for any assignments I had to do in all courses. Searching more information in English rarely happened in my life before. ARW course helped me be confident in learning and searching for information in English since I could understand what I read. Moreover, I know better about writing, I am sure that I can write better now. I know how to paraphrase and summarize the texts, which is different from the past that I just copied

the texts from other sources to put into my assignments and submitted to the teachers of any courses without worrying about plagiarism. But, now I know how to avoid it, and I am proud of myself more since I can write and read better. (Interviewee #1)

I feel more confident to read and write after studying the ARW course because I can see the ways of doing it. I am sure what is right or wrong and what should be done or not. Specifically, writing skills, I think that writing is not too difficult now, and I am happy to learn more about how to avoid plagiarism. I am proud of my reading and writing improvement because it makes me feel a lot more confident. (Interviewee#5)

I love English more after studying the ARW course. I feel like I can cope with any assignments assigned in all courses. I can see the clear pictures of reading and writing my study. (Interviewee#4)

My reading is still a problem because my background of vocabulary knowledge is not good. However, it is better, I am more confident to guess the meaning of what I am reading without using dictionary and I can understand it. Incredible! And I think that my writing has improved a lot. Although grammar is still my problem, I am more confident to write. (Interviewee#10)

In conclusion, the subjects showed their satisfaction with learning the academic reading and writing skills through the ARW course by the use of CBI approach. They also think that this course is useful for their study, higher education and future career, and they are more confident in reading and writing skills that were improved by the use of CBI in the ARW course.

4. Conclusion

The Content-Theme-Based Instruction approach is an alternative teaching approach to develop the academic reading and writing skills of the tertiary students in EFL context, that is, teaching academic skills through the integration of content and language seems appropriate and enables the students familiar with both the context of learning content and learning language. Collaborative activities are useful for the students to brainstorm and generate the ideas for their writing and comprehend the reading texts at the first stage of academic skills learning. It helps the students see different points of views towards the learning topics. The outcomes of group work from collaborative activities are as a good model for individual learning. Most importantly, the students are happy with learning academic reading and writing skills by the use of CBI approach. It made them be more confident in academic reading and writing skills and believed that their academic reading and writing skills were improved. That is, the goal of the study was achieved by seeing the effectiveness of CBI approach in developing the Thai EFL undergraduates' academic reading and writing skills, and the very good by-product, self-confidence, was also reached. The self-confidence is a good factor in the subjects themselves for their further learning toward academic skills so as to develop themselves for furthering education and future career.

Acknowledgement

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