

The Use of Collaborative Learning in an EFL Reading Course:
A Case Study of Its Effects on Thai Students at Tertiary Level
การใช้การเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือในวิชาการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ:
กรณีศึกษาของผลกระทบต่อนักศึกษาไทยในระดับอุดมศึกษา

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บทคัดย่อ

ด้วยความสำคัญของภาษาอังกฤษสำหรับการเรียนในระดับอุดมศึกษาที่เพิ่มสูงขึ้น นักศึกษาไทยผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศจำเป็นต้องพัฒนาทักษะการอ่านให้มีประสิทธิภาพ เพื่อให้เข้าใจสื่อและข้อมูลที่หลากหลายสำหรับการศึกษาและการประกอบอาชีพ ทั้งยังเข้าถึงแหล่งความรู้และสามารถตอบสนองต่อศาสตร์วิชาต่างๆ ที่มีมาตรฐานในระดับที่สูงขึ้น แต่นักศึกษาของไทยส่วนใหญ่ยังขาดความพร้อมในการพัฒนาทักษะการอ่านให้มีประสิทธิภาพ สาเหตุเกิดจากการเรียนการสอนแบบดั้งเดิม ที่ขาดความยืดหยุ่น โดยยึดครูผู้สอนเป็นหลัก การมอบหมายงานที่ต้องทำเดี่ยวให้กับผู้เรียน รวมทั้งขาดวิธีการจัดการเรียนการสอนที่เป็นนวัตกรรม หรือเน้นการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ในชั้นเรียน ทฤษฎีการเรียนรู้แบบพึ่งพามีลักษณะแตกต่างกับการเรียนรู้แบบดั้งเดิมของไทย โดยใช้การดึงบทบาทอ่านจากครูผู้สอนไปสู่ผู้เรียน เน้นการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์และการมีส่วนร่วมที่มากขึ้น การเรียนรู้แบบนี้สามารถช่วยเพิ่มความสนใจและความพึงพอใจของผู้เรียน บทความนี้รายงานกรณีศึกษาถึงผลกระทบของทฤษฎีการเรียนรู้แบบพึ่งพา ในวิชาการอ่านและการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษระดับกลางทั้งเก้าครั้ง สำหรับนักศึกษาไทยชั้นปีที่ 2 ในคณะเภสัชศาสตร์ของมหาวิทยาลัยเอกชนแห่งหนึ่งจำนวน 30 คน ข้อมูลที่ได้จากคะแนนรวมและคะแนนเฉลี่ยของการทำกิจกรรมแบบเดี่ยวและแบบคู่ของนักศึกษาพบว่า การเรียนรู้แบบพึ่งพามีผลกระทบต่อการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาทั้งในด้านคะแนนกิจกรรมและทัศนคติ นอกจากนี้ผลจากการสัมภาษณ์แบบโครงสร้าง โดยจากการสุ่มกลุ่มตัวอย่างผู้เรียนจำนวน 15 คนพบว่า ผู้เรียนทุกคนมีทัศนคติในทางบวกต่อการเรียนรู้แบบพึ่งพา เนื่องจากการเรียนรู้แบบนี้สามารถสร้างผลกระทบในแง่บวก และให้ประโยชน์ต่อผู้เรียน ดังนั้นผลของการศึกษานี้จึงควรได้รับการเผยแพร่และนำไปใช้เป็นแนวทางในอนาคตสำหรับครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศและผู้เกี่ยวข้องอื่นๆ เพื่อพัฒนาปรับปรุงวิชาการอ่าน รวมถึงวิธีการสอนที่เอื้อต่อความสำเร็จทั้งยังสร้างแรงจูงใจในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศในระดับอุดมศึกษาของไทย

คำสำคัญ: ทฤษฎีการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือ การอ่านภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ ระดับอุดมศึกษา

Abstract

With the rising importance of English in higher education, EFL students in Thailand need to develop efficient reading skills to fully comprehend a wide range of materials, gather written information for their academic studies and careers, and to access resources to meet increasingly strict world standards in all

disciplines. However, many EFL Thai tertiary level students seem unprepared for the reading demands placed on them. This deficiency is said to be due to fixed patterns of traditional teaching English instruction which is still teacher-orientated, individual, and lacks innovative, interactive methods. Collaborative learning, as opposed to the Thai traditional learning system, takes the power from a teacher and distributes that power among the students in an interactive and engaged manner so as to increase the students' interest and learning satisfaction. This paper details a case study on the effects of collaborative learning during 9 sessions of an intermediate reading and writing course with 30 second-year Thai students studying in the Faculty of Pharmacy at a Thai private university. The data obtained from total individual work scores and pair work as well as the mean scores of both types of work implied that collaborative learning had effects on students' performance activity scores in and attitudes toward learning English as a foreign language. In addition, the structured interview responses from fifteen randomly selected participants showed that all of them had positive attitudes towards a collaborative learning-based teaching method since it proved positive effects on and provided benefits for them. Thus, the study results should be introduced and used to provide future guidelines for EFL teachers and stakeholders to develop or improve reading courses and instructional methods which will help facilitate success and motivation in EFL learning for tertiary level students.

Keywords: *Collaborative Learning, EFL reading, Tertiary Level*

I. Introduction and background of the study

Along with the rising importance of it in higher education, English is also seen as a tool to be used in regional and international communication. Thailand is faced with increasing demands to produce graduates competent in every English skill—especially for educational and occupational purposes. Put simply, they need to communicate effectively in everyday interactions with both native English speakers and non-native speakers.

Reading is the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret information appropriately (Grabe & Stoller, 2002: 9). Siripanich and Laohawiriyanon (2010) point out that reading skills are essential for further learning—particularly for tertiary-level learners who must read varied and complex texts to extract information. In other words, they need to access resources to meet increasingly strict world standards in all disciplines. Thus, EFL students need to develop efficient reading skills to fully comprehend a wide range of materials and gather written information for their academic studies and careers.

A number of reading practitioners since 1970 have suggested that second language (L2) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension is affected by several factors, including poor English instruction in schools. Munsakorn (2012) observes that EFL Thai university students must read a large number of academic texts, but that many entering universities seem unprepared for the reading demands placed on them. One of the reasons for Thais' English reading deficiency is said to be fixed patterns of traditional English instruction in Thailand which is still oriented around teachers, commercial textbooks, and

assigned individual work in class. With the criticized 'traditional' Thai approach to learning English, teachers are the center of all learning processes and students aren't motivated to be creative, to use critical thinking skills, or learn on their own outside the classroom. It also lacks innovative and interactive methods that would engage students - the focus of this paper.

A number of studies show that active, engaging, and student-owned learning and educational experiences lead to better and deeper learning. Collaborative learning, as opposed to the traditional Thai learning system, takes the power from a teacher and distributes that power among the students, motivating and engaging them (Banerjee, 2012). Many researchers have reported that students working collaboratively in pairs or small groups can increase their interest in learning, tend to learn more of what is being taught, retain the information longer, cope with learning anxiety, and appear more satisfied with their learning as a whole (Ardi, 2006; Dooly, 2008).

According to the strengths of collaborative learning noted, this paper, therefore, aims to report the effects of collaborative learning in an EFL reading course with Thai students studying in the Faculty of Pharmacy at a Thai private university. Since this group of students would well represent EFL students in tertiary level.

II. Review of literature

Collaborative learning is inter-twined with the teaching method and the learning activities used in this study. Collaborative learning refers to instructional methods or learning efforts where students at various performance levels are required to work together, find solutions to problems, and work towards a common goal or shared outcomes. These learners become responsible for and take a more active role in their own learning and success and that of others. Control in the classroom is shifted from the teacher to student peer groups to cope with disagreements and differences over the course of learning (Bruffee, 1999; Moore, 2008; Slotte & Tynjälä, 2005; Thompson, 2008). In a nutshell, then, collaborative learning is a process that focuses on effort, active participation, interaction, communication, ideas, information, and knowledge shared among groups, large and small, of students.

Many language teachers—particularly in ESL/EFL—realize the value of collaborative learning since this kind of interaction is at the heart of how students learn language skills (Sharma, 2011). Unlike what takes place in the conventional English language classroom, collaboratively oriented classrooms aren't normally teacher-designed, teacher-managed, or teacher-dominated group activities, but have student-managed and student-centered group work (Sharma, 2011).

In collaborative learning, ESL/EFL teachers can do students a great favor by allowing them to learn a language by using it (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Sharma, 2011). This means that students can have authority to speak, plan, manage, explore, and present while keeping the class under control by directing the course of their learning based on agreed ground rules, frameworks, or encouragement from the teacher (Sharma, 2011). As a result, students are actively and collaboratively exchanging, discussing, debating, reacting, taking

responsibility in learning, as well as negotiating ideas and information with each other. Many researchers have reported that students working collaboratively in pairs or groups tend to:

- increasingly interested and satisfied in learning
- learn more of what is being taught
- work at their own pace with more independence and responsibility
- maintain information longer, and
- appear to be motivated along with their classes (Dooly, 2008; Goodsell, Maher, and Tinto, 1992).

In the context of this study, using collaborative learning techniques is not simply having students talk to each other, or having them complete their work individually, and then helping their peers who haven't yet finished. It is also not just having one or a few students do all the work while others are waiting to add their names to the completed work (Moallem, 2003). On the contrary, collaborative learning has students working together as a unit to accomplish a common goal. They respect each other's differences in ability, ideas, opinions and viewpoints, and the contributions that each makes to the whole (Roberts, 2004).

III. Significance of study

Given the reasons for Thai students' English reading deficiency and unsatisfactory achievement for English learners in Thailand noted previously, the study of a teaching method that applies a collaborative learning to the teaching of reading should give us insight into these issues and help us implement reading instructions that improve reading proficiency and facilitate satisfactory achievement. In addition, the findings and discussions of both theoretical and practical implications from this study should expand our research knowledge regarding the power of collaborative learning among Thai students studying EFL reading at a tertiary level.

IV. Study Objectives

Considering the benefits of collaborative learning and its positive effects on EFL noted earlier, the researcher constructed a teaching method that applied this type of learning to how reading was taught and learned in an EFL reading course with tertiary-level Thai students at a Thai private university. The aim of the study was to find out what effects of collaborative learning had on EFL students as well as on teaching and learning EFL reading for Thai students at tertiary-level.

V. Research methodology

- Participants

The participants in this study were second-year Thai students studying in the Faculty of Pharmacy at a Thai private university. Of the thirty participants, twenty-four were females and six were males ranging in age from 19 to 21. They were purposively selected and asked if they would

volunteer to participate in this study during the course. Before the study they all signed a consent form to ensure their legal and ethical rights. In addition, to ensure data confidentiality and security, each participant was assigned an alphanumeric number in place of their names. Thus students' names became Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, and so on and these designations were used throughout the course.

- Settings

Every process of this study was conducted by the researcher-teacher in the participating university located in Pathum Thani province: the study was carried out as a teaching case study - nine sessions of the teaching classes were conducted in normal class time in an intermediate English reading and writing course for the 2014 academic year. The study was started in September 2014 and was completed in December 2014.

- Instruments and data collection

Since a single data set would not be adequate to answer the research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2011) embedded in this study were several research instruments for different types of data to ensure that the results were valid. To further ensure validity and reliability, all instruments in this study were examined and revised based on the advice and suggestions of two experts and language specialists from the Faculty of Education of the participating university. The instruments applied in this study were as follows:

- ▶ Learning activities

Three sets of classroom activities were created to enable students to transfer learned language knowledge in reading to the productive language skills of speaking and writing. All four activities in each set: two speaking activities and the other two writing activities were done in class and then repeated in two other separate classes due to the research validity concerns. Each class was of 120 minutes duration using a teaching method and procedure that emphasized learner collaboration, participation, and student-student interaction. Learner collaboration, participation and interaction were part of the learning tasks and activities.

Each activity was scored 1-10 according to the students' performance, with students doing six types of activities individually and the other six types in pairs (in a total of 9 classes). They were allowed to select or change their partners according to their preference throughout the course. Simply put, in each class, the students did the activities for each type of communication skill—speaking and writing both individually and in pairs—one individually and the other in pairs. The activity performance scores of each set were used to gauge students' language proficiency difference between individual work and pair work, and also the effects of collaborative learning on the students during and after the course.

- ▶ Reading materials

Reading texts were used as a platform for the productive skills of speaking and writing based on nine reading texts with the selection criteria based on the content of science or science for daily life. This content was chosen in order to generate language functions and language function performance measurement for communication skills in reading, speaking, and writing within the time allotted for the

teaching-learning activities of each class period. The reading texts were selected with these aims:

- To provide suitable content in order to help students acquire a new way of viewing the world by using authentic texts with content related to their lives (either inside or outside school), their interests, and situations or ideas they saw as meaningful and important.

- To activate interest in reading by introducing reading texts about some global issues that would arouse classroom discussions and then pair work about these topics as the post-reading activity, and

- To reinforce students' interest by selecting reading texts with a suitable number of new words (Mao, 2011), with the List of Vocabulary Taught in Intermediate Reading Practice (Folse, 2004) as a guideline for checking new words and selecting suitable texts.

► Structured Interviews

After the nine teaching classes, structured interviews were conducted with a selected cross-section of 15 participants with mixed abilities, including both males and females. According to Adler & Adler (1987), this number of interviewees could give a researcher experience in planning and structuring interviews, conducting and partially transcribing these, and generating quotations for the paper. For this study, a qualitative structured interview was used to collect rich data and to deepen understanding of the study results. The researcher-teacher planned, conducted, recorded, transcribed, and translated the interviewees' responses, generating quotations for this paper. The participants were interviewed individually to answer the questions preliminarily set according to the collaborative learning theory applied in the learning classes and activities. The participants asked to be interviewed in Thai because they thought they could give clearer answers this way. The interviews were videotaped, along with photos taken.

VI. Study results

The data for this study were collected from all research instruments as in-depth sources to help give the study more credibility and validity. The results of the data collected via the instruments were presented as follow:

- Student activity performance scores

As noted earlier, both individual work performance scores and pair work performance scores were used to see the difference in student language proficiency throughout the program. In other words, both types of scores were summed up, examined, compared, and analyzed to see whether and how collaborative learning had any effects on students' learning and language proficiency.

Table 1 below shows the students' total individual work scores and total pair work scores. Of 180 total points for each type of work—20 points for individual work and 20 points for pair work were collected in each of the nine class sessions—15 students' total pair work scores were higher than their total individual work scores.

Students	Individual work	Pair work	Difference	Students	Individual work	Pair work	Difference
	180 points	180 points			180 points	180 points	
1	129	138.25	9.25	16	137.5	141.5	4
2	141.25	133.75	-7.5	17	139	122.25	-16.75
3	130.25	130.5	0.25	18	143.25	142.5	-0.75
4	137.5	141.5	4	19	136.5	138.25	1.75
5	134.25	131.5	-2.75	20	135.75	133.25	-2.5
6	130	123.25	-6.75	21	135	133.75	-1.25
7	131.25	135.25	4	22	132.25	133.75	1.5
8	136.5	130.5	-6	23	133.75	133	-0.75
9	130.25	128.5	-1.75	24	123	126.25	3.25
10	146.5	137.75	-8.75	25	142.75	143.25	0.5
11	137.5	142.5	5	26	133.75	136.25	2.5
12	139.75	143.25	3.5	27	130	133.75	3.75
13	128.75	134	5.25	28	127.75	121.25	-6.5
14	138.5	137.75	-0.75	29	120.5	121.25	0.75
15	134.5	122.5	-12	30	128.25	123.25	-5

Table1: Students' total individual work scores and pair work scores spread

In addition, the mean scores of the whole class in both types of work showed that the individual work mean score was slightly higher than the pair work mean score (134.16>133.14).

- Structured interview responses

As discussed earlier, the interviews were conducted after the nine teaching classes with fifteen randomly selected participants: each was interviewed individually to answer questions set according to collaborative learning theory. The researcher-teacher transcribed the responses from videotape into written form, and then translated the transcriptions into English. Based on a qualitative data coding process, the participants' responses were compiled, organized, synthesized, and summarized which facilitated analysis of the study. More importantly, all questions were designed to capture how participants responded to the study to help answer the research questions. The responses are summarized here ...

- Almost all participants assumed that this course would be like their previous English courses

which resulted in demotivation and negative experiences in learning English. Nevertheless, they reported that they became actively involved in class and in the learning tasks and activities when they found that this style of learning was interesting, enjoyable and challenged them as they could do and complete activities with their fully involved peers.

- At the beginning of the course, some participants hardly used English to communicate with peers due to anxiety, unfamiliarity with this new method, and unpleasant past experiences in learning English, in addition to a fear of making mistakes. Later, every participant tried harder, communicated more in English with their peers, exchanged ideas and knowledge, helped each other check the learning information for better understanding, and more importantly, they became more confident in later class sessions.

- Although some participants tried harder in later class sessions, all reported that they tried harder to communicate their intended meaning and ideas more effectively than in the past since the tasks became more difficult and the reading texts became more advanced. They had to collaboratively look for more information or use different techniques to communicate the meaning of ideas more clearly. In addition, some tried hard in class because they wanted to help their partners to complete the tasks and activities well and also to get good marks.

- All participant pairs shared their learning experiences and thoughts with their partners and peers. They discussed topics, shared some facts and the meaning of reading topics, and helped each other select the best materials for their activities.

- All participants reported that they enjoyed the course and working on the learning tasks. They felt relaxed, challenged, and motivated as well as enjoyed the tasks and activities because they had full freedom and didn't feel hemmed in when collaboratively completing their activities. They particularly enjoyed the course when they could talk with peers, and exchange ideas and knowledge together freely.

- The participants felt good about helping peers to be well-prepared and complete the tasks. They liked helping each other by giving opinions, collecting additional information, sharing materials and ideas, clarifying unclear points, and collaboratively completing tasks successfully.

VII. Discussion

As noted previously, all research instruments in this study were designed and implemented in teaching classes to find out what effects collaborative learning had on tertiary-level students in an EFL reading course. The data collected and the results were based on participants' individual work and pair work performance scores as well as their interview responses. The findings for the data analysis and results from the collaborative learning-based teaching classes are discussed below:

- Student activity performance scores

As mentioned earlier, a number of researchers have stated that students working collaboratively in pairs or groups tend to be more interested, motivated and satisfied in learning which leads to better learning and longer retention of learned information and knowledge (Dooly, 2008).

According to the participants' total activity performance scores carried out during the course; it was noticeable that 50 percent of the participants had higher total scores for their pair work than those of their individual work. However, the mean score of the participants' individual work appeared to be slightly higher than that of their pair work. To be clear, this study was nine sessions over only nine weeks, so it was not possible to reach any conclusion about significant effects of a collaborative learning-based teaching method on the participants' language proficiency over such a short period. From these results, however, it could be implied that collaborative learning had some effects on learning English as a foreign language and this corresponded to several previous studies on collaborative learning (Abdullah & Binnui, 2009; Marsh, Mehisto, Wolff, and Frigols, 2010; Sharma, 2011; Sivakumar, 2014).

- Structured interview responses

Not only the participants' activity performance scores but also their structured interview responses were used in this study as the rich data to find out and confirm the effects of collaborative learning on the participants' learning EFL reading.

Based on the discussion in this section, it was evident that all participants had positive attitudes towards a collaborative learning-based teaching method. In pairs, each individual could bring out the best of himself/herself to work towards their mutual achievement. Also, they became more confident during and after the course as each participant was not pressured to complete the tasks on his/her own, but with constant support from the partner. Simply put, they were able to consult each other freely concerning what the task outcomes should be like to ultimately achieve their learning purposes.

Undoubtedly, this type of teaching method had positive effects on tertiary-level Thai university students' learning EFL reading since they were able to do their best by putting ideas into actions freely. In other words, the class became the platform for learning, self-regulated activities, discussion, problem-solving, as well as social interaction and communication with their peers. In sum, a positive relationship was demonstrated between collaborative learning and teaching and learning reading in an English as a foreign language classroom.

VIII. Limitations of the study

This study investigated and proved the effects of collaborative learning on learning reading in English as a foreign language for Thai students at tertiary-level. However, some limitations of the study were noted as follows:

The time limitation - The study results were associated with these participants only at the limited time the data were collected. If a similar study were to be conducted over a different or longer period with the same participants, it would yield significant changes in the results.

The participants of the study - Since this study looked at only thirty students who studied in the same school year, from the same faculty, in the same university, these participants, therefore, could not be representative of the great diversity of learning contexts.

The teaching tasks and activities - The study was based on limited classroom tasks and activities, as well as interviews, due to time limitations. If further or more varying classroom tasks and activities were to be carried out with more time given, the results would yield richer information about the effects of collaborative learning on EFL reading.

Data collection - Data collection from all research instruments was carried out by only one teacher over the course of study. More comprehensive results would have emerged for a fuller perspective and clearer effects of collaborative learning on reading in English as a foreign language for Thai students at tertiary level if more teachers either from the same or different institutions had been available for the study.

IX. Recommendations for future research

This study provided answers to the effects of collaborative learning on EFL Thai university students, and the teaching and learning of an EFL reading course. Nevertheless, due to its limitations some questions remained unanswered and recommendations and suggestions for future research are offered here:

- Conducting a similar study with a larger sample size and a greater variety of participants who had more varied educational, economic, and geographical backgrounds would be more fruitful for future research to gain a better understanding of the effects of collaborative learning on EFL.

- Conducting longitudinal studies or case studies with a longer time frame would also be worthwhile to extend the investigation and gain a more in-depth understanding into students' development, changes, and improvement in their learning outcomes through the use of collaborative learning methods.

- Conducting mixed methods of study proved useful. Expanding instruments with a broader and deeper reach; continuous efforts to improve the research instruments and data collection procedures as well as more inclusion of teachers, researchers or educators might help shed some light on other perspectives of collaborative learning theory in the future.

X. Conclusion

Up to this point, it was clear that the teaching and learning EFL reading method applied in this study shifted from that of a traditional teacher-designed, teacher-managed, or teacher-dominated English language classroom to that of a student-managed and student-centered one. From the data obtained from the participants' language performance scores, it could be implied that collaborative learning had effects on learning reading in English as a foreign language.

Through the results and analysis of the interview responses, students working collaboratively in pairs resulted in various positive effects. With extensive opportunity to work together, the students also developed social and interpersonal skills thorough discussion, negotiation, and decision making.

The study has found a great deal of benefits of learning from and working collaboratively with peers. Therefore, the results of this study should be introduced and used as future directions for EFL teachers, educators, administrators, and other stakeholders to develop or improve the reading courses and

instructional methods which will help students learn how to take control of their own learning and work with others effectively. Also, collaborative learning-based projects can be used to supplement normal classroom teaching to encourage the students' opportunity for communication skill practice. Finally, a supportive teacher should let the students know that he/she values their thoughts and feelings about learning processes, learning tasks, materials as well as choices of learning since these can be an attribute to success and motivation in EFL learning.

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