

## **The English Reading Project to Enhance Reading Comprehension and Collaborative Learning for Grade 11 Students at a High School in Bangkok**

Parita Chitchuen<sup>1</sup>  
pimola4olive@gmail.com

Ubon Sanpatchayapong<sup>2</sup>  
ubon\_s@hotmail.com  
Faculty of Education, Rangsit University, Thailand

### **Abstract**

This qualitative case study aimed to explore how the English reading project enhanced 14 students' reading comprehension and collaborative learning in a high school setting. Two research questions were: (1) in what ways did project-based learning enhance Grade 11 students' reading comprehension?; and (2) in what ways did it create collaborative learning? Obtained data included (1) interviews with students, (2) teacher's journals, (3) student learning logs and (4) story-retelling activities; all data were analyzed by content analysis. Findings on the students' reading comprehension were derived from four learning techniques: *using dictionaries* to look up for the meaning of unfamiliar words, *using speed reading techniques* to comprehend the stories, *using contextual clues* to trace meanings from unknown words, and *retelling the stories* in their own words. In terms of collaborative learning, the obtained data showed four collaborative learning strategies: (1) *co-decision making*, (2) *sharing work and responsibilities with their pair and classmates*, (3) *solving problems with their peers*, and (4) *learning how to work with other people*. In addition, project work helped students use and develop thinking skills and familiarize themselves with the Internet to search for more information based on their reading passages. The students managed their time well. Working closely together established a strong tie with their partner and classmates. Project-based learning also created *a bilingual atmosphere* and encouraged weak students to communicate with one another more comfortably.

**Keywords:** *project-based approaches, the English reading projects, reading comprehension, Collaborative learning, grade 11 students*

### **1. Introduction**

Reading has been widely recognized as vitally important for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners to master (Cochran, 1993). Good reading skills could help EFL learners achieve success not only in English learning but also in other content-based classes where English reading proficiency is required, particularly in the fields of business, medicine, engineering, and communication technology. Reading has played a crucial role in overall development in language skills and even in academic success for decades, as learners are to expand their knowledge of cultures and the world (Cochran, 1993). People read for many reasons but understanding is important because without understanding, reading is nothing more than tracking symbols on a page and does not provide the reader with any information (Wells, 2016). In addition, there have been a number of research findings that

support reading comprehension as meaningful and systematic learning experience (Allen and Stoller, 2005, Fried-Booth, 2010; Ribe and Vidal, 1993, and Sanpatchayapong, 2010).

As for project-based learning (PBL), Fried-Booth (2010) pointed out that PBL was particularly relevant to English language teaching and learning for its capacity in bridging “classroom” with “real life” English. Bell (2010: 39) asserted that “PBL is a student driven method of instruction that allows students to learn through inquiry while collaborating with their peers and creating projects to demonstrate their learning. Student involvement and choice are essential elements of PBL. In contrast to traditional methods of instruction, PBL teachers become facilitators of student learning “as they guide students through the learning process.”

In Thailand, teaching English has aimed at developing four language skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—for communication. Of the four skills, reading is in priority for learners to understand academic, economic, social and cultural information via various communication channels. Language skills development could be supported by project-based reading (Koralek & Collins, 1997). In particular, the Office of Education Council Thailand (2004) recommended learning through project-based activities to encourage students’ expressions in real or close-to-real situations. Students could learn from their own problem selection, together with their peers in group work. In so doing, students could choose the type of project, plan, and carry out their project, followed by their work-end product presentation, reflecting their own application of acquired knowledge and skills. After completing their project, students could see for themselves their productive skill outcomes.

Collaboration usually occurs when students work together in a group to share their experiences or beliefs to construct new knowledge by following given guidelines (Littlewood, 2000). Collaboration is also a way of working with other people in which responsibility and respect for group members are shared (Panitz, 2013). A peer’s opinion is observed and students learn to construct their knowledge of the basis of such opinions (Young, 2010). Therefore, students not only learn language through group work but also interact and accept different ideas from their peers. In effect, the process of learning exists in the form of interaction with peers and teachers to collaborate and engage themselves in group work. Hirvela (1999: 7) highlighted this notion in EFL instruction that “when the students are asked to do the task in pairs or groups, their performance and their learning are getting better than working alone.”

## **2. Background of the Study**

### **2.1 Meaning and benefits of project-based learning**

Project-based learning has become a focus of interest among researcher, language teachers and practitioners since the eighties (Alan & Stoller, 2005; Fried-Booth, 1982, 1986; Haines, 1989; Legutke, 1984, 1985; Papandreou, 1994; Sheppard & Stroller, 1995; Stoller, 1997; Tessema, 2005; Tomei et al., 1999). The term “project” used in EFL contexts was first proposed by Fried-Booth (1986: 8), indicating that language tasks arise naturally from the

project itself, “developing cumulatively in response to a basic objective, namely, the project”. Haines (1989) elaborated project work as involving multi-skill activities which focus on a theme of interest rather than specific language tasks. Stoller (1997) suggested project-based learning as a natural extension of fully integrated language and content learning, making it a viable option in a variety of instructional settings including general English (GE), English for academic purposes (EAP), English for specific purposes (ESP), and English for occupational/vocational/professional purposes (EOP/EOV/EOP). According to Hedge (2002), projects are extended tasks which usually integrate language skills by means of a number of activities. These activities support working toward the learning goal and may include the following: (1) planning, (2) gathering of information through reading, listening, interviewing, and observing, (3) group discussion of the information, (4) problem solving, (5) oral and written reporting, and (6) display.

Dechakup (2008) emphasized that project-based learning (PBL) is a project that follows a scientific method which enables students to think and design to work through a project. This idea was adopted by the Office of Education Council (2004) to encourage learners to do pair or group projects to experience real or close-to-real situations. In project-based learning, students *learn by doing* from their own problem selection. In collaborative learning, students choose the type of project, plan, and carry out the project and present the work-end product. After the project is done, students learn more and reap the benefit of learning and sharing knowledge.

## 2.2 Characteristics of project-based learning (PBL)

The primary characteristics of project-based learning (PBL) were summarized by Stoller (1997). First, project-based learning (PBL) focuses on content learning through language learning. Second, it is student-centered with the teacher playing a role in offering support and guidance throughout the process. Third, it is cooperative rather than competitive; students can work on their own, in small groups, or as a class to complete a project. Fourth, it leads to the authentic integration of skills and processing of information from varied sources, mirroring real-life tasks. Fifth, it culminates in an end product that can be shared with others. Finally, it is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging; students can build up confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improve their language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities.

The Ministry of Education Thailand (2001) stated two objectives of project-based learning (PBL): (1) to develop student’s learning by choosing a topic and methods on their own, and (2) to instill students’ collaborative principles to real life by earning knowledge in class in preparation for real-life situations. They are guided to see how academic work can connect to real-life issues.

The characteristics of project-based learning can be briefed as involving both individual and collaborative work for learners to explore real-world problems and create presentations to share what they have learned. Compared to traditional learning from textbooks, this approach has benefits for students in (1) acquired deeper knowledge of

subject matters, (2) increased self-direction and motivation, and (3) improved research and problem-solving skills.

### 2.3 The issue under study

Based on the literature given in the Introduction, the project-based learning approach represented a good teaching method useful in supporting student-centeredness, collaboration and networking. Considering students' EFL backgrounds and their moderate reading scores, the researcher-authors would like to use project-based learning to enhance students' reading comprehension.

It was reported by the Ministry of Education (1997) that quality assurance evaluation results as pointing to low-level English skills of secondary Thai students, especially reading skills, were caused by lack of active learning. Such a point was emphasized by Lavender (2013) that Thai students do not like to learn English because they find it boring, and they do not use English in their daily life.

In 2014, the final exam scores of the students under study were low--a little higher than the passing criteria or 50% in the reading comprehension section. The expected criterion of the reading test was set at 80% performance. The Head of the EFL Department called a meeting and discussed a possible remedy with the use of project-based learning. It was also noted that the students lacked reading skills outside the classroom. With limited vocabulary, the students did not like reading because they found it not only difficult but also boring. In this regard, project-based learning should be trialed with these students in grade 11 to boost learning motivation as well as provide learning activities for them to communication in real-life situations.

Based on the mentioned problems, the researcher-authors felt the need to explore how to support secondary school students, particularly in their reading skills development as a platform for speaking and writing skills. The researcher-authors therefore initiated a reading project to enhance student reading comprehension. This study will report the reading project and its effects as perceived by the participating students after going through learning activities and group work in the project.

## 3. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were: (1) to explore ways that project-based learning enhances grade 11 students' reading comprehension and (2) to report on how project-based learning supports collaborative learning in this study.

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1 Case Study approach

This research was a case study using qualitative data. A case study approach provided real-life situations and a wealth of details to give contextual knowledge of the experience of the students attempting to improve their reading skills. This approach was also appropriate for this research because it used multiple forms of data collection, allowed for the study a






thorough analysis of numerous data, and provided an in-depth understanding of effectiveness of the project work.

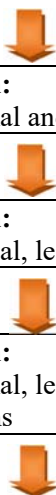
Justification of the case study approach was exemplified by the work of two earlier researchers. Creswell (2007) stated that case studies were descriptive, particularistic, and heuristic in design because of their focus on people, events, programs that required explicit details in order to understand the phenomenon. Yin (2009) also pointed out that a worthwhile case study was rigorous because it was useful, contained long-term observations of participants, utilized member checks, triangulated data, employed coding checks, was contextually complete, and related all data to the research questions.

#### 4.2 Ten steps of project-based learning

Using a project-based learning method to enhance students’ reading outcomes, the researcher-authors adopted ten steps after Ribe & Vidal (1993). In working on those guiding steps, the author-researchers studied the learning standards and indicators of the Basic Education Core Curriculum Thailand version 2008 and used the prescribed outcomes for Grade 11 graduates. Before starting the project, the author-researchers interviewed students to get information about their background on project work and limit the scope of the case study. The length of the project was in eight weeks (two hours a week) with the total of sixteen hours as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** The ten steps of project work after Ribe & Vidal (1993)

<b>Hours</b> 1-2	<b>STEP 1:</b> Creating a class atmosphere	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher’s journal and learning logs
		
<b>Hours</b> 3	<b>STEP 2:</b> Getting the class interested	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher’s journal and learning logs
		
<b>Hours</b> 4	<b>STEP 3:</b> Selecting the topic	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher’s journal and learning logs
		
<b>Hours</b> 5-6	<b>STEP 4:</b> Creating a general outline of the project	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher’s journal and learning logs
		
<b>Hours</b> 7-10	<b>STEP 5:</b> Doing basic research around the topic	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher’s journal and learning logs
		
<b>Hours</b> 11	<b>STEP 6:</b> Reporting to the class	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher’s journal, learning logs



<b>Hours</b> 12	<b>STEP 7:</b> Processing feedback	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher's journal and learning logs
<b>Hours</b> 13	<b>STEP 8:</b> Putting it all together	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher's journal, learning logs
<b>Hours</b> 14-15	<b>STEP 9:</b> Presenting the project	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher's journal, learning logs, story-retelling evaluation forms
<b>Hours</b> 16	<b>STEP 10:</b> Assessing and evaluating the project	<b>Data collection:</b> Teacher's journal, learning logs, post interviews

#### 4.3 Participants

The participants of this study were fourteen Grade 11 Thai students in a high school in Bangkok. The size of the participants in a case study was determined by availability (Yin, 2009) in that the criterion for specific sample size for a case study was irrelevant. The subjects were 5 males and 9 females, age 16-17. They selected their partner as preferred in seven pairs. The participants' individual profiles were kept by their project title.

#### 4.4 Research instruments

They were four instruments in the study: (1) a set of interview questions for student responses, (2) teacher's journal, (3) student learning logs and (4) story-retelling.

**Table 2:** the link between the research questions and data collection method

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Type of research instruments</b>
1. In what way did project-based learning enhance Grade 11 student comprehension in this study?	1. Teacher's journal 2. Pre- and post-interviews 3. Student learning logs 4. Story-retelling
2. In what way did project-based learning support collaborative learning?	1. Teacher's journal 2. Pre- and post-interviews 3. Student learning logs

## **5. Data Collection**

Four sets of data were collected in the study: a teacher's journal, pre- and post-interviews, students' learning logs and a story re-telling evaluation form.

### **5.1 Teacher's journals**

Teacher's journal contained the ten-step process of project-based teaching and learning in English classes. The objective was to record happenings in class for critical reflection of the researcher-authors on classroom management, such as comments and exchanged ideas between the students and the researcher-authors. Such a journal was to note students' interactions, attitudes and problems in each class. In addition, it was to keep track of the teacher's thinking, give space to generate teaching ideas, work out pedagogical problems, reflect on teaching successes and struggles in the classroom, and put past insights to work in planning future courses (Platt, 2011).

### **5.2 Pre- and Post-interviews**

Two interviews were conducted with each participant in the study. According to Bernard (2006) semi-structured interviews can be prepared ahead of time. Preparation allows the interviewer to be ready and competent during the interview. Informants have freedom to express their views in their own terms. Semi-structured interviews can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data.

The researchers conducted the pre- and post-interviews with individual students, 15 minutes each. The pre-interview was conducted in the first week of the study, and the post-interview was done after the participants' story re-telling presentation or at the end of the study.

### **5.3 Students learning logs**

The researchers used a learning log to collect data as researcher-teachers. The learning log was structured after de Bono (1993) in his CoRt thinking program which, since then, has become one of creative thinking strategies available to language learners. In the classroom, students used a code called PMI to give their opinion on learning. PMI stands for three meanings: 'P' or 'PLUS' for something in the progress of learning that students find beneficial, 'M' for what they do not value, and 'I' for what interests them (de Bono, 1994).

The learning log was used to (1) ascertain students' different points of view toward each stage, (2) compare students' viewpoints with what the teachers put in their journal to see in particular how students perceive their teachers' role and their own. The number of all learning logs was for eight weeks throughout the project's duration.

### **5.4 Story-retelling evaluation rubric**

Story-retelling was performed by the participants and evaluation was made by the researchers. The purpose was to capture the participants' understanding of their stories when making their final oral presentations as the last step. It also aimed to check students' reading comprehension. Evaluation of reading elements scored 0 to 2.

## 6. Data Analysis

### 6.1 Teachers' journals

Data analysis in the study was an on-going process done in each step of the project. In the first stage, the researchers put journal into an observational framework after Charttakul (2009), Klanrit (2005), and Pickford (2006). The journal-observation form contained five columns according to roles and purposes of data analysis: (1) the step of project-based teaching and learning as well as time duration, (2) teacher's actions, (3) participants' actions, (4) whole class' action, and 5) notes or remarks. Then data in columns 2 to 5 were categorized and coded on the basis of grounded theory and techniques: open, axial, and selective coding procedures, after Strauss and Corbin (1998).

### 6.2 Pre- and post-interviews

Two interviews per student were all analyzed with the use of the same procedures as in the teachers' journals.

### 6.3 Students' learning logs

All entries of students' learning logs were analyzed in the same way as the teachers' journals and the interviews. Then each log's P or positive ideas, M or negative view and I, which represented students' questions and suggestions, were compared within to see whether there was any influence of each step on their project work. These students' data were also compared with the teachers' journals to examine a gap in perceptions, if any, between the teachers and the students. Such analyzed data were expected to help the researchers find answers to the research objectives.

### 6.4 Story retelling and evaluation

A rubric was created by the researchers to assess story re-telling by the participants. There are three rubric scales focusing on comprehension elements, such as story elements, details, inferences, predictions and conclusions. These rubric scales varied from 0 to 2:0 for limited comprehension, 1 for partial comprehension, and 2 for full comprehension. Story retelling was to provide an opportunity for students to process their reading comprehension by organizing and explaining it to others.

## 7. Results and Discussion

This section reports results of the study in response to two research objectives on how project-based learning enhanced grade 11 students' reading comprehension and how project-based learning supported collaborative learning in this study. Discussion of results refers to major references in the same areas under study or issues concerned. Some examples of the students' responses on enhanced reading comprehension and collaborative learning are given in Appendix A.

### 7.1 Project-based learning enhanced grade 11 students' reading comprehension

The students' reading comprehension was in fourfold in project-based learning. First they used *dictionaries* to look up meanings for some unfamiliar words in the reading texts. Then they used *a speed reading technique* to comprehend reading texts as well as look for the main idea and supporting details. They paid attention to *context clues* to guess meanings



of the words new and unknown to them. The last stage was for them *to retell the stories* in their own words. The story re-telling reflected their comprehension of the given stories.

The results showed that all students were able to re-tell their stories in their own words with good understanding on the rubric scale 2 for *full comprehension*, as reflected in their positive attitude toward project-based learning (see Appendix for the students' comments). Their degree of opinion toward reading comprehension by the reading project was positive (Fried-Booth, 2010). Fourteen students were interviewed and acknowledged that project work substantially improved their reading comprehension (see Appendix for the students' comments). They learned a lot of new words. Students' reflection on project-based learning showed that they were in favor of multi-strategies (Haines, 1989; Hedge 2002), and cooperative learning (Stoller, 1997; Bell, 2010). They asserted that they gained and developed their critical thinking skills (Ribe & Vidal, 1993; Dechakup (2008), such as making a decision, giving suggestion and explaining their viewpoints.

## 7.2 Project-based learning supported collaborative learning

The obtained data showed four aspects of collaborative learning: (1) co-decision making, (2) sharing work and responsibilities with their pair and classmates, (3) solving problems with their peers, and (4) learning how to work with other people. The participating students went through ten steps to enhance their reading comprehension as well as collaborative learning. To them, project-based learning enabled them to work with their partner to comprehend the assigned reading texts.

It should be noted that these stages helped create *a bilingual atmosphere* during the project when the participants communicated with each other in both Thai and English. They were engaged in the topic of their interest and were pleased with their preferred partner, thus motivating them to work well. Project work also helped students acquire more words in their own effort to comprehend the given stories. They had ample opportunities to further develop thinking skills in decision-making and planning. It was interesting for the researchers to witness their enthusiasm in using the Internet to help them comprehend their reading and make a good presentation. Some students watched videos on YouTube to learn about how to give a good presentation as well.

The findings showed that collaborative learning or working together to solve problems and complete projects was beneficial to students (Littlewood, 2000; Panitz, 2013). In the process of project-based learning, students were able to develop collaborative and interpersonal skills (Hirvela, 1999). In the study, project work supported relationship among peers in the classroom (Young, 2010). It was apparent that the students performed various language functions when communicating with each other, like asking for clarification, brainstorming for a relevant topic, giving opinions, refusing, and negotiating for a practical solution to the discussed issues or problem. Activities in ten steps of project work, like pair work, group discussion, expressing viewpoints, reporting decision made, and rehearsing a presentation, and the presentation-all provided for the students opportunities to interact and communicate.

## **8. Conclusion**

The study demonstrated how project work enhanced reading comprehension of the students in grade 11 at a high school in Bangkok. The participating students in the study were engaged in project based-learning in ten steps. The project provided for the students with project-learning strategies that can be transferred to other types of reading—be it narrative or expository. The learning process motivated the students to work with their preferred partner toward the target level of reading comprehension. The students proved for themselves that collaboration enabled them to understand the assigned story.

The researchers noted that the starting point of project-based learning could appear somewhat chaotic when the students tried to familiarize themselves with the new learning mode. The teacher should give more practice time for each step in order to provide them with opportunities to further explore. As time passed, the students gradually felt in control with the subsequent stages of learning. By the end of project work with their presentation, the students experienced a sense of achievement in delivering their work to the whole class. Such a learning experience was to motivate them to perform better in their next language learning tasks.

As for teachers who may want to try project work with reading skill development, they should take into consideration the group size of students. A small group size would be easier to manage; however, a typical large group size of 40 students in Thailand could be a great challenge for teachers who may consider pair or team teaching to facilitate project work management. In other words, project-based learning is not beyond reach for teachers who want to try a new challenge that can yield positive learning outcomes of students in their specific teaching context.

## **9. Acknowledgements**

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## **10. The Authors**

Parita Chitchuen, M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction (Rangsit University, Thailand). She is teaching at an English high school in Angthong Province, Central Thailand.

Ubon Sanpatchayapong, D. Ed was ThaiTESOL 20th President. She got her doctoral degree in TESOL from the University of Melbourne, Australia. Her teaching experience has been with Mahidol University and Rangsit University, respectively. At present, she is on the Advisory Board of Thailand TESOL and Deputy Director for Administration at Rangsit English Language Institute (RELI).

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### **13. Appendix: Examples of the students' responses on reading comprehension and collaborative learning**

Student 1: “*I used a dictionary to look up the words I did not know. I also used a dictionary to check the spelling of a word when I wanted to rewrite my story. I think using dictionary is very helpful; to understand the story.*”

Student 2: “*I find the meaning of the words I did not know from dictionary. I usually used an online dictionary. Well, I rarely used a print dictionary. I think both types are good. But it is easier and faster for me to use an online dictionary. I can find out how to say a word just by one click. I think using a dictionary really helped me with my reading comprehension.*”

Student 3: “*Using a dictionary helped me going through this process. I looked up for the words I did not know from dictionary and tried to understand the story. I asked my teacher when I did not understand something.*”

Student 4: “*I understand the story much better after I learned how to use a dictionary. I asked the teacher when I did not understand. I wish there would be more time on doing project because I have a lot of homework.*”

Student 5: “*I was able to understand a story more and was able to understand the sequence of the story. I read fast by using a speed reading technique. I think once you kind of understand the structure of writing narrative story, it helped you guess how the story could start and end.*”

Student 6: “*I understood the story better since I used a speeding reading. I was able to understand the whole passage better than I did before.*”

Student 7: “*I am better at understanding my story since I applied a speed reading technique order. I could look at my passage and kind of understood the sequence of the story I read.*”

Student 8: “*I understood the story better since I knew the structure of the text. I was able to find the narrative elements like plot, setting, characters, theme, etc. I think a speed reading technique really helped me understand my story better.*”

Student 9: “*Knowing narrative elements is helpful for my reading because I could apply it to use on my reading. I tried to find narrative elements in my own story by a speed reading technique. It helped me understand the story better.*”

Student 10: “*I learned that difficult or uncommon words may be followed by information to help discern the meaning. I applied context clues strategies to help me comprehend my*

own stories. When I did not understand a word, *I tried to use context clues* instead of looking up on dictionaries.”

Student 11: “In this project *we had to plan and do everything by ourselves*. We made a choice and did things step by step. *We must manage our time* to work on the project.”

Student 12: “*We planned things and managed our time together*. We met the free time to work together on reading. I have a part-time job. Sometimes it was difficult for me to find time to work with my peer.”

Student 13: “I think it is difficult to do a project work. We must learn and understand what *we are going to do step by step*. But I think working in project work has us work together *in a team* and have good friendship. *We managed time so that we can get effective results*.”

Student 14: “We are done with the reading. Now *we are planning how to present our story to the class*. I think this is hard to rewrite the story by myself. It is difficult. *After my classmates talked about how to make a good presentation, I want to do that too*. Maybe I can add music or pictures on my presentation. I think *this project work has taught us to manage time in an effective way*.”