

# APPLYING CULTURAL PROJECT-BASED LEARNING TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' MOTIVATION FOR WRITING SKILLS

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## Abstract

*It can be said that writing is the most demanding and difficult skill for university students who study English as a second language although several steps such as prewriting, drafting, editing, revising and publishing have been applied. In addition, students find it boring to write topics that are artificial and academic such as environment, politics, or education. Topics like costume, lifestyle and custom, therefore, are necessary to be offered in writing lessons because it is diverse and easy to find sources of information. However, it seems to be challenging for students, especially freshmen. Hence, this article aims to investigate the application of cultural project-based learning to develop students' motivation in writing. This descriptive qualitative research was conducted in an advanced class consisting of 29 first-year students. They were divided into six groups; each includes 4-5 people assigned to make a cultural project within 18 weeks, divided into 2 phases. The products are in the form of a brochure and a cultural festival performance. The study mostly focused on the first phase because it was the time students were required to conduct a brochure. Each member of the group had to create his/her own essay and then compiled the essays to be a brochure consisting of 10-12 essays. To check the content of the brochure, the lecturer also asked the groups to present in front of the class and send the writings via email to get some suggestions, feedback, or comments.*

**Keywords:** *culture, project-based learning, writing, essay writing*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Rationale of the study

As one of the compulsory subjects in schools in Vietnam, English is taught from elementary school level to university level. Due to problems like facilities, practicing environment, class size, English is considered the most difficult subject for many students. Even though English has been taught since lower grades, it is challenging for students to compose a piece of writing. Some university students have been trying hard to practice using it inside or outside the classroom. Teachers also give full lectures on how to write an essay, it seems to be not adequate for lack of practice, interest in writing, and appropriate comments and feedbacks on students' writing.

In addition, recently four English skills, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing are taught at schools or courses based on the national curriculum, whereas the students focus only on one skill or two skills, such as listening and speaking. Accordingly, listening and speaking are easier and more interesting to learn, since the students can watch and listen to any TV programs in English to improve either their listening or speaking abilities. The other skill, reading can be automatically improved if they are consistent to read any passages in English. Thus, the students seem to set aside the rest of the writing because they need to equip themselves with some understanding of how to construct words into clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and essays.

One more reason is that writing is not a separate subject to be taught in school in Vietnam except for language school while it is a time-consuming skill. For many university students, writing is considered to be the most demanding and difficult skill, since there are some steps to be followed such as prewriting, drafting, editing, revising. It shows that writing is a process skill requiring the students to carefully follow the stages above in order to create good paragraphs or

essays. The teacher commonly trains them to construct from a paragraph to an essay, for both paragraphs and essays have a similar organization.

In this respect, a preliminary study was conducted to know what problems the students in writing essays face. By analyzing the students' collection of essays done at the end of the first semester, the researcher found that it is difficult for them to organize ideas. The contents of writing were unfortunately shallow and less interesting. Further, their teacher also informed that they lacked motivation and seemed difficult to cultivate ideas based on the writing topics putting into an essay. Besides, the common problems in writing have been made regularly such as fragment sentences, run-on sentences, choppy sentences, and parallelism although they have been following the writing courses in series since they were in the first semester. The errors such as punctuation, commas, and grammar also appeared quite often.

Therefore, it is necessary to make writing interesting by adding cultural topics that inspire students because according to Brown (1994) culture is a way of life. It means that every part of a human's life done and used regularly is culture. It is also the context underlying what people think, feel and relate with others. Unintentionally, culture has been taught and used inside the classroom although it is mostly used verbally or in a spoken form. For instance, when the students' address, greet others and use some particular expressions, they greatly represent either local or target culture. Some topics possibly derived from the culture are lifestyle, costume, arts, family life, and many more. In fact, the teacher hardly realizes that they have taught part of the culture. Therefore, culture can evidently be introduced in academic writing as topics that hopefully can stimulate students' critical thinking.

By inserting culture in writing, the students eventually can explore their ideas based on their interest in cultural topics or themes. They talk about the reality-based topics, not the artificial ones that are commonly taken from writing textbooks. Actually, it is not simply because they need to read much information related before they write essays. If only they are consistent and focus on searching for information, they can generate and organize their ideas into good essays. Moreover, the teacher needs to greatly provide appropriate techniques, methods or approaches in order to help the students achieve their intention to explore or generate the ideas.

The matter here is how to make writing not only a subject but also be applied naturally in learners' learning. Instead of asking them to make a portfolio for writing, using project-based learning, which inspires and cultivates maximum what students have learned for their work. This approach can be fruitful for the students, since they importantly get the authority to plan, manage and accomplish their project based on the content area of knowledge that is culture topics. Particularly, project-based learning activities can be characterized in Poonpon (2011) in the following:

- focuses on content learning rather than on specific language patterns,
- is student-centered so the teacher becomes a facilitator or coach,
- encourage collaboration among students,
- leads to the authentic integration of language skills and processing information from multiple sources,
- allows learners to demonstrate their understanding of content knowledge through an end product (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a bulletin board display, or a stage performance), and
- bridges to use English in class and real-life contexts.

It can be seen that project-based learning inspires students to generate ideas based on real-life contexts by assigning them to work with other people. In project-based learning, the students have to work both independently and cooperatively. They have to join with members of the classroom and then end their project with a product, namely culture-based essays. In short, project-based learning is necessarily appropriate for content learning, not language formulae or patterns.

Following the project-based learning approach applied in this research, the end-product is brochure consisting of students' culture-based essays. This brochure is the result of self-writing in which the students have to do outside the classroom. Brown (2001) particularly states that a significant proportion of classroom writing may be devoted to self-writing or writing with only the self in mind as an audience and diary or journal writing, which also falls into this category to support it. By using journals, student's ability in writing essays may be traced through a series of writings. The students' writing progress time after time can truly be checked in terms of content, organization, and accuracy. Thus, in search of a solution the teacher may immediately identify any obstacles found in their writing.

Based on the explanations above, this research incorporates culture as a way to improve writing and connects reading and writing. Accordingly, this research aims to elaborate on the implementation of cultural project-based learning to

develop students' attitudes toward writing and explain the advantages and disadvantages of the implementation of cultural project-based learning to develop students' writing.

## 1.2 Research context

The research was conducted in an advanced class at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), a member of Thai Nguyen University, located in the North of Vietnam. TUEBA is not a language school so English is not a major subject taught. However, advanced classes in this school are allowed to study every subject in English. In the first year, students are enrolled in the probation course. It means students are provided with all four English skills by studying several subjects such as grammar and vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, writing, pronunciation, extra-curriculum activity, and project-based learning. From the second year, they study major subjects in English too; therefore, it is crucial for them to have a good English background.

Unlike other English subjects like listening, reading, speaking, or writing, which are academic, project-based learning which is defined as a model that organizes learning around projects is added in the curriculum to make a new way for language learning with TUEBA students. According to the definitions found in PBL handbooks for teachers, projects are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems, that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities; allow students to work relatively autonomously over extended periods; and culminate in realistic products or presentations (Jones, Rasmussen, & Moffitt, 1997; Thomas, Mergendoller, & Michaelson, 1999). Therefore, this subject involves students in language learning naturally by requiring them to discover and make the final products themselves with the guidance from supervisor.

A first-year class is chosen because project-based learning is taught in the second semester when they have finished an academic term in advance. Although this subject is not new, for TUEBA students, this one is considered a new one because this subject is only applied in advanced classes.

## 1.3. Introduction of project-based learning in the Advanced Program

Project-based learning has been using in teaching advanced classes for three years. There are different projects such as drama, tourism and culture projects. Culture projects have been used for 2 years and it has proved its strength for students' interest in their learning as well as writing. This project is conducted within 18 weeks and divided into 2 phases.

The first phase is from the 1<sup>st</sup> week to the 11<sup>th</sup> week. This is the time for conducting this study for it mainly focuses on students' writing. After explaining duties to do during 11 weeks, students are asked to choose the topic they are interested in, make an outline for the culture items they are going to present in their final journal. From the second week to the eighth week, they are asked to write essays basing on the topic they choose and send to the instructor to revise and comment. After finishing commenting, the instructor sends it back to the students to edit the second time. Students are required to edit within one week and then send it to the researchers again to make final comments or confirm that the essay is suitable for the article. From 8<sup>th</sup> week to 11<sup>th</sup> week, students use the essays which have been finalized to make the cultural brochure. During designing the brochure process, the essays continue to be edited to match with the content including in the articles and submit the final brochure to teachers and researchers.

In the second phase, students focus more on speaking due to preparation for presentation for the cultural items they have learned in the first phase. By the end of this phase, they perform a cultural festival, which contains fashion shows, cuisine, customs, and festival performances.

For the advantages of this project, which are mentioned as following by Thomas (2000) as following:

- PBL projects are central, not peripheral to the curriculum
- PBL projects are focused on questions or problems that "drive" students to encounter (and struggle with) the central concepts and principles of a discipline.
- Projects involve students in a constructive investigation
- Projects are student-driven to some significant degree.
- Projects are realistic, not school-like.

These are the reasons why this subject is chosen to be studied the impact on learners' learning in general and writing in particular.

## 2. Research method

### 2.1. Data collection methods

This research involved 29 students of the second semester taking the AP program at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration. The researcher collaborated with the lecturer to design research on applying cultural project-based learning to develop students' motivation for writing since the researcher did not teach this course. The lesson plans were made for eleven meetings (two-third semester). From the first to the second meeting, the lecturer alone explained anything related on how to write 500 word -a culture-based essay that inserted culture topics such as, lifestyle, customs, movies, etc. and then assigned the students to work in-group including 4-5 people to plan a project of a brochure, while the researcher observed. Then, the students needed to work outside the classroom generating ideas. Next, in the third meeting, they proposed an essay title and outline. In this meeting, the researcher not only observed but also actively helped the lecturer check the students' essays' titles and outlines. The fourth meeting is the time when the students presented their draft of essays in front of the class in order to get some comments and suggestions either from their lecturer or from their friends. Later, from the fifth meeting to the eighth, the lecturer asked the students to do peer editing by exchanging their essays within group before sending it to the teacher. Finally, the students presented the revised essays and collected them into a brochure.

To obtain credible data, the researcher collected the data by recording the teaching and learning process and completing the observation sheet. The researcher plays as a practitioner in the research who observes and takes note of every emerged issue in each lesson of the research. This is an important channel for data collection because the teacher can record students' common writing errors and how improving they have gained. As Blaxter, L. (2010) suggests "How people see and understand their surroundings will no doubt play a part in the ways in which they behave, they act and interact with others, and in the ways their actions are perceived by others. Observation is an extremely handy tool for researchers in this regard. It can allow researchers to understand much more about what goes on in complex."

The second method was assessing the students' essays based on ESL Composition Profile by Hartfiel, et. al. (1989), and interviewing the students and the lecturer. The teaching and learning process were carefully transcribed and checked to answer the first aim that is to elaborate on the implementation of cultural project-based learning to develop students' academic writing. Accordingly, the lecturer and the researcher read, rated and commented on the students' essays.

Based on the teaching-learning process and the students' scores, the researcher interviewed the lecturer and some students in search of strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of cultural project-based learning. The researcher only chose those students who were nicely willing to be interviewed using a snowball technique in order to reach a point of data saturation; no longer hearing or finding new information. Four random students who were in different groups and a lecturer were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview. They were encouraged to talk about their perspective of writing errors and improvement in groups. As Dawson (2002) states that this method is seemed to be most widely used in qualitative research because the researcher who would like to discover more specific information comparing to the one collected from other sources finds this method effective. The interviewees were named student A, B, C, D.

The data were analyzed throughout the research. Therefore, the researcher worked with data by organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding which parts will be told to others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). It means that the researcher selected and chose only data, which importantly supported the purpose of the research.

For the purpose of the research is to explore the students' attitudes and behaviors towards an innovation applied for their learning for finding the answer for how and why certain phenomena happen, a qualitative approach was determined as an appropriate methodology for the research. Besides, the teacher only had only 11 weeks to implement the new teaching technique in class; and the numbers of participants are 29. Therefore, it is small-scaled research; thus, a qualitative approach seems to be a perfect selection.

### 2.2. Findings

To elaborate the implementation of the cultural project-based learning to develop students' motivation for writing and illustrating the strength and weaknesses of conducting this project, the data collected from observation, students' essay scores, and interviews were analyzed.

Based on the observation, 29 students were attending the PBL class. Both the researcher and the lecturer collaborated to create lesson plans of 11 meetings on applying cultural project-based learning to develop students' writing. By doing so, the students were assigned to make groups, each consisting of 4-5 people in order to plan, manage and accomplish an essay-writing project in the form of a brochure. At that time, the students looked very active and involved, since they needed to explore and generate ideas related to culture outside the classroom and then proposed title and outline before starting to write the essay. It was similar to the interview result with A translated in English as follows:

“At first, I was stressed because I had to choose the topics my own, which had never had before when we all waited for the teacher to assign tasks for us. In addition, we thought that we would choose something that did not match the teacher's thought. There were thousands of sources of information so that we did not know what to choose. Luckily, after the teacher's guidance, our group work together and in the end we can cooperate and help each other. Even now, we are a solid team.”

There are six topics chosen by students, including four Vietnamese regions and two foreign countries. The number of essays is quite a lot so that they chose the sub-topics diversely, which makes each brochure have its own style and color. The most common subtopics are location, climate, festivals, cuisine, and people. The reason they chose them is narrated as following from student B:

“After the lecture teacher gave us about the culture, we started searching on the internet. There were numerous topics and we were flooded. In the end, we decided to choose these cultural items to write because they are familiar with our knowledge and us. In addition, we do not have to choose the difficult words, which we even have never seen before.”

Soon after presenting the draft of their essays in front of the class, the students wrote their culture-based essays outside the classroom, as a project. Some strategies were introduced to support their ideas. They read some related sources and discussed them with their friends to get some suggestions. Most of the writings were not stucked by the ideas but they came up to another trouble. In the first writing, the lecturer got all the writing on the deadline set. However, she was a little shocked because most of the writings were copied or translated by the translating engine:

“I found most of the writing written by copying and using some translation engines because the language is not natural, even I could not find any grammar mistakes in the first drafts they sent me. When we had online meetings, I shared on-screen some piece of writing and asked them about the meaning and the source they had taken the information. They were silent. I showed them exactly what and where they copied their writing and they admitted. After the problems with the first writing, all of them had to rewrite by their own language.”

Accordingly, the students found that it was not easy and simple. They had to revise all the language items they had learnt to compose a 500 word essay while they were influent by word by word translation; it took them lots of time to deal with the first writing the second time. They were afraid of being trapped plagiarizing since the lecturer had banned it. It was also supported by C in the following:

“My first draft was so terrible because the teacher asked me to rewrite all for my copy from the Internet. I used Google translation to help me deal with long passages and technical terms. After getting feedback from the teacher, I felt so depressed and started to be more responsible for my writing. I spent the whole afternoon that day to read some related sources and watch some videos in order to inspire me in generating more ideas. I began writing when I was sure about everything I was going to give in my essay. It took me nearly two days to finish the essay with the help of dictionaries, books and the internet. Fortunately, the teacher did not ask me to rewrite then. Instead, she gave me lots of comments on grammar, writing styles and format. That was really helpful.”

After the first writing, which was mostly commented by the teacher, the second writing gave students a new challenge because it involved peer-feedback. Students had to exchange their writing within their group members before sending it to the teacher. Both commented and edited versions were attached in the email sent to the teacher so that she knew what they had done and had not done. Students found it rather stressful but it made them more responsible for their own writing as student D said:

“When the teacher asked us to give a comment to each other's writing, we were all stressed because every member of our group was not really good at writing. Each of us had lots of writing errors so that it was so challenging for us to give comments to others. However, when we focused on reading our team member's writing it was not really as hard as I thought because I still recognized their errors and in turn I got comments from my friends. At that time, we discussed together how to edit these problems appropriately. Although we could not deal with all, and we had to ask the teacher for help, we got a useful lesson here. It is learning from other's mistakes.”

Student A added that:

“After we discussed and found a solution to deal with errors in writing, we sent it to the teacher to get her feedback. You know, this time when we got the reply email, we were so happy because the number of errors was only a third in comparison to the first writing. We once again edited our writing together and we found lots of stupid mistakes we often had. Besides, our team spirit grew up after working, discussing together. I also realized that writing is not something too complicated.”

The lecturer also confirms the changes in students writing:

“The second writing was much better because the number of writing errors is lower in comparison to the previous one. Especially, I could not find any writing copied or used translation engine. Though there were common problems such as fragment, stringy, and choppy sentences, or there was a lot of word by word translation, I found them their real writing.”

Furthermore, the students finally presented the revised essays and collected them into a brochure, although the students' culture-based essays were not very good in terms of scores. Overall, the scores were ranging from 'very poor' to 'good to average'. In terms of content, the students mostly succeeded to insert culture topics into their essays, since the scores ranged from 12 to 20 in the level of 'good to average'. The students seemed to get significantly low in the score of organization and language use that ranged from 5 to 10 in the level of 'fair to poor' and 'very poor'. Then, in terms of vocabulary and mechanics, the scores ranged in the level of 'fair to poor' and 'good to average'.

According to the students' scores above and the interview results, some problems faced by the students were revealed in the following. The students firstly had the experience working with their classmates outside the classroom with cultural topics that were relatively new. They got accustomed to working or writing under their lecturer supervision, not their friends' help. They had not been ready yet to do the individual assignment with the requirement of searching own references or sources. They never experienced to write serious composition consisting of 500 words.

In line with the problems above, interviewing with the students could be fortunately categorized into the research advantages and disadvantages. Some students named A, B, C, D, and teacher recommended that inserting culture topics through applying project-based learning was helpful and made the writing more interesting. The students were challenged to be more independent and more critical since they had to search and prepare their own sources or references either from the internet or from the other course textbook. However, the lecturer stated in the interview that:

“I think applying cultural project-based learning actually was very interesting, but the situation of the classroom can be out of control while proposing and checking the essay's title and outline. The students were noisy and had a chat while waiting for a turn to see the lecturer. In terms of peer

editing, the problems happened to the low proficiency students. They did not know what to correct and edit, therefore they were very passive.”

It showed that the things stated above are the disadvantageous parts of applying cultural project-based learning in the academic writing course. In addition, A, B, C, D, and the lecturer declared that applying cultural project-based learning consumed much time.

In this respect, it can be postulated that applying cultural project-based learning could not be totally developing students' writing yet viewed from the student's score. Only a few students got good scores but actually based on the interview result, it contributed to challenging students being more independent, more critical, and more responsible for their writing.

### 3. Discussion

As reported in the findings part, the investigation of applying cultural project-based learning to develop students' motivation for writing revealed the unexpected result viewed from the students' scores. The applying cultural project-based learning can only help in terms of content and vocabulary but not help yet in terms of organization and language use since the length of the project here was only eleven meetings. In contrast, Poonpon (2011) reported that applying project-based learning can balance of language use and content in the project. A reasonable explanation for this might be that the students needed more time to conduct a project. Thus, adjustment of the implementation plan and other activities needed for future implementation.

Regarding the changing perspective, the finding showed that the students and the lecturer were accustomed to doing all writing processes like prewriting, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing inside the classroom. The lecturer had never assigned the students writing project systematically conducted outside the classroom, and only individual homework is mostly assigned. Therefore, applying project-based learning was something relatively new for both of them. They may feel uncomfortable and stressed since project-based learning focuses on in-depth investigations while constructing personally -meaningful artifacts, the tone of a classroom may change (Grant, 2002). Actually, each student can have different ideas to be offered in the project rather than wait for the ideas suggested by his/her lecturer.

The findings also showed that inserting culture into lessons in the class had been very challenging. The students tried hard to make themselves understand how to insert culture into culture-based essays. They were truly motivated at generating ideas by searching from many sources such as textbooks, internet sources, TV, film, and video (Baker, 2012). Thus, it showed that they were actually able to compose or write culture-based essays.

All in all, the students mostly agreed that incorporating culture through project-based learning into the teaching of English, in this case, writing changed either the lecturer's or the students' attitudes on learning. As stated by Saniel (2012) & Cakir (2006) that in order to teach culture for foreign language, using techniques that promote cultural understanding need to be sensitively used to adapt to students' attitude to this subject. They admitted that they were more independent, more critical, and certainly enhanced their cultural understanding. They needed to prepare all things independently outside the classroom. The lecturer only monitored, checked, and confirmed whether they did on the track or not. He or she did not feed them by providing titles or references as usual. By doing so, the students automatically became more critical. Later, these positive attitudes lead to the terms of advantageous parts of the research findings.

In fact, the findings also indicated that there were problems with low proficiency students in terms of generating ideas and editing. They tended to be unfaithful in composing culture-based essays; inactively recognize their errors and their friends' writing errors, and they relied much on the lecturer's supervision while editing session inside the classroom. They did not know what and how to correct their partner's essay. Thus, this situation could gradually be changed whenever the lecturer had maintained to apply project-based learning in the teaching and learning process.

### 4. Conclusion

This section has elaborated on the application of cultural project-based learning to develop motivation for the writing of the students in the advanced class at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business administration. The application of cultural project-based learning has developed students' writing only in terms of content, vocabulary,

attitude toward writing learning, but it has not developed yet in terms of organization and language use. It helped the students to search for their interests on culture topics through the internet or other sources and continue to generate ideas of composing a culture-based essay. This happened since the students were not accustomed to working.

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