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THE EFFECTS OF THINKQUEST PORTAL AND PROJECT- BASED LEARNING ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

SHAMALA A/P KRISHNAN

A project report submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Education in Teaching English As A Second Language (TESL)

Faculty of Education
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DECEMBER 2010
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To my beloved parents and sister
I would like to thank all the people who have enabled me to complete this study in one way or another.

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ABSTRACT

Project-based Learning and ThinkQuest is a teaching and learning approach which have been introduced in Malaysian Smart Schools to build on individual strengths, and allows individuals to explore their interests in the framework of a defined curriculum. Moving away from rote learning and memorisation method used in traditional language classroom, Project-based Learning is holistic in nature and incorporates the principles of providing challenging and complex work, interdisciplinary and encourages cooperative learning. The effectiveness of Project-based Learning has been documented through numerous research studies. However, very few published materials have been done on the effects of Project–based Learning and ThinkQuest as a teaching method to enhance students' interest in learning English in rural primary schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to discover the effects of ThinkQuest and project-based learning in English language learning in a rural primary Smart School. It is hoped that this study could help enhance interest in learning the second language in this primary school. A total of 36 respondents from Year 4 class in a rural primary smart school have participated in this study but only 6 respondents were selected as the samples. All the respondents have been exposed to Project- based Learning strategies and also on how to upload the information gathered onto the online portal. Qualitative data were gathered in this study using four types of instruments: questionnaires, interviews, ongoing observation and peer evaluation. Data analysis was done using open coding method and percentage. It was found that all respondents after the PBL session, showed a significant improvement in the English class in terms of their language learning and confidence in using the language. In conclusion, the use of project-based learning and ThinkQuest played an important role in enhancing students’ interest in learning English language and it gave a great effect to their language learning too.
ABSTRAK

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In Malaysia, English is placed as the second most important language after Bahasa Malaysia which is the national and official language. Although English is considered as a second language in education and curriculum, the educational system from the primary up to the tertiary level provides an important place for English. The terminal goal of the English language curriculum for schools is to help learners acquire the language so that they can use it in their everyday life, to further their studies, and for work purposes. English is important, as with globalization, Malaysians will need to be proficient in the language and to communicate with people in other countries. The use of English in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has also been incorporated into the curriculum to enable learners to access knowledge on the internet and to network with people both locally and overseas (KPM, 2004:1).
Emergence of programmes such as ETEMS proved that Malaysian government gives importance to English as it is considered as an international language. After the abolishment of ETEMS Programme, Ministry of Education has proposed a new curriculum whereby English will be considered as an important subject and new syllabus in teaching and learning English will be introduced soon to ensure the students acquire proper second language learning so that they can use the language in outside world. The importance of English also lies in its economic significance,

“... that Malaysians might not only lose its economic competitiveness but also find progress in the industrial and technical field retarded if its workforce was not competent in English.” (Mahathir Mohammad, 1991)

As English is considered very important in education, new methods such as students-centered approach, cooperative and collaborative learning and task-based learning have been used by the teachers in schools to improve the English language learning among the second language learners, yet the standards of English among the rural primary schools still can be questioned. Many students were still facing problems in speaking and writing in English due to the lack of interest and exposure in using the language. The problems faced by the students affect the students’ English results too. Hence, it is hoped that by introducing a strategy like Project-based Learning (PBL henceforth); it will help enhance students’ interest which will affect the students’ language learning especially in primary schools.

With regards to language learning and teaching in primary school classroom context, the usage of internet in PBL method is still new and research on the values has not been fully investigated. Even though the discovery of its potentials in educational setting is yet to be explored, it signals the emergence of another teaching method which can add to other language learning methodology in language classroom.
This also can be addressed as transformational changes in the rapid development of education. Currently, teachers have attempted to make the language learning in classrooms more like those in the real world in order to enhance the second language acquisition. Thus, the language will not be in the form of “training” for the classroom use, but more for the real communication with the target language in the real world.

PBL is more towards experiential learning. Experiential learning refers to the organization of the learning process on the basis of the pedagogical principle of “learning by doing”, which means that learners acquire knowledge after having experienced or done something new (Kotti, 2008: 32). Experiential learning is defined as the exploitation and processing of experience, aiming not only at acquiring knowledge, but also at transforming the way of thinking and changing attitudes (Meziro, 1991). In experiential learning, learners participate “in concrete activities that enable them to ‘experience’ what they are learning about” and the “opportunity to reflect on those activities” (Silberman, 2007: 8), since “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning is related to the project method. The project method is “a natural extension of what is already taking place in class” (Stoller, 2002:109), an open learning process, the limits and processes of which are not strictly defined, which progresses in relation to the specific teaching context and learners’ needs and interests (Frey, 1986; Kriwas, 2007).

The idea of assigning projects to students is not a new one. There is a longstanding tradition in schools for "doing projects, “incorporating "hands-on" activities, conducting field trips, and implementing laboratory investigations. Mostly project work will be implemented by the Science subject’s teachers so that the students can apply whatever they learn in science to the real world context but using project method in second language classroom still can be considered as a new method in Malaysian primary schools.
Because of the significant achievement in using PBL in the classroom by many researchers, this study focused on the effectiveness of using ThinkQuest Portal an internet based tool in PBL to enhance the interest in learning English language which can improve the young learners’ language learning and language skills.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

English language, as a second language in the country, has a dominant role to play in the broader education scenario in Malaysia. English language teaching in primary education, therefore, aims at equipping pupils with the basic English language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and knowledge of grammar to enable them to communicate (orally and in writing) in and out of the school for different purposes and different situations. This is because the aim of English language instruction in Malaysian schools is to enable the learners to communicate effectively and efficiently in English in social and professional situation (Chitravelu, 1995: 4).

The policy clearly states that English language is still a strong second language in Malaysia. The primary English language syllabus, for instance, declares:

“In keeping with the National Education Policy, English is taught as a second language in all government-assisted schools in the country at both the primary and secondary levels of schooling.” (KPM, 1995: 1)

The KBSR English language curriculum, in principle, attempts to ensure that the pupils would acquire knowledge and skills through direct experience in learning
the language skills. Learning English, as envisaged in the KBSR, should be pupil-centered in order to meet the varied pupils of different abilities. The students must be able to use English in different context such as for asking information, requiring goods and services and must be able to communicate effectively not only in classroom but also when dealing with community.

But pupils rarely had the opportunity to use the language because most students are not really interested in learning the language. Although a great many different ways are used in order to enhance interest in language learning in classroom context, the end product is still unsatisfactory in rural primary schools.

In this study, the researcher used the Project-based Learning method to enhance the students’ interest in learning English so that they can acquire the second language learning in L2 classroom. The researcher integrated ThinkQuest Portal in the teaching and learning procedure because ThinkQuest is designed to make it easy for teachers to set up learning projects within their classrooms or in collaboration with other students and teachers around the world. The environment is flexible so that teachers can design projects to meet their specific teaching and learning goals. Having confidence that ThinkQuest is a space for interactions between real teachers and students and it is a compulsory tool which teachers in the Smart Schools must use during their teaching and learning hour, the researcher felt that there is relevancy in integrating the ThinkQuest Portal in PBL to enhance students’ interest in language learning.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of ThinkQuest Portal in PBL on Year Four primary school students’ language learning as measured by questionnaires from the respondents selected and by the data collected from ongoing observations, interviews and peer evaluations. ThinkQuest is an online portal which
has been introduced as a teaching and learning tool for conducting PBL in Malaysian Smart Schools. Small projects with driven questions will be given to the students and they will upload their finding in this online effective tool. The research aimed to expand the PBL approach among the primary school learners and to determine whether the integration of ThinkQuest Portal in PBL can be an alternative way in helping learners to improve their interest in learning language effectively and to determine its effects on the students’ language learning. The finding of the research was hoped to proof that ThinkQuest Portal and PBL provide a more motivating way of L2 learning. It was also has been hoped that learners themselves be aware of the potentials of the instructional tool used, thus, helped them better recognize its effectiveness in their future learning.

1.3 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In Malaysian rural primary schools, the opportunities to use English with their peers are rarely available to students. This is because most of the students in rural schools were not exposed to English and most of them are not originated from English speaking background family. This seems to be the main factor which makes English difficult to learn. In the teaching context, English teachers realize that there are many external factors that commonly cause students to fail in learning English. Among these are big classes, geographical location of the schools, students’ backgrounds, supplementary textbook availability especially in the library, access to a language laboratory, and teachers’ qualifications (Dardjowidjojo, 1995). Each of these conditions is related to the others, and has made the problem of teaching and learning English even more complicated to solve. Students still facing lack of interest in learning English and teachers are still trying to enhance the students’ interest by implementing new approaches into their teaching and learning activities.

In Malaysian Smart Schools, implementation of ICT based technologies gains support from the students and teachers but yet the increase of interest in learning English and using the language still can be questioned. Though PBL curriculum is still a new way in teaching the English language, it has a potential role in developing
the four language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Therefore, it is hoped that implementation of ThinkQuest Portal in Project-based Learning will be effective to gain interest of the young learners to use the language and at the same time to improve their second language learning.

1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical framework showed the theories underpinning this study and the direction of changes of the methods used in teaching and learning procedures. Earlier, concepts of traditional classroom methods have been changed from teacher-centered classroom activities to learner-centered classroom activities. Integration of technology has been an advantage for the learner-centered teaching and learning method and it has attracted attention among the teachers and the learners. Although ICT has been expanded into the new curriculum of language teaching methodology, yet the usage of ICT in language teaching was still in the unsatisfactory level.
Program such as ICT in Language (ICTL) also has been implemented in schools but the students learnt the computer skills only for the classroom usage and not in the real life situation. By integrating ThinkQuest and implementing project work, learning occurs in the real life situation and at the same time students will be exposed to the maximum usage of language.

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study provides information about the effects of implementing Project-based Learning in a rural primary Smart School. The scope of this study was between Project-based Learning, ThinkQuest and Year Four students. This study was intended to address two sets of questions. This study summarizes some of the descriptive information, as well as information from the historical record, in an attempt to describe the effects of integrating ICT into Project-based Learning. It reviewed traditional teaching and learning method and latest teaching and learning method which brought changes in the modern teaching and learning methodology which was hoped to enhance interest among the primary school learners in learning the English Language.

1.6 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study was carried out to meet the following objectives:
1.6.1 To examine how ThinkQuest Portal used in Project-based Learning helps increase the Year Four students’ interest in learning English.

1.6.2 To examine how the use of ThinkQuest Portal in Project-based Learning affects their language learning.

1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.7.1 How does the ThinkQuest Portal used in Project-based Learning help increase the Year 4 students’ interest in learning English?

1.7.2 How does the ThinkQuest Portal used in PBL affect the students’ language learning?