All That I Studied Gave Me a Clearer Goal" Students' Voice: Project-Based Learning in ESP Course

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Abstract. English as the main language held an enormous role in the Ecotourism and Hospitality sectors, moreover in preparing students for the working field. This study examines the use of a project-based learning (PBL) approach in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course, specifically in an English for Ecotourism and Hospitality Management class for Thai students. It focuses on students' perceptions during and after the implementation of PBL. Data were collected through interviews, revealing that participants experienced happiness and enjoyment throughout the process. Additionally, they gained greater clarity about their future goals upon completing their projects. The findings suggest that PBL in ESP not only strengthens students' knowledge and skills but also promotes their mental well-being. The study concludes with implications and recommendations for future research on PBL and ESP.

Keywords: Case-study, Ecotourism and Hospitality Management, English for Specific Purposes, Project-Based Learning, Students' Perceptions

Introduction

Studies on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) cover a broad range of research areas, with numerous programs incorporating ESP to teach English in specialized contexts. Common fields include medicine, engineering, economics, education, psychology, and more (Kavlu, 2020; Stefanova, 2021). ESP courses are particularly prevalent among university and higher education students preparing for their careers. While ESP programs are well-documented in academic literature, much of the research focuses primarily on outcomes rather than students' experiences during the learning process (Ngo & Ngadiman, 2019; Silitonga et al., 2024; Suharyanto et al., 2021).

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ESP, a subset of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), is crucial for university students and professionals in specific fields (Arnó-Macià et al., 2020). It provides targeted knowledge and skills relevant to their careers, helping them face future challenges in their areas of expertise (Diachkova et al., 2021; Trujeque-Moreno et al., 2021). Cloudia Ho (2020) mentioned that mastering English is vital for their academic and professional success, as English is widely used globally and essential for effective communication in the tourism industry. This statement was also supported by Suprayogi & Budi Eko (2020) stated the benefits of implementing English in tourism sectors during their study. While general English is beneficial, specialized vocabulary in hospitality and tourism management is also necessary (Chamorro et al., 2022; Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2021). According to Alhumaidan & Alghamdi (2023) English for Specific Purposes effectively addresses these needs, enhancing students' knowledge and skills in tourism.

At Xavier Learning Community in Chiang Rai, Thailand, a course titled "English for Ecotourism and Hospitality Management" is offered to third-year tourism students (Ruankool, 2022). This course aims to prepare students for careers in the tourism sector by providing knowledge and skills specific to ecotourism and hospitality management. It focuses on vocabulary, comprehension of tourism-related texts, and professional communication skills in various situations. The course also emphasizes the importance of professional demeanor and customer interaction.

However, evaluations of the program reveal challenges in applying ESP principles practically. To improve understanding, ESP teaching materials should balance theoretical and practical content. Iswati & Triastuti (2021) in their study mentioned that Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a promising approach that can enhance comprehension of both theoretical concepts and practical applications. PBL has proven effective in various ESP contexts, including medical (Barros et al., 2021), engineering (Beneroso & Robinson, 2022; Servant-Miklos & Kolmos, 2022), teaching (Ngadiso et al., 2021; Suharyanto et al., 2021), and economic fields (Eka et al., 2022). This study aims to explore the effectiveness of PBL in ESP for the tourism sector, examine students' perspectives on ESP learning, and understand how students address challenges encountered during their ESP studies using PBL.

Project-Based Learning

The Project-Based Learning (PBL) emphasizes real-world applications and active engagement in purposeful projects (Morais et al., 2021). Susetyarini et al. (2022) stated in their study that the PBL teaching method enhances students' critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. In PBL, students and teachers collaboratively address problems by designing projects that provide meaningful solutions. Through this process, students face various challenges and obstacles, which help them develop their critical thinking abilities. Additionally, working on projects fosters teamwork, thereby strengthening communication and collaboration skills.

PBL is widely used across various educational fields. Meng et al. (2023) highlight its effectiveness in English learning, while its applications extend to economics (Eka et al., 2022), engineering (Servant-Miklos & Kolmos, 2022), and healthcare (Barros et al., 2021). However, research on PBL in eco-tourism and hospitality management remains limited (Sen & Walter, 2020). PBL positively

impacts students' academic motivation and life skills in tourism but suggests that further research is needed, particularly in economic communities and developmental sustainability (Anwar et al., 2022). In their study, Kangai et al. (2024) emphasizes that with the growth of the tourism sector post-COVID-19, there is an increasing need to implement PBL in eco-tourism and hospitality management courses.

PBL can offer significant benefits by providing students with real-life learning experiences (Almulla, 2020). Service excellence is crucial in the tourism sector, requiring students to have strong understanding and communication skills. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) addresses these needs effectively (Noor, 2019). Despite this, research on ESP in ecotourism and hospitality management often neglects students' perspectives during the learning process (Hidayati et al., 2023), focusing mainly on achievements and outcomes (Iswati & Triastuti, 2021). Students' perceptions and stress management are rarely examined.

Understanding students' perceptions before, during, and after a course is vital (Le Van & Hai Tien, 2021). According to Ngui & Lay (2020), while students may meet course requirements and show improvement, their mental health and stress levels are often overlooked. Although students' mental health is crucial for their development, there is limited research focused on this aspect (Pabro-Maquidato, 2021). In the context of learning a second or foreign language, students may experience increased stress related to speaking or writing in English. Therefore, it is crucial to explore students' views on the implementation of PBL in ESP courses for ecotourism and hospitality management.

This study addresses the often-overlooked aspect of students' mental well-being in the learning process, particularly in high-stress environments like second or foreign language courses. While Project-Based Learning (PBL) in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses can enhance language and professional skills, students' mental health and stress levels remain largely unexamined. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring students' perspectives on the impact of PBL in an ESP course for ecotourism and hospitality management.

Therefore, the researchers would like to address one research problem namely, how do students perceive the effects of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) method on their English learning and mental well-being, particularly in the context of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course focused on ecotourism and hospitality management? In addition, align with the research problem, the researchers would like to address the objective of this study which is, to explore students' perceptions of the Project-Based Learning method in English learning, especially within an English for Specific Purposes course in ecotourism and hospitality management.

Method
Research design
In this study, Project-Based Learning (PBL) was introduced at the outset of the course. This PBL is grounded in constructivist learning principles. Throughout the process, students engaged in PBL activities, including creating video advertisements, presenting trip itineraries, performing role-plays, and promoting new tourist attractions. Conducted from September 2023 to January 2024, the study took place in the ESP course for Ecotourism and Hospitality Management at Xavier

Learning Community, Chiang Rai, Thailand. The study documented students' perspectives and insights during the implementation of PBL, throughout the learning process, and after the completion of the course. The interview results were analyzed using thematic content analysis.

Throughout this study, the researchers initiate and plan the research for one semester. First, the study was introduced to the dean, academic advisors, and staff before continuing to the students. In addition, the researchers gained much information regarding students' problems and hindrances in learning English in the ESP course for Ecotourism and Hospitality Management. Second, after the research was approved, the researchers carried on guiding students in gathering information and developing their fundamental knowledge of ecotourism and hospitality management. Furthermore, students were engaged in project development. They design and develop their project with teacher guidance and advice. There was a set of timelines and proper assistance for each project which they needed to finish every time. There were presentations and reflections to display their products and to gain feedback to improve and evaluate their performances. Finally, after each project was done, the teacher gave constructive feedback and evaluation on both the product and process.

Participants

The participants in this study were eight students from an Ecotourism and Hospitality Management class at Xavier Learning Community. The group consisted of one male and seven female students, who were in their first semester of the third year for the academic year 2023. The students were aged 21 to 23 years old. The course was worth three credits, requiring students to engage in three hours of class meetings, individual study, and project work outside the classroom each week. Students meet with the teacher only twice a week: for one hour on Mondays and two hours on Wednesdays.

Research instrument

The research instrument used in this study was semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted to gather information on students' perceptions of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) method, particularly during their study in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course within the English for Ecotourism and Hospitality Management class.

Data collection

Data collection involved several steps. First, the researcher consulted with the academic advisor and obtained permission to apply the Project-Based Learning (PBL) method in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course within the English for Ecotourism and Hospitality Management class as a pilot study. Second, the researcher submitted a 16-week course outline to the academic board, detailing the planned steps, assignments, projects, quizzes, and assessment methods. Next, the course outline, learning objectives, and assessment criteria were introduced to the participants. PBL was implemented over 16 weeks, with participants working on projects according to the course outline and receiving feedback on their performance. At the end of the 16 weeks, participants were interviewed by the researcher to gather their perceptions of the PBL method in the ESP course.

Data analysis

The qualitative data from the interviews were processed through transcription and thematic content analysis. This analysis involved transcribing the

semi-structured interviews, clustering the data, and coding it according to the process described by Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019). The researchers coded the collected data to organize and describe the information for evaluation. The results were then presented narratively. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions regarding the use of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) method in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course within the English for Ecotourism and Hospitality Management class.

Findings

The outcome of the study is presented in the form of qualitative data.

Students' perspective of project-based learning

Based on observations and interviews with the participants, several key points were highlighted regarding the implementation of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) method in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course within the English for Ecotourism and Hospitality Management class.

Students' insight on handling problems or difficulties

Based on the interview results, the participants were quite successfully capable of handling problems and difficulties during the implementation of a project-based learning method in English for specific purposes course in English for ecotourism and hospitality management class. They stated that the problems were related to the tasks given and their English skills capacity. As mentioned by Participant 6, she could not deal with the task and felt there was too much workload. Participant 5 agreed with this, she said in the interview that she could not work up the video well. The video task was one of the projects students needed to finish in order to complete the second and fourth projects. Participant 7 mentioned that she experienced that some vocabulary in the article was quite complicated to understand. In this condition, she tried to repeatedly read the text many times.

Some strategies they implemented to tackle these challenges were finding the motivation to finish the tasks (participant 1), memorizing to solve the problems (participant 2), and changing mindset (participant 3). The other participants stated that they tried to ask friends and operate their smartphones to help them overcome the challenges (participant 4) and try many different applications (participant 5). They were so keen to do their best on each project.

Students' feelings when studying and facing problems

Following their feelings during the lessons, most students felt happy and excited about obtaining new knowledge. One participant was quite happy with what she had achieved (Participant 1). One of the participants mentioned that he most enjoyed developing his skills outside the classroom (Participant 2). Furthermore, participant 3 stated that she needed to be aware of what and why she is doing the task or projects, so she can do her best on every project. The same thing went for Participant 4, she tended to think that she did her best and let bad things or problems go from her mind and feelings.

On the other hand, Participant 5 shared her feelings when approaching a challenge. She was inclined to quit. Thus, she felt like did not want to do it anymore. Furthermore, Participant 8 stated that she was sad when thinking about her English skills, therefore, she always motivated herself to do better in the future. This statement is in line with Participant 6. She mentioned that sometimes, she felt

discouraged by the problems that she encountered during the course. However, she elaborated on her answer by adding that she always tried to solve those problems she experienced. A negative feeling was also encountered by Participant 7. She stated that at one moment during the course, she decided to forfeit and halt studying when facing some difficulties. Meanwhile, she tried to be calm to control her emotions, and then continue her learning. In common, those participants felt and experienced difficulties during the course, nonetheless they tried their best to overcome them.

Students' attitude towards the application of PBL in class

Regarding the students' attitude to the implementation of PBL in tourism class most of the students had positive attitudes. The constructive issues concern their English knowledge and skills, technology improvement, and future goals. As mentioned before, some students expressed that their English skills and knowledge rose during the course. Participant 7 and 8 stated that their speaking skills were improved throughout the lessons and projects. Participant 8 underlined that she gained advanced knowledge in acting skill and speaking skills by finishing many projects. This is in line with Participant 7 who stated that by completing some projects especially related to making videos, she practiced her speaking skills a lot.

Other than English knowledge and skills, the participants also gained some understanding of their technology usage, particularly video editing skills. As mentioned by Participant 6, said that she understood (video editing skills) more than before, and it gave her experience in making videos. This statement was in line with Participant 7, she mentioned that she has learned how to make clips and subtitles when making the projects and assignments. The English knowledge and skills acquired during the lesson were abundant, nonetheless, obtaining additional skills related to technology was something else. They were quite satisfied with the project's result and the skills they achieved.

One of the objectives of this course other than acquiring English skills and knowledge was to help the students gain more insight into what the tourism field is like in the working world. At the beginning of the lessons some students were still confused about their future jobs, and others said they did not know what to do in the future. However, after finishing the projects, they appeared to be more confident in their future. As a result, many participants stated that they started to project their future goals during the lessons.

> "All that I studied gave me a clearer goal" …" I wanted to have my own business. I have a clear goal after studying this subject." (Participant 5)
>
> "It helped me get to know more new information by myself and learn more about working in tourism." (Participant 1)
>
> "(I) get to know about Isan traveling more than (in the) past." (Participant 4)

Therefore, it is clear that the implementation of project-based learning in English for specific purposes course in the English for ecotourism and hospitality management class has significant results in giving a vibrant picture of the tourism sector.

Students' performance in groups and their synchronization

Through this PBL students expressed their experiences while working with friends and in groups. Participants mentioned that they were happy and excited to work and to study with friends to be challenged and to gain new experiences (participants 1, 3, 4, and 6). Even though some students felt tired and bored with

the tasks and assignments, they found many strategies to handle these problems. The participant divided the responsibility and work among the group members (participants 4, 6, and 7). They said that dividing the work will make the work easier and faster to be completed. Participant 2 stated that she needed to find different methods to use during the group discussion in order to make the outcomes better. It indicated that their critical thinking improved during group discussions and group projects.

In addition, participant 5 expressed her concern that in her group, her friends always remind each other when they have tasks or assignments to do. Other than how to finish the assignments or tasks, one participant also focused on their synchronization in the group. Participant 8 stated that she could get along well with other participants, therefore it was easy for her to work together with her friends in the group.

Students' challenges during PBL

In this part, the participants regularly mentioned some challenges they found during the course. The most common challenge they faced was time management (Participants 2, 5, and 6). The reasons were various, for instance, there were many assignments from other subjects and time-consuming assignments such as taking and editing the videos. Another challenge was their acquaintance with technology, particularly video editing (Participants 6 and 7). In addition, some participants had difficulties regarding their English competency. Participant 1 stated that she experienced some challenges in completing her assignments. Participant 4 said she needed to translate the instructions to understand the contexts and also some answers to her native language. Last, participant 8 mentioned that she was not quite advanced in grammar.

In accordance with the problems, the participants came up through some great strategies. The participants could finish the work in time since they were great at working in a group (participants 1 and 8). They also got help from friends and lecturers (participants 2, 3, and 7). In addition, they were good at using technological aids (participant 4 and 6). Therefore, the achievements they got at the end of the course were ample and valuable.

Discussions

The study aims to investigate students' perceptions of the Project-Based Learning Method in English for Specific Purposes, specifically in the English for Ecotourism and Hospitality Management class. According to the interview results gathered, the participants were inclined to 1) be successful in dealing with obstacles and difficulties throughout the implementation of the project-based learning method in English for specific purposes course in English for ecotourism and hospitality management class. They indicated that the issues were connected to the work assigned and their English proficiency level. This problem was also mentioned in the study by Nasir & Dermawan (2022). According to Nasir & Dermawan (2022), students encountered difficulties related to their speaking skills during the implementation of project-based learning. Even after the study, a few students were not able to reach the expected level. However, in this study, the participants were determined to do their best on each project.

Second, according to their feelings during the lectures, most participants were glad and excited to learn new things. This finding was in line with the result

from (Ngadiso et al., 2021). In their study, they made fun and active project-based learning. Therefore, students could find happiness during their study time. While some participants sensed and encountered problems in this course, they did their best to overcome them.

Third, the majority of participants had a positive attitude toward the adoption of PBL in the tourism class. The constructive issues are related to their English knowledge and skills, technology improvement, and future goals. As previously stated, some participants said that their English abilities and knowledge improved during the course. Aside from English knowledge and skills, the participants got a grasp of their technology usage, notably video editing skills. As a result, it appears that the implementation of the project-based learning method in English for specific purposes course for ecotourism and hospitality management class yields considerable results in providing a dynamic picture of the tourism sector.

This finding enriches the result from Chamorro et al. (2022). In their study, they only highlight speaking skills as the most important skill in ESP for Tourism. Thus, in this study not only speaking skills, but also technology improvement such as video editing skills.

Fourth, as mentioned by (Ngadiso et al., 2021) the implementation of project-based learning in English class could trigger happiness and activeness from the participants. Through this PBL, participants shared their experiences working with friends and in groups. They were working in groups and building chemistry among participants. Participants expressed their happiness, excitement, and enjoyment of working and studying with friends to be pushed and learn new experiences.

Fifth, tackling the challenges. According to Meng et al. (2023), some challenges that participants face during the PBL are frequently described as beliefs and understanding of PBL, project design, and planning, implementation management such as time management challenges, and support. This challenge also happened in this study. Time management became the most common among the participants after English proficiency and lack of technology understanding. In response to the issues, the participants devised several excellent techniques, including working in groups, asking teachers or friends, and employing technology aids.

Conclusion

The implementation of the project-based learning method in English for specific purposes, specifically in the English for ecotourism and hospitality management class showed a positive outlook. These conclusions were drawn from the data results gathered and analyzed in the previous sections. From the interview results, the researchers could determine participants' insight on handling problems or difficulties, and their feelings when studying and facing problems during the course. Furthermore, the results were also shown about participants' attitudes towards the application of PBL in tourism class and how they worked in a group and built synchronization among the participants. Last, the participants' challenges they experienced during the PBL.

Some limitations of this study include the small sample size, with less than ten participants due to the elective nature of the subject for tourism track students. Additionally, the study was conducted at only one location, Xavier Learning Community in Thailand, which limits the generalizability of the results to other

students in Thailand. Future research could benefit from including a larger and more diverse group of participants across various levels and programs to yield more varied and comprehensive outcomes. Moreover, incorporating feedback from learning institution stakeholders, such as lecturers and staff, could provide valuable insights into students' time and task management issues and address their challenges more effectively.

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