

Work-based Learning: Case Study A Pilot Program for Business English Students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Thailand

Parham Rafatjou

Lecturer, Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Chiang Mai Rajabhat University

Abstract

Educational institutions around the world, especially in the developing countries, are often criticized for their lack of substance to deliver the required skills for students to strive in real world. These shortcomings are often attributed to outdated class material and teaching methods. Furthermore, competing in current world of technology and constantly changing work environments place pressure on both educational institutions and academics to provide quality programs in order to enhance students' competencies to compete in this competitive world.

This case study is based on the observation made on a group of 32 students enrolled in the 4th year of Business English program at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Thailand, in the first semester of 2018. As part of their curriculum, these students participated in this pilot program which offered them a hybrid classroom-workplace experience. The objective of this program was to assess the impact of Work-based Learning (WBL) and to evaluate whether students would gain a broader set of skills by participating in such programs. This program was unique in the sense that it offered a classroom-workplace mix in the same semester.

This purpose of this paper is to summarize the highlights and shortcomings of this program, to assess the impact of the WBL approach and finally, to evaluate the effectiveness of WBL which may be applied to more junior years in the Business English program.

Key words: Task Work-based learning, Life-long Learning, Thai Students' English Proficiency, Attention Span & Social Media -based language learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Even with quality education programs, it is often challenging to transfer the required knowledge and skills to students and to ensure their success at workplace. Therefore, a combination of education and hands-on experience, Work-based Learning (WBL), would be a sensible approach. Lemanski, Mewis, Overton (2011) define WBL as a category of university programs that incorporate universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities at workplace.

There are multitudes of benefits in using this approach. WBL allows students to realize their level of competencies (or lack thereof), and provides them insight in respect to their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, WBL is beneficial to educational institutions, in collaboration with both companies and trainees, to better understand the industries' needs and to modify educational programs to be more aligned with those requirements. Furthermore, organizations may gain access to a pool of candidates, and can adjust their training programs in order to be more in line with their strategic goals. WBL is a cooperative program involving educational institutions and various organizations to provide students real-world and hands-on experience in order to facilitate the transition from school to workplace. Such programs are designed to meet the learners' needs, contribute to the long-term development of organizations' objectives and are counted as formal credits towards university courses (Boud, Solomon, Symes, 2001)

Lemanski, Mewis, Overton (2011) refer to three key elements concerning WBL which relate to both learners and employees, to include: learning through work, learning for work and learning at work. The authors further elaborate that with respect to pedagogy, WBL contributes to life-long learning of learners by utilizing the three above-mentioned elements.

WBL can be offered in various forms; however, the ultimate goal of this approach is to provide students the opportunity to develop practical and conceptual skills related to their training and to apply them in a workplace setting (Atkinson, 2016). Atkinson further states that WBL can appear in the following forms: Apprenticeships and traineeships; Simulation; Job placements and finally, Internships, with the objective to provide learners the necessary knowledge and tools to be successful in their future careers.

In their research article, Lemanski, Mewis, Overton (2011) refer to Bragg & Hamm's perspective regarding factors that contribute to a successful WBL program (Lemanski, Mewis, Overton (2011-p.6), namely:

- 1) Strong program leadership and connections between the program and its stakeholders
- 2) Frequent and effective communications with respective organizations
- 3) Beliefs in program excellence, as well as effective school-based learning components
- 4) Sufficient financial support, along with innovative program and pedagogical features

In sum, the key to a successful WBL is dependent on the engagement of all parties, namely: educators, learners and respective organizations. For WBL to be successful there ought to be clear and ongoing communication between various stakeholders. Instructors and advisors as well learners need to be committed to the program and be engaged in all stages.

Furthermore, organizations should be able to facilitate the placement and learning, and provide resources and mentorship throughout the process. Despite WBL approach's many advantages, there are a number of challenges associated with this methodology. A successful WBL program demands effective curriculum design, pedagogy and accreditation.

2. METHODOLOGY

The Case Study

Note: The observation, opinions and recommendations in this paper are provided by the lecturer of the course “English for Electronic Business”, which was held in the first semester of 2018 at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University.

2.1 Background

This pilot program involved 32 fourth-year students in the Business English program at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. During this particular semester, the participants attended four courses at the University, namely: English for Marketing, English for Mass Media Advertising, English for Electronic Business, and a course in Formal Presentation. Generally, students in this program are required to participate in a semester-long internship assignment during the last semester of their fourth year, before graduation, so to gain some real-life experience. It is often the case that many students choose not to work throughout their 4-year program in order to focus on their studies, and thus fail to acquire real-world experience until they reach their fourth year.

This unique pilot program incorporated 2 components, namely: four weeks of classroom time and subsequent ten weeks of internship assignment at various locations. At the beginning of the semester, the students were informed that they would be participating in this pilot program, and were subsequently assigned to locations, in Chiang Mai and in the Phang-Nga province at four and five star resorts. The assignment of positions were conducted randomly, where the majority occupied positions in Food & Beverage (F&B) areas, while others were deployed in Housekeeping, Human Resources, Reception, Booking and Customer Care areas. During their time at the workplace, the students were required to provide weekly or bi-weekly reports to their program advisors and instructors. Subsequently and toward the end of their internship program, students held formal presentations, with their instructors and advisors present, to highlight their learnings and presented skills that they had acquired during this short time period. Subsequently, they returned to school to attend the final exams.

2.2 The Assessments

The method of assessment of the students for this particular course (English for Electronic Business) was two-fold: the University evaluation (50%), and the provided workplace assessment (50%).

The University evaluation was conducted by the lecturer based on the following components:

- 1) Class participation and interaction in the first 4 weeks of the semester
- 2) Bi-weekly group reports to highlight experience and exposure to technology
- 3) Interviews and observation of the students' performance and interaction at workplace
- 4) Workplace presentations

5) Final exam pertaining to the class material as well as knowledge gained at workplace

The workplace assessment was conducted by the respective organizations, which will be discussed as follows.

2.2.1 The University Evaluation

The lecturer had the opportunity to teach the same group of students in the previous semester as well as the latter, and therefore was familiar with their capabilities and competencies. It is noteworthy to mention that this course and the previous, taught by this lecturer, were conducted fully in English.

Since the lecture time was limited to four weeks, the knowledge that was communicated to students was limited. However, the students were encouraged to use theories learned in the classroom to identify various components and practical applications of their learnings at workplace. The course material was mostly comprised of topics related to technology in the Hospitality industry, the role of technology and trends, and ways technology has revolutionized the industry. The lecturer provided guidelines to students to enable them to search for clues and to ask the right questions regarding technology utilization at their workplaces.

Toward the end of the internship assignment, the lecturers and advisors were then invited to the workplace locations to closely observe students' knowledge through formal presentations, which were intended to showcase the skills gained over this time period. Subsequently and upon the completion of the internship program, the students returned to the University to participate in the final exams.

The lecturer then evaluated the students based on their interaction in the classroom, by reviewing their bi-weekly reports, and by interviewing them individually and in groups at workplace. Moreover, the students' formal presentations were observed, and they were assessed based on a number of criteria, which will be discussed further below. And finally, the final examination was conducted, where the students were once again assessed for their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, and the skills they had acquired during their internship.

2.2.1.1 Individual and Group interviews

The lecturer conducted individual and group interviews with the students at workplace, and later at the University, in order to identify the benefits of the program and to pinpoint areas of concern that could be modified. The outcomes of these interviews will be reported in following sections.

2.2.1.2 The Students' Workplace Presentations

As mentioned earlier, the students were required to present their roles and area of responsibilities at their workplace with their lecturers and advisors present. The presentations were conducted in English and were followed by questions and answers (Q&A), which were recorded for future references. Since these students were in the English program, the focus of the assessment was their ability to express themselves in English, while speaking about their gained knowledge and skills. The students' workplace presentations were assessed (by the lecturer) based a number of criteria including but not limited to: Presentation and language skills, Relevancy of the material presented, Critical

thinking & creativity, as well as Problem-solving & flexibility, Teamwork, and their overall ability to adapt and contribute to their roles, amongst others.

2.2.2 The Workplace Assessment

As stated earlier, the students received 50% of their overall grades based on the feedback provided by the employers. The employers evaluated the students based on the following criteria: Creativity & Innovation; Critical thinking and Problem-solving; Communication and Collaboration; Information, Media & Technology Skills, respectively.

3. RESULTS

The outcomes of this study included the lecturer and workplace assessments, the students' feedback and the students' recommendations, as summarized below:

3.1 The lecturer's Assessment Results

The students' overall performances were generally good and above expectation. The presentations were done better than anticipated, considering they were conducted in English and contained technical aspects of their area of responsibilities. Following the presentations, the presenters were asked questions regarding their responsibilities and those skills gained throughout this time period. The presentation grades were then added to individual student's performance for the semester.

3.2 The Workplace Assessment Results

The employers' assessment consisted of their observation of the students' performances throughout their internship assignments. As stated earlier, the trainees were assessed based on four main categories, namely: Creativity & Innovation; Critical Thinking & Problem Solving; Communication & Collaboration and, Information, Media & Technology Skills. Each main category consisted of at least three sub-categories to ensure a wider range of classification of skills. The lecturer then compiled the results of the employers' evaluations based on individual scores, which was granted to each trainee, and added them to respective categories. Please note that the conclusions drawn below are not based on specific statistical analysis, and solely point to areas that are more challenging to our students.

	Creativity & Innovation	Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	Communication & Collaboration	Information, Media & Technology Skills
Average	3.72	3.48	4.13	4.02
Grade	74%	70%	83%	80%
	B	B	A	A

C+ Reasoning
 C+ Creativity in Finding Solutions
 C+ Ability to Analyze
 C+ Ability to Resolve Problems Systemically

Figure 1 students' performances throughout their internship assignments

As evident in the above schedule, the trainees performed well under the categories of Communication & Collaboration along with Information Media & Technology. They exhibited weakness when it came to Creativity & Innovation, and they underperformed in the areas of Critical thinking & Problem-solving. The latter is an issue that our University and team of lecturers / advisors are well aware of and attempt to remedy. Critical thinking and Problem-solving skills appear to be a significant challenge to our students at this University and likely to many other educational institutions in Thailand.

3.3 The Students' Feedback

Overall, the students appeared to have had a positive experience regarding the program. Based on individual interviews and surveys conducted by the lecturer, the students were able to learn an array of hard and soft skills throughout this short period of time, and stated that they would recommend this program to other students at the University.

One area of concern with many of our students is lack of confidence. It appears that the short internship allowed them to overcome some of their fears and to become more resilient and strong. Other comments mentioned by the students regarding the advantages of this program, included:

- 1) Personal and professional improvement
- 2) Enhancement of communication- and social skills
- 3) Better time- and people management
- 4) Understanding the importance of company culture and teamwork
- 5) Understanding the value of hard work which results to success

As evident from above, these are some very positive and strong support for the effectiveness of this program. Despite the fact that the training program was rather a short term engagement, the students appeared to have positively responded to their assignments. The unique nature and advantage of this short term placement was that it allowed lectures and advisors to observe the outcomes more vividly and witness the transformation that the participants had experienced, which made it both more manageable and measurable.

As mentioned earlier, these were Business English majors, and the focus of this program was to enhance their language skills along with other practical competencies. However, not all students were able to fully utilize their language skills. For one, few were deployed to locations that catered non-English speakers (mostly German speakers), which did not give them the opportunity to speak English at all times. Furthermore, those who worked in non-customer-facing areas such as Housekeeping or Human Resources similarly had little chance to practice their language skills. Having said this, there has been an overall satisfaction and general consensus in respect to those hard & soft skills learned throughout the program.

3.4 The Students' Recommendations

As stated earlier, the trainees were generally satisfied with the program. As part of their assessment, the participants were asked to provide recommendations so that the program can be further improved. These are some of the participants' recommendations:

- 1) Provide better placement advising and planning

- 2) Internship placement to be done in 2nd or 3rd year of their program
- 3) Extend the duration of the assignment to 3-4 months
- 4) The University to seek and select high quality employers
- 5) There should be more end-to-end support throughout the program
- 6) Organize internships during summer holidays so they can attend school
- 7) Provide advance notice to students so they can plan
- 8) Allow students to decide for the employer and roles
- 9) Reduce tuition as they are not attending the University
- 10) Reduce class load when on assignment
- 11) Provide a wider selection of employers

4. DISCUSSION

The significance of this pilot program was not limited to the fact that the students were exposed to the workplace and learned a set of hard skills. The more important aspect of this program, in the eye of the lecturer, was the effect on the students' soft skills. In a research article published by The Language Institute of Thammasat University, Thailand (2013), a number of *general* factors were named which impact students' English proficiency in Thailand, namely:

- 1) Unqualified and poorly-trained teachers
- 2) Poorly-motivated students
- 3) Learners of mixed abilities in large classes
- 4) Rare opportunities for students to be exposed to the English language outside the classroom

Furthermore, the article pointed to other problems relating to Thai students, to include:

- 1) Students' lack of independent practice outside the classroom
- 2) Students' general lack of exposure to the English language in- and outside the classroom
- 3) Students' insufficient knowledge and skills of English
- 4) Students overall difficulties with writing, listening and pronunciation
- 5) Students' lack of patience in practicing English
- 6) Students' lack of confidence in speaking English
- 7) Student's lack of understanding of usefulness of the English language

One other research article complied by Saranya Saetang from Kasetsart University (2014) addressed similar issues:

- 1) Low students' ability
- 2) Students' shyness when it comes to asking questions and participating in activities
- 3) Students' lack of enthusiasm to learn
- 4) Lecturers' ability and lack of effective techniques
- 5) Insufficient time for lecturers to look after all students
- 6) Duration of lectures being too long
- 7) Structured relationships between lecturers and students

As it is evident from above, there a number of overlapping and common factors that hinder students to excel in a classroom setting.

The findings of these research articles are consistent with the lecturer's observation. One of the main issues facing students, at least in this educational institution, is shyness and lack of confidence, which is likely in part culturally motivated. Saranya Saetang (2014) states that shyness is part of Thai cultural identity, and individuals tend to conceal their feelings and keep silent, which is generally a sign of respect. Saetang adds that, in a classroom setting however, "shyness and silence could be obstacles to impede learning processes". Considering students' general reservation to speak and participate, and by adding the language factor to the equation, it becomes evident why students exhibit poor language competencies, which partly stems from shyness and lack of confidence.

One other critical and related issue concerns the use of technology. Social media and technology have markedly limited humans' interactions. The era of technology has created barriers to close and face-to-face communication between individuals. Many of the lecturer's students state that they would rather interact with friends via social media rather than meeting in person. Obviously, this preference for being isolated and for remote communication does not remedy the shyness factor, as students have lesser tendency to interact, to learn social skills and to improve their sense of confidence.

The second challenge facing students, which was mentioned above, and which is also observed by the lecturer, is the lack of exposure to the language. At this particular educational institution, Thai students have very little exposure to the English language. They perhaps spend in general three to six hours of classroom time with a native speaker on a weekly basis. All other courses are taught in Thai, including those major courses in English. Classes are often crowded and likely teacher-centered, where students have little opportunity to participate and use their language skills.

Furthermore, the materials utilized in classrooms are likely dated, not relatable and mostly focused on grammar and writing exercises. Students therefore are not motivated to learn or to pay attention in class. *Relatability of the material is key to capturing students' attention.* In addition, the style of teaching plays a significant role. A teacher-centered classroom does not offer active participation of students and does not encourage creativity or critical thinking.

Critical thinking is yet another challenge for Thai students in this University. Students are generally not required to analyze problems and to think critically, which is an important component of 21st century skills to possess. As mentioned earlier, the one area that the students in this pilot program failed to perform, according to the workplace assessment, was critical thinking and problems solving; the ability to reason, to analyze and find effective solutions to problems. The problem of critical thinking along with lack of confidence and shortcoming of language skills undoubtedly contribute to poor performance in classroom and outside.

Once again, technology and social media may be a culprit to this problem and can be partly blamed for this lack of critical thinking and creativity. Students often spend a significant number of hours every day on social media, during which time they play games and are exposed to unusable information. *There is a great deal of input with no real and productive output.* The massive amount of information- intake does not allow students to think critically and to nurture their own creativity. The heavy volume of information on social media also causes users to skim through information and have the desire to move on to the next subject or piece of news, which is *detrimental to their ability to concentrate and*

focus. This is yet another issue in the classroom, where students do not have the patience and the level of focus to absorb essential information and to process and retain them, which pose significant challenges to instructors.

Finally, the lack of motivation is a significant challenge to both educators and learners. Students often do not grasp the value of their education and skills that they acquire. One factor contributing to this problem is lack of understanding what career options are available and which skills are required to be employable in the respective roles. A large number of students attend the university, and enroll in particular programs, in order to fulfil their parents' wishes. Furthermore, many students are not aware of career choices that are available, as career counseling and mentorship are rather limited, and therefore career choices appear to be narrow and sometimes undesirable to students. These shortcomings lead to student's lack of accountability and motivation.

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, this pilot program was not only beneficial to the students in terms acquiring necessary hard skills, but it also allowed them to gain invaluable soft skills, which could remedy some of the challenges mentioned earlier. Despite the fact that not all of the students were excited about the program at the beginning, they appeared to have benefited and enjoyed their assignments once completed. One area that almost all participants agreed to have improved upon was the level of confidence that they gained by contributing to their roles. Unlike the classroom environment, they had to face challenges at workplace and to interact with others (in this case customers and coworkers), and specially foreigners, and to use their various skills to communicate and to contribute to their roles.

They appeared to have matured over this rather short period of time and felt that they had grown both personally and professionally. Furthermore, they sensed that their communication and social skills had improved, they became better time and people managers, learned the importance of hard work and the value of skills they learned at the University. In other words, they could connect their education and skills and could identify the real application of their knowledge.

It is needless to say that this pilot program needs to be further improved; however, the value that the students received and the improvements they witnessed, despite the short term of the assignment, are considerable.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper addressed the many benefits of using the WBL approach. As discussed, all stakeholders benefit when they collaborate to ensure that students are equipped with essential skills. The success of the future workforce is dependent on having the required skills which are applicable to workplace. Practical work experience is not only beneficial to students in order pursue their desired careers, but also it leads to life-long learning and assist them with those skills that they require for both personal and professional growth.

This particular case study illustrated the positive aspects of using a WBL approach in practice. Despite its few shortcomings and limited duration, the outcomes were desirable. As mentioned in the Discussion section of this paper, the students' feedback was generally positive and they appeared to have gained great deal of practical skills. The observation of the students as well as their interviews highlighted the importance of gaining soft skills for

the participants. As it was discussed earlier, the assignments helped the students to become more confident and self-reliant, to enhance their communication and social skills, to become more exposed to the language and as well, to be more creative. Furthermore, it helped to improve their problem-solving skills; to concentrate on tasks at hand and finally, to gain a number of hard skills that they may use in their future careers.

After the completion of their assignments, the participants appeared to be reenergized and motivated. Conversations with the employers suggested that they were satisfied with the students' performances and offered them to continue their internship roles in same capacities.

For those students, who would return to classroom after such programs, the learning will likely be different. They would likely be more enthusiastic and motivated, and more aware of the type of skills they need in order to be successful in their careers.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

WBL appears to be an effective approach for students at this University and likely many others. It is recommended however to place students in their assignments in year 2 or 3; preferably in the second year of their program. The first year of the 4-year program should be used as a platform to transfer the required knowledge and to prepare students for their assignments. Upon returning from their internships, students will have one or more years to further enhance their skills. Completing these assignments provide them with a fresh perspective regarding what is expecting them after graduation; it highlights skills that they possess or lack, and finally it motivates and reenergizes them to pull through the remaining duration of their studies.

A successful WBL program demands an effective curriculum design, pedagogy and end-to-end support. Therefore, a collaborative team of academic and administrative staff ought to be established in order to accommodate the stakeholders' needs, and to build effective communication channels for supporting students. Students should be prepared and supported throughout their program to ensure they make the most of their internship experience.

Moreover, greater attention must be given to selecting high quality and reputable businesses, who are willing and able to accommodate students and who possess proper training programs that can cater students from different backgrounds and skill levels.

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