

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE IMPROVEMENT OF ENGLISH SKILLS THROUGH RESEARCHING TARGET NEEDS ANALYSIS

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Abstract - Although Thai students have studied English for a long time, they still have a problem in learning English and improving their English skills. It might be due to a lack of opportunities to be exposed to English-speaking contexts. This study, however, argues that another possible reason might be due to a lack of direct experiences in how English is necessary in the real working contexts. Therefore, this study aims to examine students' perceptions towards the improvement of English skills through researching target needs of English in their prospective careers. 60 undergraduates majoring in Business English program at SuanSunandhaRajabhat University were the subjects of this study. They were asked to do the target needs analysis of English in business careers by interviewing current workers in the careers that they intend to work after graduating. Then, their perceptions towards the improvement of English skills were collected and investigated. In essence, the investigation reveals that to improve their English skills, they think that their personalities and learning styles have to be changed. Particularly, they learned that they need to become lifelong and insightful learners. Guidelines and suggestions for teachers to integrate researching as a part of learning activities in specific business English courses are also discussed.

Index Terms - Business English, Research-Based Learning, Students' Perceptions, Target Needs Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

We live in an era that English is essential in our lives in all aspects, ranging from everyday living to working. Although different careers tend to require different qualifications [1], English skills are extremely necessary in every kind of job nowadays. English skills can be improved by different ways of learning such as project-based learning (e.g. [2]), problem-based learning (e.g. [3] and [4]), web-based learning (e.g. [5]) and research-based learning (e.g. [6]). Under different assumptions, different ways of learning have been used to achieve different purposes. For instance, project-based learning is a comprehensive approach aiming to help students learn and gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time. It involves a dynamic classroom approach as it is believed that students can acquire a deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems [2]. Consequently, this approach seems to fit the purpose to raise a greater depth of understanding of concepts, broader knowledge base, improved communication and interpersonal/social skills, enhanced leadership skills, increased creativity, and improved writing skills. On the other hand, web-based learning (online learning/ e-learning) includes online course content to raise the ease of use of the tools to browse the resources on the Web [5]. Therefore, it seems to be suitable for distance learning. However, it can be argued that students tend to learn most when they are actively involved in developing their knowledge [7]. Unfortunately, neither project-based nor web-based is likely to effectively

promote active learning. In fact, it seems that research-based learning is an approach that tends to be more appropriate to use for promoting active learning. This is because this approach is likely to raise a number of skills such as developing and enhancing skills, generic skills (e.g. critical and analytical thinking skills, information retrieval and evaluation skills, and problem solving skill), and skills in conducting and evaluating research that are helpful to students' ongoing personal and professional lives. Through research-based learning, students can also develop the intellectual skills of critical analysis and valuable transferable skills such as group work, time- and resource-management and data handling. Although all of these skills may not obviously enhance English skills, they tend to help students actively improve their English skills by themselves and in a long run. In particular, this study tries to argue that research-based learning potentially helps students learn and improve their English skills to become successful learners. This brings us to the specific focus of our study on examining the relation between research-based learning and the improvement of English skills. However, it is unclear in what way and to what extent research-based learning helps students' English skills improved. Therefore, this study aims to examine students' perceptions towards the improvement of English skills through using research-based learning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nowadays, to be successful in any careers, every worker needs to have a qualification of English skills.

However, different jobs will require different skills. To be able to indicate what English skills are needed in a particular job, need analysis can be proceeded.

Needs analysis can be defined as a requirement for fact finding or the collection of data from the different sources, such as the data or information about the learners themselves [8]. Ellis and Johnson [9] states that needs analysis is a way of gaining a detailed description of a learner's needs. It will take into the specific purpose for which the learner will use the language, the kind of language to be used. However, the data or information could be gotten from the range of other groups of people such as trainers and company staff. One of the goals of needs analysis is to understand the target situation needs.

Target Situation Analysis (TSA) focuses on the target situation in which learners need to function better and analyze specific features of language use. TSA was first used by Chambers [8] to refer to communication in the situation. The term has been used to cover the identification and the assessment of needs in the target situation, especially in terms of language skills needed in different careers such as workers in an oil company [10], bankers [11], workers in tourism [12], and cabin crew [13].

Although research-based learning focusing on target needs analysis seems to raise students' potential in English skills needed in their prospective jobs, there is still a gap in the literature in what way the students' skills will be improved. The purpose of this study then is to examine students' perceptions towards the improvement of English skills through researching target needs of English in their prospective careers.

III. METHODOLOGY

First, each student surveys needs of English in their prospective careers by interviewing three current workers. The interviews were differently designed to investigate the needs of English in different business workplace such as hotel, airline, tourism, and logistics. Each student had to interview three workers working in the careers s/he intends to work after graduate. Then, each of them had to write a reflection on how English is important and needed in the jobs and how to improve their English skills to reach the future requirement. The students' reflections were content-analyzed for recurring themes and categories. This study focuses on only 60 undergraduates who are fourth year students majoring in Business English program at SuanSunandhaRajabhat University.

IV. FINDINGS

From coding and quantifying 60 students' reflections towards English skills needed in their prospective job, 13 categories of English skilled needed for improvement can be identified (see Table 1).

Table 1: English skills needed for improvement

No.	English skills needed for improvement	No. of students	Percentage (%)
1	Technical terms and vocabularies	9	15.00
2	The usage of language for appropriate situation	3	5.00
3	Using English for convincing	1	1.667
4	Communication and speaking skills	17	28.33
5	Listening skill	10	16.67
6	Writing skill	3	5.00
7	Grammar	7	11.67
8	Guideline and suggestion	1	1.67
9	Give the information	1	1.667
10	Joking	1	1.67
11	Telephone conversation	1	1.67
12	Writing an e-mail	8	13.33
13	Using the polite language	1	1.67

Top five skills that most of students think that are very essential for their future careers are presented in Figure 1.

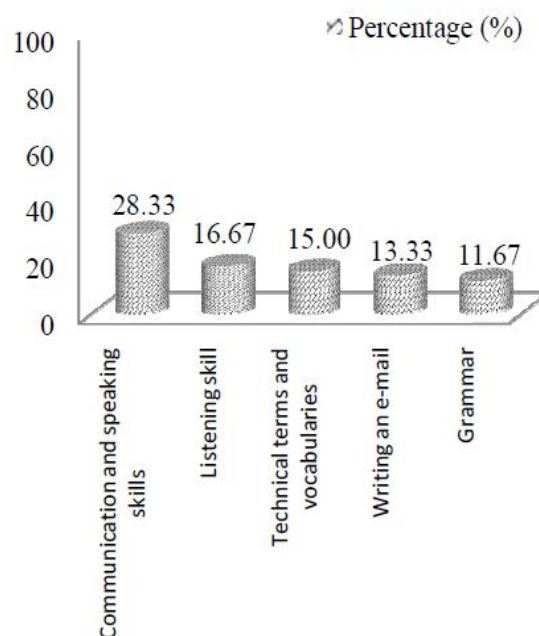


Figure 1: Top five English skills students need to improve

The reflections also showed that to develop the English skills, there are seven learning approaches that the students think can help them improve their English skills to reach the future requirement in the real workplace. Seven approaches with the percentage are given in Table 2 as follows.

Table 2: Learning Strategies to improve English skills

No.	Learning strategies for improvement	No. of students	Percentage (%)
1	Learning from experienced people	7	11.67
2	Watching Youtube soundtrack	3	5.00
3	Watching TV series soundtrack	4	6.67
4	Surfing English websites	6	10.00
5	Frequent practice	17	28.33
6	Lifelong learning	33	55.00
7	Weakness identification	15	25.00

Top five learning approach that the students think can help them improve their English skills that are necessary in their working lives are given in Figure 2. As can be seen in Figure 2, many students think that they need to change themselves to become lifelong learners. Most of them particularly say that they “need to be able to learn new things all the time and always.” Moreover, they believe that frequent practices are also necessary, in terms of not only help them get the job but also let them keep the desiring jobs. In addition, some students think that they can improve their English skills by identifying their weaknesses. Last but not least, the students’ reflections show that English skills can be improved in a way that matches the job requirement by learning from experienced people and surfing English websites, whereas watching TV series soundtrack and watching Youtube soundtrack can also be effective for some students.

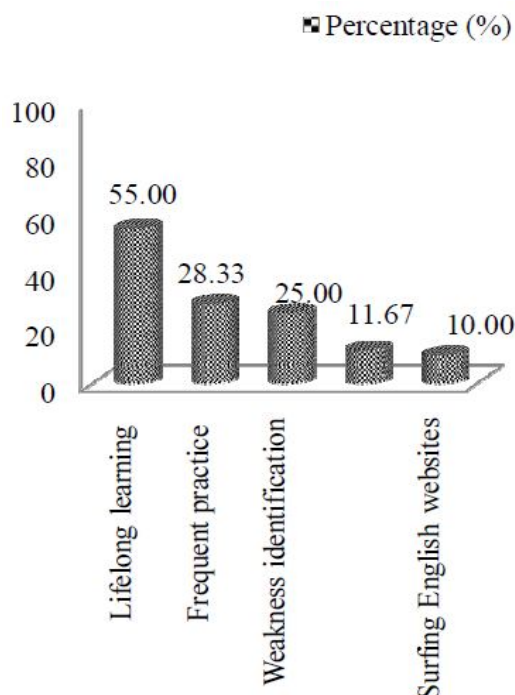


Figure 2: Learning strategies for English skills improvement

Finally, to improve English skills, most of the students believe that changing the personality can also help develop their English skills. That is, they need to change themselves to be more enthusiastic, hard-working, eager to learn, open-mind to learn new things, and confident.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of this study, we have assigned students to do target needs analysis by interviewing current employees in future careers that they intend to work after graduating. Some difficulties that students may encounter with doing target needs analysis are data collection, especially making an appointment for the interview. However, technology such as VDO call and social network can help support and make the interviews easier and more convenient. It is challenging for language teachers as facilitator to develop new learning methodologies and experiences to help learners learn language better and become skillful language users. From the research-based learning, there are several English skills that fourth-year students majoring Business English at SuanSunandhaRajabhat University need to improve to be successful in their future working lives.

The essential skills are communication skills (i.e. speaking and listening skill). These skills are very important for people who are working in the careers that are extremely concerned with English communication such as hospitality industry (hotel and tourism industry), airline business. The students are also aware of the need to improve the technical terms and vocabularies in English and related to their future careers.

Also, grammar skills are also important, especially for writing emails. To improve English skills, it seems that becoming lifelong learner is the most important factor while to become a successful worker, frequent practice and being able to identify their own weaknesses are the key. To do so, the students can learn from experienced people or easily access through the Internet by surfing English websites, watching TV series soundtrack or watching Youtube soundtrack. Although what the students discover is not new, the students think that it is very effective as learning all of these themselves really encourage and motivate them to improve their English skills. This is because they truly understand that if they really want to be successful in their future careers, what English skills they really need and how they can improve them. The key finding is that the students have learned that since English is very significant in their working lives, their English need to improve for their future careers. To improve themselves, they need to become lifelong learners who are eager to learn all the time and can learn around the clock by the use of new technology. Most of them admit that they have been told about this

for several years while studying but they just really understand the point by learning themselves from interviewing for target situation needs of English in their prospect careers.

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