GENERATING DEPTH AND ENGAGEMENT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROJECT-BASED CURRICULUM

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Abstract

In 2006, the English department at a Thai private university implemented a project-based curriculum in which selected projects were 'shared' across all of the courses in the first year of the curriculum. This report summarizes the curriculum design and implementation process and offers an example of one project – a student blog – by way of demonstrating how the projects were conducted.

Keywords: Curriculum, project-based teaching, blogging

Introduction

This paper is in two parts. In the first part I will present details on a new English Major curriculum that was implemented and that continues to be developed at Dhurakij Pundit University (DPU), Bangkok. The primary reason is to demonstrate how we have designed and experimented with a content and project-based curriculum that is, as far as I know, quite unique in Thailand. More specifically, this discussion will refer to the curriculum as it currently stands, in its second year, after some revisions were made.

In the second part I will provide one example of the projects students conducted in the second 'version' of the new curriculum – the production of a blog – to show how the principles and aims of the curriculum were put into practice.

New Curriculum Implementation

In Thailand it is not uncommon for freshman students to enter university with less than even Basic English skills. This applies equally to students enrolling in English Major Programs, where probably a majority of students are false beginners.

If evidence is needed, here is an example of some students' writing from a basic diagnostic writing test, which was held in one of the first writing classes of the first semester of the first year (bear in mind that these students have received a good number of years, up to twelve,of English instruction). All features of writing have been preserved.

Q1. What is a sentence?
   1. The word mix The word. It is sentence., or name, is, moon…Ex. this is my friends,
   2. There are any words are mix in sentence
   3. Subject Gramma Verb Tent
   4. A sentence have Subject, Verb, Object. Some sentences have past ten and other. Have words. It is communication with everybody.

Q2. Write a sentence using each of the following groups of words:
   A. eat, go, lunch, midday
      1. I going to resturant at midday for have lunch.
      2. My family go to eatting the lunch in midday.

   B. learn, job, English, good
      1. I learn English good job.
      2. I am like good learn English but don't like a job.
      3. I'm lean English

4. I learn English not good and I can't job.

The point of this is not to belittle the students, nor to show that their writing is so bad, which in some cases it isn't, but simply that this is the level at which many university English departments have to begin their instruction.

The expectation that these students will, in four years, become proficient and confident language speakers is pervasive and seems perfectly reasonable. But, given the realities, it is also perverse. Conditions ranging from outdated teaching approaches and low level English proficiency of teachers, few resources in schools, completely undeveloped study skills among students, lack of genuine interest and curiosity (English is often a 'default' subject for indecisive freshmen), to continued traditional teaching practices and unevaluated curricula at universities all combine to result in an unacceptable number of students who, after hundreds if not thousands of hours studying English, can barely muster the confidence to compose a coherent, grammatically or pragmatically appropriate utterance.

Opportunity for change
Curricula in Thailand can be adjusted in any given year, but this adjustment is limited to shuffling the order of offered courses, although content of individual courses is also of course open to change. However, the opportunity to redesign an entire curriculum arises after every 4 year program cycle, and in 2006 we decided to make a major overhaul, primarily because the proficiency levels of students were low even at end the of their studies.

Weaknesses in previous curriculum and lesson delivery:
1. There was no coherence across courses: teachers designed their courses without awareness of what other instructors were teaching to the same students.
2. English was affectively and socially 'removed': English was a subject like any other, treated as having finite and stable content, rules and meanings; it was thus an abstraction, not seen as a means to communicate.
3. Classes continued to be teacher-centric and teacher talk dominated class time.
4. Teachers were settled in their routines and in some ways reluctant to explore other means and methods.
5. Due to previous frustrations involved in teaching, teacher fatigue had set in, and instructors began to lack 'faith' in students' potential to learn English to a competent level.
6. Courses in early years of the curriculum did not challenge students intellectually, and did not develop their questioning or analytical skills.

Pedagogical and Theoretical Premises
It is vitally important that educators can clearly enunciate the theoretical premises which inform their instruction. Theoretical premises, conscious or implicit, guide the teacher's methodology, objectives, content preparation and classroom management. Additionally, an explicit recognition of one's theoretical principles allows for the opportunity to verify or refute a curriculum's or teacher's approaches. Thus, in the case of this curriculum the following theoretical principles were outlined following extensive work-shopping and meetings:

a. Theoretical premises
1. ELL is enhanced when content can be explored in depth, allowing for multiple points of entry, rather than if content is introduced piecemeal and in 'samples'
2. English needs to be 'self-realized': it needs to be made personally relevant in context (not the practice thereof); such self-realization is established when the stakes of learning go beyond the class
3. ELL involves the generation of histories (Kraus, 2003), culture and an ecology of use (Van Lier, 2004)
4. ELL is improved when it is driven by (student driven) problem identification and solving
5. ELL is enhanced with a holistic, approach integrating language and content (Blanton, 1992)

6. Communication is embodied and felt, not only 'studied'
7. ELL is enhanced when the processes of learning and use are highlighted
8. ELL involves changes in perception (not only the memorization of rules and vocabulary)

b. Content design principles.

It is also important to have a clear idea of what a curriculum or study program hopes to achieve. While individual courses are designed with 'behavioral objectives', that is, objectives which state what students should be able to do by the end of each class and course, the design of a curriculum equally requires a similar set of general guiding principles. In other words, how do the theoretical premises outlined above inform the pedagogical approach, the design of content, materials and ultimately the projects themselves? In our case we emphasized the following concepts and principles regarding our approach:

1. To view language holistically: to treat English as an open system, not a discrete set of units; to integrate language and content
2. To be alert to the affective factors involved in language learning and mindful of the principles of experiential learning (Kohonen, 1992): to ensure that activities and behaviors encourage confidence and desire to learn
3. To highlight communicative and pragmatic views of language: to encourage the use of English in and out of the class; to include cross-cultural notions of politeness, and meaning-making
4. To attend to linguistic development: while not central to our approach we should not neglect the importance of accuracy and this is fostered through feedback and reflexivity
5. To develop professionalism: to insist on pride in quality work and emphasize that a sense of professionalism begins at university

By bearing these principles in mind during the design phase of the curriculum we could ask ourselves whether what we were preparing was indeed in keeping with what we aimed to achieve.

Project-based teaching outline

Project-based teaching is an approach to integrating language and content by asking students to conduct a variety of tasks, such as generating topics, researching and presenting findings, in the process of completing a larger project. Proponents of project-based teaching argue that language is contextualized, authentic, and complies with principles of learner independence (Beckett & Slater, 2005, Fried-Booth, 2002, Moss & Van Duzer, 1998).

It is characterized by the following features; it:
- Builds on previous work;
- Integrates speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills;
- Incorporates collaborative team work, problem solving, negotiating and other interpersonal skills;
- Requires learners to engage in independent work;
- Challenges learners to use English in new and different contexts outside the class; Involves learners in choosing the focus of the project and in the planning process; Engages learners in acquiring new information that is important to them;
- Leads to clear outcomes and
- Incorporates self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and teacher evaluation. (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998, p. 6)

Of primary importance then, is that students are engaged in the *production* of something, rather than the mere repetition of supposedly stable meanings found in exercises and normal tasks.

Project work is by no means a new approach and, as Hedge (1993) notes, is linked to experiential learning theories dating back to Dewey among others. Moreover, it is not always met with the

complete approval of students, as it can be complex, culturally alien and conflict with students' beliefs regarding language learning (Beckett & Slater, 2005). However, the approach we adopted was somewhat different in that students were to focus on the same project across all of their courses: they would plan, read about, write and discuss their projects in courses related to each skill. The aim of this was in a way to 'slow down' the English learning process by allowing students to concentrate on the same content and project for an extended period of time.

Design and procedure

The curriculum's principles, projects and content for all courses were designed during workshops prior to the commencement of semester, with instructors who were assigned to teach the first year intake. Additionally, meetings were scheduled for every week during the semester, although in reality we did not meet this often. Most communication was conducted with teachers individually.

An online proficiency test was organized for all students in 1st and 2nd year in order to identify relative proficiency levels. At the end of the year, the same test was conducted to compare student proficiency levels.

The courses

All of the courses focused on various aspects of the same projects, all the while focusing on allowing the development of content familiarity and fluency. The courses are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Courses Offered in First Year	
Semester 1	**Semester 2**
1. English Learning Skills and Strategies 2. Reading Skills and Strategies 1 3. Writing Skills 1 4. Oral Interaction 1 5. English Use 1	1. Reading Skills and Strategies 2 2. Writing Skills 2 3. Oral Interaction 2 4. English Use 2 5. Pronunciation

This is an unusually high load (30 credits of their major) for students in their first year. In order to enable such an intense curriculum we also had to redistribute the General Education courses throughout the curriculum.

Selection of Projects

The three main concerns in the selection of projects were:
1. whether projects were logistically feasible;
2. whether the projects were manageable for students in terms of difficulty, and;
3. whether they were interesting for students (and in some way relevant)

As we could not consult with students regarding which projects they would find interesting we had to second guess the third consideration. Nonetheless, the projects do meet and address the theoretical principles outlined, and there are good reasons to believe – especially in hindsight – that both the degree of difficulty and interest value have been well matched to our students. The projects are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Projects in each Semester	
Semester 1	**Semester 2**
1. Web page (blog) 2. Travel brochure 3. Narrative 4. Movie Review	1. News report 2. Advertisement 3. Drama 4. Social Issue

Example: Blog

In the first version of the curriculum we had included an online 'magazine' that students were to create as their final project for the semester. Our reasoning for this project was that students would find enjoyment in creating a web page, in small groups, and be able individually to write on a topic – in line with the group's chosen theme – that they liked. In other words, this was not considered an inherently 'magical' new pedagogical approach simply because students were working online: the basic premise was its enjoyment value. Surprisingly however, our survey revealed that this was one of the less enjoyed projects. The reasons for this, based on student feedback, were that it was the final project of the semester and the pressure to complete the task, as well as coordinate within their groups, undermined the potential for enjoyment.

As such, in the revision of the curriculum we made two changes, namely to make the online work individual and to place it at the beginning of the semester. An obvious solution was to make this project a blog. Not only would students develop some computer skills (it was illuminating to see how many students were unfamiliar with computers and online environments as we have come to assume that these students are the 'internet generation') and get their 'online' fix, but the blog allowed for a consideration on how we introduce and present ourselves in public and online. Additionally, the blogs allowed for 'public' consumption of students output, thus raising the stakes in their presentation. In our case we chose Hi5.com as the blog provider as it is one of the most popular in Thailand.

The key to this project, as it was with all others, was to determine content and coordinate its delivery over the four week period of the project. This was done through meetings with instructors of all the courses. The following page outlines the session plans across the courses.

In the case of the blog, content could not be as rigidly designed as in other projects. However, it should be noted that the content did not follow typical patterns of courses in terms of difficulty or 'learning order': introduction of grammar, for example, was less 'systematized' or linear than in course books. Instead, students learned grammatical and genre-based content that was relevant to and emerged from the project itself. (Incidentally we started the project in week 2, as the first week is generally more chaotic, with considerable student movement and absenteeism.)

For each project a different course was the principle focal point for coordination. In the case of the blog, the English Learning Skills and Strategies (ELLS) course was in charge of taking students to the computer labs to upload and edit their pages, while Writing Skills 1 controlled the students' input, as it was in that course that students composed their personal profiles or 'autobiographies'.

However, all of the courses addressed blog writing in some way: the reading course used online blogs for reading/content analysis; the conversation course used blogging both as a springboard for conversing about introductions and presenting oneself, as well as a topic of discussion in terms of blogging as a social phenomenon. Finally the English Use 1 course used blogs as points for analyzing commonly used grammar and vocabulary. An example of students' final upload is given in Figure 1 below.
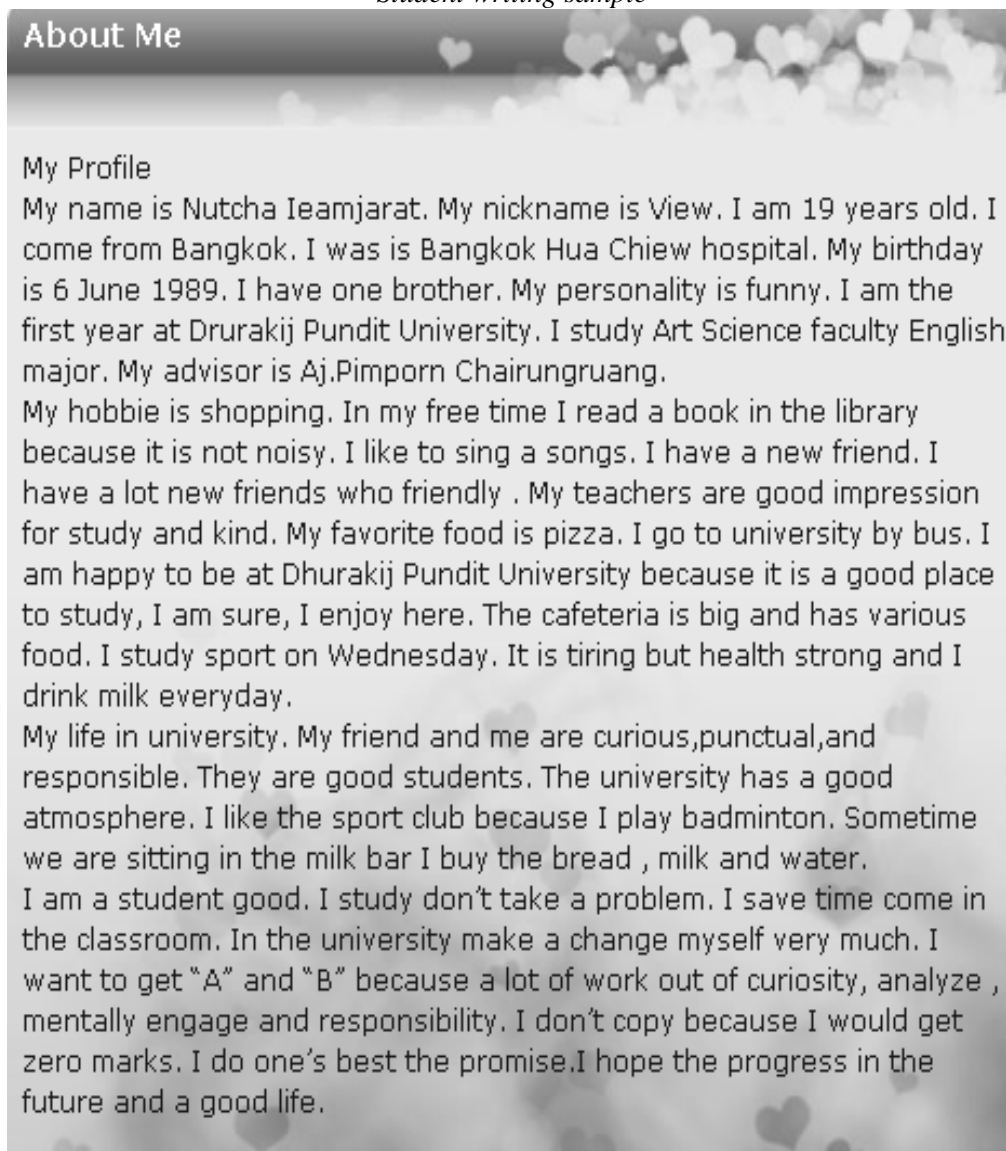
Student writing sample

Figure 1

All of this required coordination. Obviously, not every session could directly address blog writing as each course had its general objectives. Additionally, the objectives of the curriculum were born in mind and therefore various curricular objectives overrode project objectives.

Thus, in Table 3 below, the shaded boxes refer to either the use of the computer labs (SALLC), highlight the curricular objective of encouraging critical thinking (e.g. discussions) or examine reflexive components of a given course.

Table 3

Integration of Project 1 Across Courses

Week	2		3		4		5	
Class	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Eng Use 1	Parts of speech	Sentence structure	Subject-verb agreement *e.g. I am I have*	Tense *e.g. I went I used to*	Tense	Nouns and pronouns	Nouns and pronouns	punctuation
ELLS	Create hi5 web page	Create and design hi5 web page	Vocabulary development regarding internet use	Being an active learner	Time management: creating a schedule	Using SALLC and internet sources to find info.	Learning styles and preferences	Learning styles and preferences
Write	The writing process	The sentence: personal profile	The simple sentence: personal profile	The compound sentence: personal profile	Basic Punctuation	Basic Punctuation	Blog writing (personal profile)	Blog writing (personal profile) SALLC
Read	Dictionary skills	Dictionary skills	Introduction to web log	Reading different parts of web blog scanning	Analysis of blogs	Analysis of blogs	Reading biographies	Travel brochures: cities
Oral		Introducing self and others	Talking about families; asking, introducing	Talking about interests; wh-questions	Small talk; initiating conversations	ROLE PLAY small talk, initiating conversation	Talking about internet: discussing pros and cons	Talking about internet

Some problems and issues
In general
Perhaps the biggest issue concerning the implementation of the project-based curriculum was timing and scheduling. First, as is common to larger undertakings such as this, time was a factor in preparing the curriculum, in particular its materials, and for the first version we had to create the curriculum while it was being implemented. However, for the second version this was less of a problem. Other time-related matters included the fact that it was been difficult to arrange meetings as regularly as we would have liked (due to other commitments and interruptions), and teachers therefore tended to branch off on their own without consulting other team members. Holidays also created havoc with the alignment of content so that where one course was following the session plans another subject might have fallen behind.

Another important matter was that there was little time to familiarize new staff to the project. Whereas the original team became 'communally immersed' in the new program and subsequently were co-supportive, new faculty members required training (and, let's be honest, 'convincing') which was not possible to provide as often necessary. They were consequently not been as comfortable with the approach – at least at the outset. However, once teachers became more fully involved their enthusiasm grew. Indeed, we now have a number of research projects stemming from the new curriculum.

Finally, quite a few students dropped out. In the first year ,we started with about 160 students and now have approximately 120 still in the department. There are similar figures with the second intake of students (in their second semester at the time of writing). In a way this is not too much of a concern as this is not an unusual drop-out rate. Also, some reasons that students have given for leaving the program are that there is too much work, or too much English! While for upper administration this may be a concern in terms of revenue, it has in a sense been a blessing in disguise as the intensity of the program has acted as an informal screening – something that is not done for students entering the university.

Issues with blog

With the blog itself we eventually had to take quite a lax approach regarding monitoring and assessment. For one, it was soon evident that we had 'lost control' of the students' activities: where it started as an academically oriented exercise, students, not unexpectedly, quickly turned it into a social forum (which is of course a primary purpose of blogging) in which they used Thai. Additionally, as a social networking site hi5 of course encourages users to invite 'friends' (or rather, complete strangers) to join one's network, so that there was a seemingly exponential growth of friends who in turn typically flooded a person's site with 'comments' (mostly banalities!).

There was also an issue of security. Although we gave students a list of 'do's and don'ts' regarding hi5 use, for example regarding the inclusion of personal details or possibly risqué photographs, this was not possible to monitor continuously. This applied to other aspects of a website, such as students' additions of applications, widgets and so on.

In sum, after students had been assessed for their website and profile, we did not continue to monitor the use of blog for learning purposes. However, that was our failing, and could be rectified with more vigilance on our part.

Results

Most of the results we have to date come from the first group of students (again, the second group has only recently completed their first semester at the time of writing). In order to get feedback regarding the students' reception of the curriculum we conducted a survey after the first year. Some important data we collected included that a total of 84% of students indicated that they either enjoyed their studies 'very much' (30%) or 'a lot' (54%), that 71% of students indicated that the project-based approach was difficult but they learnt English (92% of students responded that they felt they learned a substantial amount), and that more than 85% of the students felt either 'a lot' or 'more' confident that before.

We also conducted (locally designed) online proficiency tests at the beginning and end of the year for both our experimental group and the second year students. The second year students had already completed two General English courses as part of the old curriculum but were effectively in their first year of 'serious' English studies. As a result, their initial mean score was higher at 69.28% compared to the first year students' mean of 55.23%. Post course results were significantly different however, with second year students attaining a mean of 71.82% (an increase of 2.54%) whereas the first year students achieved a mean 65.87% - an increase of 10.64%. These are admittedly superficial results, but interesting nonetheless.

There were more subjective observations which were equally pleasing. Teachers who were involved at the outset reported that our first group had some of the most confident students we have had. They tended to visit teachers in their offices more frequently, asked more questions, and were comfortable in engaging foreign teachers in small talk on campus – a significant difference from other students who continue to shy away from using English when not compulsory! Teachers also unanimously felt that the students are generally more motivated and diligent than students in other year groups. The (randomly chosen) student sample of the blog, given above, also demonstrates an improved facility with the language, and we are genuinely proud to have students go from being unable to *conceive* of writing texts, to composing up to 200 word texts within the space of their first 5 weeks at university.

Finally, a more formal survey of the teachers revealed a high degree of positive feelings regarding the implementation of the new curriculum. While the main critique was that the delivery of content was not as coordinated as they would have liked, the overall response was that the project was worthwhile, successful and pedagogically effective.

Conclusion

The implementation of the new curriculum was challenging, occasionally stressful, and by no means seamlessly smooth. Its overriding objective was to introduce students – and teachers – to a 'new' approach to learning and teaching English by integrating and coordinating course content and aims. If nothing else, the introduction of the new curriculum was and continues to be rewarding from both teaching and administrative viewpoints. It has been satisfying to see that it is logistically possible and that the teachers involved were cooperative and interested in the project. In addition, the general indications are that it is also effective, interesting, challenging and motivating from a learning perspective. Students despite complaints to the effect that there was too much work seemed to appreciate the new approach. As such, the future development and improvement seems highly warranted.

Acknowledgements

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