

Thai EFL Students' Perceptions toward Learning English Descriptive Paragraph Writing through Problem-Based Learning

ทัศนคติของนักเรียนในบริบทที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศที่มีต่อการเรียน
การเขียนย่อหน้าภาษาอังกฤษแบบบรรยายโดยใช้ปัญหาเป็นฐาน

Received: December 13, 2019

Revised: October 4, 2019

Accepted: October 11, 2019

Abadee Cheadae (อาบาดี เจ๊ะอาแดร์)*

Somruedee Khongput (สมฤดี คงพุดม)**

Abstract

The current study aims to investigate Matthayomsuksa 6 students' perceptions toward learning English descriptive paragraph writing through problem-based learning (PBL) approach. The participants of this study were 40 participants at a school in Yala. They were assigned to solve a problem in groups. The problem to be solved was about writing a descriptive paragraph. The research instruments included questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed for arithmetic mean and interpreted using descriptive analysis. The qualitative data from the semi-structured interview were analyzed using content analysis. The results revealed that the participants had good perceptions toward learning descriptive paragraph writing through PBL approach ($\bar{x}=3.45$). When considering each domain, the results revealed that the most highly rated domain was knowledge gained and writing improvement ($\bar{x}=3.54$). The least rated domain were identical, self-study and working in group ($\bar{x}=3.40$). The open-ended questions and semi-structured interview results revealed that the students had mixed perceptions toward PBL. The students perceived that PBL was not only helpful for developing their writing ability but also communicative and cooperative learning skills since PBL offered them an opportunity to exchange their different knowledge with their peers through group discussion and focused tasks with facilitation of the teacher. However, some negative perceptions were discovered. Some students found that time allocation provided by the teacher was not adequate to complete their task, and the problem and the handouts were too difficult for them as PBL was likely a new writing concept for the students. In addition, differences English proficiency of

* นักศึกษาปริญญาศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต สาขาการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษานานาชาติ คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์

** อาจารย์ที่ปรึกษา ดร. ภาควิชาภาษา และภาษาศาสตร์ คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์

members in a group affected their learning outcomes. The findings suggest that PBL can be implemented to develop Thai EFL students' English descriptive writing ability with careful considerations of involving factors.

Keywords: Problem-based learning, descriptive paragraph writing, student

บทคัดย่อ

วัตถุประสงค์ของงานวิจัยนี้คือเพื่อสำรวจความคิดเห็นของผู้เรียนที่มีต่อการเรียนการเขียนย่อหน้าภาษาอังกฤษแบบบรรยาย โดยการใช้ปัญหาเป็นฐาน กลุ่มตัวอย่างที่ใช้ในงานวิจัยนี้ ได้แก่ นักเรียนจำนวน 40 คนจากโรงเรียนในจังหวัดยะลา ซึ่งได้รับการสอนโดยใช้ปัญหาเป็นฐาน และปัญหาที่ใช้ในการเรียนรู้ของนักเรียนนั้น เกี่ยวกับการเขียนย่อหน้าภาษาอังกฤษแบบบรรยาย เครื่องมือวิจัยที่ใช้ ได้แก่ แบบแบบสอบถามและสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง ข้อมูลวิจัยที่ได้วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณ และคุณภาพ และอธิบายในรูปแบบบรรยายผลของการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล พบว่าผู้เรียนมีทัศนคติที่ดีต่อการเรียนการเขียนย่อหน้าภาษาอังกฤษแบบบรรยายโดยการใช้ปัญหาเป็นฐาน ($\bar{x}=3.45$) เมื่อพิจารณาถึงทัศนคติแต่ละด้านพบว่า ด้านที่ผู้เรียนมีทัศนคติที่ดีที่สุดคือ ความรู้ที่ได้ และพัฒนาการด้านการเขียน ($\bar{x}=3.54$) ด้านที่ผู้เรียนมีทัศนคติที่น้อยที่สุดคือ การเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง และการทำงานเป็นกลุ่ม ($\bar{x}=3.40$) ผลของแบบสอบถามแบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง และแบบสัมภาษณ์ พบว่าผู้เรียนมีทัศนคติที่แตกต่างกัน ผู้เรียนเห็นด้วยว่า การเรียนรู้โดยการใช้ปัญหาเป็นฐาน ไม่ได้แค่ช่วยให้ผู้เรียนมีพัฒนาการในด้านการเขียนเท่านั้น แต่ยังรวมถึงทักษะด้านการสื่อสารและการทำงานเป็นกลุ่มอีกด้วย เนื่องจากผู้เรียนมีโอกาสในการแลกเปลี่ยนความรู้ที่แตกต่างกันระหว่างผู้เรียนด้วยกันผ่านการอภิปราย และงานที่ได้รับมอบหมายด้วยความช่วยเหลือจากผู้สอน อย่างไรก็ตาม ทัศนคติในด้านลบได้แก่ เวลาที่ใช้การเรียนไม่เพียงพอต่อการเรียนการเขียน ปัญหาและเอกสารประกอบการเรียนยากสำหรับนักเรียน เนื่องจากการเรียนรู้โดยการใช้ปัญหาเป็นฐานเป็นรูปแบบการสอนแบบใหม่ และความแตกต่างทางด้านภาษาอังกฤษของสมาชิกในกลุ่มส่งผลต่อการเรียนของนักเรียนในกลุ่ม ผลของวิจัยเล่มนี้สรุปได้ว่าการเรียนรู้โดยการใช้ปัญหาเป็นฐานสามารถนำมาใช้ในการสอนเพื่อการพัฒนาทักษะการเขียนไม่ใช่เฉพาะระดับอุดมศึกษา และบริบทที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สองเท่านั้น (Sojisirikul, 2009, Dastgeer & Afzal, 2015) แต่ยังรวมถึงระดับมัธยมศึกษาตอนปลาย ในบริบทที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ แต่อาจจะต้องพิจารณาให้ถี่ถ้วนเกี่ยวกับปัจจัยที่อาจจะส่งผลต่อการเรียนรู้โดยวิธีการสอนนี้

คำสำคัญ : การเรียนรู้โดยการใช้ปัญหาเป็นฐาน การเขียนย่อหน้าภาษาอังกฤษแบบบรรยาย ทัศนคติของนักเรียน

Introduction

As writing in English is one of important language skill in the 21th century, students have to express themselves in English writing to build relationships with foreigners and people all around the world. One of the substantial writing types which students are required to write is descriptive writing because it is used to describe objects, events and experiences for the readers to understand clearly (Namasivayam, Singh, Mostafa, Janoory & Abdullah, 2017). Thus, teaching and learning how to write descriptive paragraph is important.

To be proficient writers, students are required to learn and be taught how to produce effective paragraph writing (Daneshvari & Davoudi, 2016). A paragraph is the combination of a group of sentences on one topic or main idea. Writing a paragraph requires a sense of organization. The ideas and sentences should be organized clearly and coherently. To write a paragraph coherently, a writer should construct sentences that are related to each other in terms of content and grammatical structure. He or she should also make them flow with a smooth transition. From these requirements, constructing a paragraph is not a straightforward task, and it can cause difficulties for writers.

In EFL classroom, many researchers agree that students have problems in writing paragraphs. A lack of adequate language proficiency and lack of knowledge of differences in vocabulary and structures between the target language and their first language are the main factors affecting the students' ability in writing English paragraph (Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007; Bootchuy, 2008; Jenwitheesuk, 2009; Benchachinda, 2012; Nonkukhetkhong, 2013; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013).

Apart from the problems based on students' knowledge, another factor affecting students' poor writing could be the teaching methods used by teachers (Alami, 2016). In class, teachers mostly play a leading role of giving knowledge. This method seems to be one-way learning process in which students are passive and rely more on teachers. The traditional teaching method, grammar translation is now considered a method that cannot improve communicative ability (Horst, 2003).

One teaching method that teachers can use to promote active learning in class is problem-based learning (PBL). PBL is a student-centered learning approach based on sociocultural learning theory, which believes that students will learn well when they work together in a small group and constructivism learning theories, which believe that students can construct the new knowledge by themselves with the support from the expert. In PBL classroom, students are assigned to work cooperatively in a small group of 4-5 students to

discuss different ideas and share feasible and best solutions to problems within the group. The members in the group have chances to find different information and share language skills that can make them acquire an in-depth understanding of the problem. Interaction and communication through listening, speaking and writing with others in the group happen, and students' ideas can be developed (Antepohl & Herzig, 1999). PBL approach also emphasizes self and peer assessment. Students are required to evaluate their own and others' works and encouraged to communicate with others (Patrick & McPhee, 2014). The teamwork is successful as the progress of every student in the group is monitored (Keeling, 2008). This practice can increase trust among group members and between the students and the teacher (Page, Thorsteinsson & Niculescu, 2009).

The roles of a teacher and students in PBL classroom are different from traditional teaching method. In PBL classroom, the teacher plays the role of a facilitator to guide students to complete a set goal that students need to perform tasks by themselves. The teacher generates and presents a problem to the students, observes, gives support and feedback, and evaluates their products in the working process in order to help them complete the task. In addition, the teacher provides comfortable and motivating learning environment to encourage students to formulate their knowledge independently and develop teamwork (Tick, 2007).

PBL has been employed in many disciplines including language education in both ESL and EFL contexts. Many previous studies have adopted it as a tool for developing students' English skills, such as reading, speaking and writing and the outcomes were satisfactory (Astawa, Artini & Nitiasih, 2017; Gijbels, Dochy, Segers, & Van Den Bossche, 2005).

However, when conducting PBL, the teachers need to take into account some negative factors that might occur and lead to the negative outcomes. PBL approach might be very difficult for the students, especially for those who have never experienced PBL before. Training on how to be dependent on themselves to discover new knowledge should be provided by the teacher. Therefore, the teacher should facilitate them to learn from the very beginning to the end of the course (Mansor, Abdullah, Wahab, Rasul, Mohamed, Mohd Nor & Raof, 2014).

In relation to the writing skill, PBL is found to be frequently employed at a higher educational level (Sojisirikul, 2009). A limited number of studies focused on a lower level of education (Dastgeer & Afzal, 2015; Othman & Shah, 2013) possibly because students are considered having adequate proficiency of English.

In EFL context, Sojisirikul (2009) also found that 84 third year and fourth year undergraduate students at King Mongkut University of Technology had good positive perceptions toward PBL implemented in English writing class and they also viewed that PBL contributed them to acquire their knowledge acquisition through independent study. As found by Huang (2005), the students in her study perceived that the PBL was more interactive than traditional teaching method, and it allowed them to learn through the problem on their own. Another supporting finding was found by Astawa, Artini & Nitiasih (2017), the students in their study pointed out that PBL was an effective method as it helped them increase communicative ability and content knowledge.

Despite positive results in many aspects of learning, some negative perceptions were also discovered. According to Coffin (2013), the complexity of the PBL process caused some students to be left behind while working in groups.

Mansor, Abdullah, Wahab, Rasul, Mohamed, Nor & Nor (2014) reported that a teacher and students in their study found it difficult to implement PBL in their teaching and learning since PBL was a new and complex teaching method for learning English. They were not familiar with this method. It required both teacher and students to work overload. Expecting more effective outcomes, a teacher of PBL class is required to be well-trained.

In addition, Gwee (2008) argued that PBL is not appropriate for Asian EFL context because of students' low proficiency and lack of ability to converse in English language with their peers. Also, the students in Asia might fail to express what they really think.

Most previous researchers have conducted PBL in their English teaching at tertiary level of study (Sojisirikul, 2009) and a limited number of studies focused on a high school level (Othman & Shah, 2013; Dastgeer & Afzal, 2015), possibly because students are considered having low proficiency of English. Therefore, the researcher would like to examine how high school students perceive PBL learning approach after learning writing through PBL process. This paper thus aims to answer the following questions:

What are high school students' perceptions toward learning English descriptive paragraph writing through PBL approach?

Research methodology

1. Participants

The participants of the current study were 40 Mattayomsuksa 6 students at a school in Yala province, who were assigned into an experimental group of 18 hours of PBL teaching experiment. They were asked to answer the questionnaires asking about their perceptions toward learning writing descriptive paragraph through PBL approach.

2. Context of the study

The participants were assigned to learn descriptive paragraph writing through PBL approach taught by the researcher. In the process of learning, they were first introduced to PBL approach in terms of roles of teacher and students. Then they were asked to engage in PBL lessons following five major teaching stages including introduction of PBL, presentation of the problem, peer teaching, presentation of writing, and evaluation progress (Sojisirikul, 2009; Sobary, 2012). Groups of 4-5 members were constructed to solve the PBL problem which was writing a descriptive paragraph of 100-120 words. The participants were required to brainstorm and share knowledge based on the knowledge materials showing content for each lesson distributed by the teacher and conducted peer teaching within the group. Then, they were asked to compose three drafts of writing in groups and assessed other groups' writing using the rubrics provided by the teacher. After going through the process of writing and peer assessment, each group was required to evaluate their own writing tasks.

3. Research method

3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire adapted from Sojisirikul's (2009) study was used to investigate students' perceptions toward problem-based learning approach after they learned through PBL approach. It consisted of two parts. The first part consists of 20 statements asking for students' perceptions toward knowledge gained and writing improvement, effectiveness of PBL units, self study and working in groups. The questionnaire was presented in a form of five Likert scale ranging from 5 "Strongly Agree", 4 "Agree", 3 "Neutral", 2 "Disagree" to 1 "Strongly Disagree". The questionnaire distributed to the students was presented in Thai in order to gain the participants' in-depth understanding of the questions. The second part was provided for students to give suggestions and comments in open-ended questions.

3.2 Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interview included six questions. It aimed to discover the students' in-depth perceptions toward the implementation of PBL in learning English writing.

4. Data collection procedures

Before the data was collected, the overall research procedure was conducted including three phases which were 1) Pre-treatment process, the participants were assigned to complete pre-test on English descriptive paragraph writing individually. 2) Treatment process, students in the experimental group were assigned to learn in PBL approach. The problem provided was “Write a descriptive paragraph of 100-120 words”. The teaching materials provided including handouts and worksheets, and they were asked to work in group to gather information, brainstorm, share their background knowledge and give peer teaching for solving the problem. Then they produced three drafts of writing. 3) Post-treatment process, the questionnaires were distributed to all 40 students in the PBL classroom and twenty participants were randomly selected for the follow-up interviews. The interview was conducted by two interviewers: ten students for each interviewer due to time constraint. Students’ native language; that is, Thai and local Malay were used in order to ensure mutual understanding between interviewers and students.

5. Data analysis

The questionnaire offered both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were computed for the arithmetic means and interpreted through descriptive analysis. The mean scores of all statements were interpreted based on Sojisirikul (2009); that is, the mean scores of students’ perceptions were divided into three levels: bad, good and very good. The classification criteria were taken from a range of scores (one to five) divided by the number of levels created. The value calculated was 1.33, which was added to each mean score, making a range of 1.00-2.33, showing students’ bad perceptions toward PBL, 2.34-3.67 representing students’ good perceptions, and 3.68-5.00, illustrating students’ very good perceptions.

The qualitative data from open-ended questions and the semi-structured interview were mixed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Themes were grouped and presented descriptively to supplement the findings from the questions.

6. Findings

The collected data from five Likert scale were calculated for the arithmetic mean. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Students' overall perceptions on learning through the problem-based learning approach

Statements	\bar{x}	SD	Interpretation
Knowledge gained and writing improvement	3.54	0.69	Good
Effectiveness of the PBL unit	3.47	0.69	Good
Self-study	3.40	0.67	Good
Working in groups	3.40	0.70	Good
Total	3.45	0.68	Good

The results in Table 1 reveal that overall the participants well perceived that they had good perceptions toward problem-based learning approach ($\bar{x}=3.45$). When considering each domain, the results reveal that the most highly rated domain was knowledge gained and writing improvement ($\bar{x}=3.54$), followed by self-study and working in group ($\bar{x}=3.40$).

Considering the attributes of each individual domain, the data obtained from the questionnaire revealed the students' perceptions in Tables 2-5.

Table 2 Students' perceptions toward knowledge gained and writing improvement

Statements	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	\bar{x}	Interpretation
1. I have developed paragraph writing skill.	0	14	20	6	0	2.80	Good
2. I have developed descriptive paragraph writing skill.	0	10	19	10	1	3.05	Good
3. I have acquired new knowledge from class discussion.	0	0	10	22	8	3.95	Very good
4. I have gained various kinds of knowledge about writing such as word choice, sentence structure, and so on.	0	7	19	12	2	3.23	Good

Statements	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	\bar{x}	Interpretation
5. I have developed thinking skills, such as thinking reasonably and systematically.	0	1	13	21	5	3.75	Very good
6. I have developed self-directed learning skill.	0	0	17	19	4	3.68	Very good
7. I have developed cooperative learning skill.	0	0	3	22	15	4.30	Very good
Total						$\bar{x}=3.54$	Good

When considering the attributes of knowledge gained and writing improvement, the results reveal that the students perceived developing cooperative learning skill as the highest rank ($\bar{x}=4.30$), followed by their acquisition of new knowledge from class discussion ($\bar{x}=3.95$) and the development of thinking skills ($\bar{x}=3.75$). Interestingly, they viewed the development of paragraph writing skill as the lowest rank ($\bar{x}=2.80$).

In qualitative responses, the participants also mentioned that they gained various kinds of knowledge from learning through PBL. They perceived that PBL was not only helpful for developing their writing skills but also improving their communicative skill and cooperative learning skill, as stated in the following comments:

I think I could not only improve my writing skill but also communicative skill. I had a chance to communicate with my friends because the teacher encouraged everyone to discuss in English all the time. (Respondent 14, interview)

I think I have developed cooperative learning skill. Before learning through PBL, I was not confident to work with others. After participating in the PBL class, I changed my mind and I could work in group better than before. (Respondent 8, interview)

Regarding the effectiveness of the PBL unit, the data obtained from the questionnaire showed the students' perceptions in Table 3.

Table 3 Students' perceptions toward effectiveness of the PBL unit

Statements	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	\bar{x}	Interpretation
1. Numbers of materials provided by teacher, such as handouts and worksheets were adequate.	0	0	8	22	10	4.30	Very good
2. The number of problems was appropriate.	0	1	10	23	6	3.85	Very good
3. The amount in handouts was reasonable.	0	3	20	15	2	3.40	Good
4. Teaching and learning steps were arranged systematically.	0	4	26	9	1	3.18	Good
5. The evaluation was appropriate.	0	2	19	16	3	3.50	Good
6. Time spent for PBL was sufficient.	0	13	21	5	1	2.85	Good
Total						$\bar{x}=3.47$	Good

The results in Table 3 show that the students had very good perceptions toward adequacy of numbers of materials provided by the teacher such as handouts and worksheets ($\bar{x}=4.30$). They also viewed that the number of problems were appropriate ($\bar{x}=3.85$) and the evaluation was appropriate ($\bar{x}=3.50$). Despite a good perception about sufficient time spent of PBL, the participants perceived it as the lowest rank ($\bar{x}=2.85$).

The qualitative data reveal that most participants confirmed their positive perceptions about the adequate number of materials provided by the teacher, as stated in the following comments:

The handouts included everything I wanted to use in writing a descriptive paragraph. I didn't need to search elsewhere. (Respondent 4, interview)

However, it was also found that time allocation and the problem given were seen as problematic. The participants commented that time and problem were not appropriate for their proficiency, as stated in the following remarks:

I think time given by the teacher was not enough, especially when composing writing. (Respondent 9, interview)

I think the problem was too difficult for me because I had never learned writing like this before and writing skill is very difficult for me. (Respondent 10, interview)

In terms of the ability to self-study, the participants' views from the questionnaire are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Students' perceptions toward self-study

Statements	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	\bar{x}	Interpretation
1. I could select reading materials by myself.	0	0	6	20	14	4.20	Very good
2. I could solve any difficulties by myself.	0	7	25	8	0	3.03	Good
3. I needed the teacher's help.	0	11	9	10	10	2.98	Good
Total						$\bar{x}=3.40$	Good

The results in Table 4 show that the students perceived selecting reading materials by themselves as the highest rank ($\bar{x}=4.20$), followed by solving difficulties by themselves ($\bar{x}=3.03$). The lowest rank of participants' perceptions found was a need the teacher's help ($\bar{x}=2.98$).

In qualitative responses from semi-structured interview, the participants are likely to have mixed perceptions. On the one hand, most of the participants mentioned that the materials provided by the teacher were convenient for them as they were able to select any materials to read, as affirmed in the following comment:

In my opinion, the handouts were very useful and helpful. It was very convenient for me that everything was there. I did not have to find any other places because they were enough. (Respondent 13, interview)

On the other hand, some participants viewed that the materials were too difficult for them, as mentioned in the following comment:

The handouts were too difficult to understand, the teacher should select easier handouts for students. (Respondent 18, interview)

Even though, I was able to select the easiest ones to read but I found that most of the materials were too difficult. (Respondent 16, interview)

In relation to collaboration in group, the data obtained from the questionnaire revealed students' perceptions shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Students' perceptions toward working in group

Statements	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	\bar{x}	Interpretation
1. I could work well with others.	0	1	13	22	4	3.73	Very good
2. I have been open to others' opinions.	0	0	13	17	10	3.93	Very good
3. Different English proficiency of group members did not affect my learning.	0	14	19	7	0	2.83	Good
4. I could work in group better than work individually.	0	1	20	16	3	3.53	Good
Total						$\bar{x}=3.40$	Good

The results in Table 5 show that the students perceived that they have been open to others' opinions ($\bar{x}=3.95$). They also viewed that they could work well with others ($\bar{x}=3.73$) and work better in group than working individually ($\bar{x}=3.53$).

The qualitative data also support this aspect. The students pointed out that they could learn better when working in group as they were able to share and exchange their knowledge with their peers, as stated in the following comment:

I like to learn in the group to share the knowledge and discuss with my friends. I could also teach my friend and my friends could teach me something that I didn't know before. I think I could learn better than learning alone. (Respondent 15, questionnaire)

Though the participants preferred to learn in groups, some students viewed that the differences of English proficiency of group members could affect their learning, as stated in the following comment:

I think I like to work in group in PBL approach if the students' English proficiency is not too different because some students' English is very poor and they did not help our group at all. I understand that they would help but they did not know how to help, so I think my group would work better if the group members' English proficiency were not too different. (Respondent 9, questionnaire)

Discussion

The results from this study reveal that overall the participants have positive perceptions toward learning through PBL approach in all four aspects, namely, knowledge gained and writing improvement, effectiveness of the PBL unit, self-study and working in group. These positive perceptions may be resulted from two major factors. First, the students had an opportunity to exchange their different background knowledge with their peers through group discussion about the focused tasks. While working in group, they were able to discuss different ideas and share feasible and best solutions to problems within the group. They could also share language skills that they could apply in their tasks making more meaningful learning as found by Antepohl & Herzig (1999).

Another factor could be facilitation given by the teacher. The teacher of this study conducted PBL approach following all the process of learning and teaching of PBL starting from the introduction of PBL to the progress evaluation in order to give support and feedback, and clarify unclear gaps. As the result, the students could develop their knowledge of writing and communicative skill.

These two factors can be explained by sociocultural learning theory (Amerian, Ahmadian & Mehri, 2014), constructivism learning theory (Mvududu & Burgess, 2012) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD), (Samana, 2013) believing that students' learning is thought to happen and develop when they learn throughout their experiences, social interaction, negotiation and collaboration in the comfort area of learning where they are surrounded by their peers in a small group and the assistances are provided by the expert or a teacher to fulfill and complete their set goals. In relation to the nature of PBL process, the students are asked to work on their own in a small group to share and exchange their

background knowledge of known and unknown points of the problem, and solve it in order to complete the focused task with teacher's support.

Considering particular aspects of students' perceptions, it was found that in the aspect of knowledge gained and writing improvement, the students could also improve cooperative and thinking skills since they were encouraged to use their background knowledge and way of thinking in order to produce a new form of learning in groups that was comprehensible and useful for them. This point appears to cohere with Gwee (2008) who asserted that PBL enhances students to improve their ability of thinking skill and team work skill. The development of these skills seem to reflect a key benefit of PBL teaching approach. As affirmed by Yuan, Kunaviktikul, Klunklin & Williams (2008), the fact that PBL teaching process challenges students to search for solutions to the real-world situation in groups can offer them with opportunities to direct their own learning while developing thinking skills.

When taking concerning factors into consideration, the finding revealed a mixed view of students' perceptions toward the number of materials, the time allocation and the problem. Most students had good perceptions towards these factors, while others had bad perceptions. One explanation of these conflicting views might be because of the differences of students' proficiencies in English. Some low proficient students might not be capable of helping or sharing their knowledge within the group, possibly making them ignored, become distrusted and left behind by others as found by Taqi1 & Al-Nouh (2014)

Another concerning factor could be inadequacy of time allocation which is believed to be inadequate. According to Ferris (2007) and Ismail (2007), writing is time consuming and writing skill is considered one of the most difficult skills to master (Na Phuket & Othman, 2015).

Therefore, the teacher of writing class should consider about the adequacy of time allocation to be given to students as stated by Nguyen, Phan & Ly (2011). Expecting effective learning outcomes of writing products, the learners needed an adequacy of time allocation in writing practice.

The last concerning factor could be the problem provided by the teacher. Despite some students enjoyed with the problem as it was challenging and interesting, some students pointed out that the problem was too difficult. Although there was only one problem to be solved, it was about writing English descriptive paragraph, which was likely a new writing concept for the students. Generally, in Thai EFL context, writing lessons offered and required the students to practice grammar rules and vocabulary without focusing on writing as a writing process since examinations usually test students' reading and grammar skills not writing

(Dueraman,2013). Therefore, when students learn writing a paragraph, they might find it difficult.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study shows that most students had positive perceptions toward the implementation of problem-based learning in class aiming to develop their writing ability. It can prove that PBL cannot only be implemented in tertiary level of study, ESL context but also in EFL context and a lower level of education where students have low proficiency of English. However, some limitations are needed to be addressed. Firstly, time for the experiment in the present study was only about 18 hours provided for the students to learn the concept of writing a paragraph through to producing their own work. This allocated time seemed to be too limited for the students to effectively build up their cognitive knowledge for writing. Another limitation is the fact that the students were not able to access learning resources through the internet or the library at school and all teaching materials were provided by the teacher. Therefore, some handouts might have been too difficult for the students to understand.

Recommendations

1. Expecting positive learning outcomes of writing skill, a teacher of PBL class should have to understand his or her role, especially facilitating roles when students are asked to identify known and unknown points of the problem and conduct group discussion.
2. One learning group should consist of equal numbers of students with low and high proficiency in English since students with low proficiency will be helped by students who have higher proficiency in English. In other words, the students of different abilities can help each other to explain things or share a good model of language performance in learning (Harmer, 1998, Moon, 2000).
3. As writing skill is time consuming, time to be spent for improving students' writing through this approach should be more than the time allocated in the present study for working on one type of writing including searching information, brainstorming, and exchanging knowledge of writing among the group, composing three drafts of writing, revising, editing and self evaluation (Othman & Shah, 2015).

References

- Alami, M. (2016). Causes of poor academic performance among Omani students. *International Journal of Social Science Research*, 4(1), 126-136.
- Amerian, M., Ahmadian, M., & Mehri, E. (2014). Sociocultural theory in practice: The effect of teacher, class, and peer scaffolding on the writing development of EFL learners. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 3(5), 1-12.
- Astawa, N. L., Artini, L. P., & Nitiasih, P. K. (2017). Project-based learning activities and EFL students' productive skills in English. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 8(6), 1147-1155.
- Coffin, P. (2013). The impact of the implementation of the PBL for EFL interdisciplinary study in a local Thai context. *The 4th International Research Symposium on Problem-Based Learning*. Retrieved from [/http://tree.utm.my/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/The-Impact-of-the-Implementation-of-the-PBL-for-EFL-Interdisciplinary-StudyinaLocal-Thai-Context-.pdf](http://tree.utm.my/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/The-Impact-of-the-Implementation-of-the-PBL-for-EFL-Interdisciplinary-StudyinaLocal-Thai-Context-.pdf).
- Daneshvari, M., & Davoudi, M. (2016). The effect of teaching paragraph writing in L1 on Iranian adult EFL learners' writing ability. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 8(6), 214-232.
- Dastgeer, G., & Afzal, M. T. (2015). Improving English writing skill. A case of study. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 3(10), 1315-1319.
- Dueraman, B. (2013). Focus on Thai learners of English: Their self-reports about foreign language learning. *International Research Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 2(7), 176-186.
- Ferris, D. (2007). Preparing teachers to respond to student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16(3), 165-193.
- Gwee, M. C. (2008). Globalization of problem-based learning (PBL): Cross-cultural Implications. *Kaohsiung Journal of Medical Sciences*, 24(3), 14-22.
- Gijbels, D., Dochy, F., Segers, M., & Van Den Bossche, P. (2005). *Effects of problem based learning : A meta- analysis from the angle of assessment*. Review of Educational Research, American Educational Research Association, 75(1), 27-61.
- Huang, R. (2005). Chinese international students' perceptions of the problem-based learning experience. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education* 4(2), 36-43.
- Lange, C., Costley J., & Han, S. (2016). Informal cooperative learning in small groups: The effect of scaffolding on participation. *Issues in Educational Research*, 26(2), 260-279.

- Mansor, A. N., Abdullah, N. O., Wahab, J. A., Rasul, M. S., Mohd Nor, M. Y., Mohd Nor, N. M., & Raof, R. A. (2015). Managing problem-based learning: Challenges and solutions for educational practice. *Asian Social Science*, 11(4), 259-268.
- Namasivayam, P., Singh, C. S., Mostafa, N. A., Janoory, L., & Abdullah, M. S. (2017). Improving ESL students' descriptive writing through Wh-Question technique. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 7(7), 219-231.
- Na Phuket, P. R. N., & Othman, N. B. (2015). Understanding EFL students' errors in writing. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(32), 99-106.
- Nguyen, D. K., Phan, T. V., & Ly, T. A. N. (2011). The effectiveness of activities for teaching EFL writing in a context of Vietnam. *Journal of NELTA*, 16(1), 82-96.
- Mvududu, N., & Burgess, J. T. (2012). Constructivism in practice: The case for English Language learners. *International Journal of Education*, 4(3), 108-118.
- Othman, N., & Shah, M. I. A. (2015). Problem-based learning in the English language classroom. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 6(3), 125-134.
- Samana, W. (2013). Teacher's and students' scaffolding in an EFL classroom. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2(8), 338-343.
- Sobary, T. (2012). *Problem based learning in teaching writing through learning cycle technique*. Paper presented at The 1st Sriwijaya University Learning and Education International Conference, Palembang.
- Sojjsirikul, P. (2009). *Problem-based learning and task-based learning approaches for English writing courses* (Doctoral dissertation, Suranaree University of Technology). Retrieved from [http://sutir.sut.ac.th:8080/sutir/bitstream/123456789/3729/2/Fulltext .pdf](http://sutir.sut.ac.th:8080/sutir/bitstream/123456789/3729/2/Fulltext.pdf).
- Sulaiman, F. (2010). Students perception of implementing problem-based learning in a Physics course. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 7, 355-362.
- Taqi, H. A., & Al-Nouh, N. A. (2014). Effect of group work on EFL students' attitudes and learning in higher level education. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 3(2), 52-65.
- Tan, O. S. (2003). *Problem-based Learning Innovation: Using Problems to Power Learning in the 21st Century*. Singapore: Thomson Learning.
- Yuan, H., Kunaviktikul, W., Klunklin, & Williams, B. A. (2008). Promoting critical thinking skills through problem-based learning. *Chiangmai University journal of Social Science and Humanities*, 2(2), 85-100.