

**PREPARING THEM FOR THE WORLD:
THE USE OF TASK-BASED GROUP PROJECT
WORK IN ENGLISH FOR OCCUPATIONAL
PURPOSES**

PRISCILLA SHAK YEE PING



PERPUSTAKAAN
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DEVELOPMENT
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DECLARATION

The materials in this dissertation are original except for quotations, excerpts, summaries and reference, which has been duly acknowledge.

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ABSTRACT

PREPARING THEM FOR THE WORLD: THE USE OF TASK-BASED GROUP PROJECT WORK IN ENGLISH FOR OCUPATIONAL PURPOSES

When students are exposed to classroom setting that simulate and approximate workplace setting, language acquisition is more likely to be facilitated and they are more likely to acquire language skills better. This paper studies the use of the task-based group project method, as a communicative, learner-centered approach to equipping second language learners in a university setting with English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) skills to prepare learners for the job market. The study investigates the use of task-based group project work in an EOP course conducted in University Malaysia Sabah's English language programme. The main objective of this study is to investigate the desirability and the effectiveness of the use of task-based group project work in English for Occupational Purposes Course. At the same time, it also gathers data regarding students' perceptions towards the use of the task-based group project work in the EOP classroom. The outcome of the study has indicated that the use of the task-based group project work does affect students' acquisition of EOP skills and that its use is more effective than the use of conventional method in teaching EOP skills. In addition, findings show that the majority of the students perceive the learning experience positively and supports the use of task-based group project work in EOP.



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ABSTRAK

Apabila pelajar terdedah kepada situasi kelas yang menyerupai keadaan tempat bekerja, pembelajaran bahasa menjadi lebih mudah dan mereka lebih berkemungkinan untuk mempelajari kemahiran berbahasa dengan jayanya. Kertas ini akan mengkaji penggunaan projek berkumpulan yang berkonsepkan "task-based" sebagai satu pendekatan yang komunikatif dan bertumpukan pelajar ("learner-centered") bagi membantu dalam melengkapkan pelajar dengan kemahiran berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Inggeris bagi tujuan pekerjaan dan bagi menyediakan mereka untuk menceburi bidang kerjaya masing-masing. Kajian ini mengkaji penggunaan projek berkumpulan yang berkonsepkan "task-based" dalam kursus "English for Occupational Purposes" dalam program Bahasa Inggeris yang ditawarkan di Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji tahap keperluan dan keberkesanan penggunaan projek berkumpulan yang berkonsepkan "task-based" dalam kursus "English for Occupational Purposes". Pada masa yang sama, ia juga mengumpul data mengenai persepsi pelajar terhadap penggunaan projek berkumpulan "task-based" dalam kelas "English for Occupational Purposes". Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa penggunaan projek berkumpulan "task-based" mempengaruhi perolehan kemahiran berbahasa dan penggunaannya juga adalah lebih berkesan daripada penggunaan kaedah konvensional dalam pengajaran kemahiran EOP. Selain dari itu, dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa majoriti pelajar berpendapat bahawa pengalaman pembelajaran mereka adalah positif dan menyokong penggunaan projek berkumpulan yang berkonsepkan "task-based" dalam kursus "English for Occupational Purposes".



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ABBREVIATIONS

EOP	English for Occupational Purposes
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
GPE	General Purpose English
TBI	Task-Based Instruction
TBL	Task-Based Learning
TBGP	Task-Based Group Project
PW	Pair Work
GW	Group Work
L2	Second Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition



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CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

1.1 Introduction

In the fiercely competitive global workplace, good English skills can be vital for success. In Malaysia, the workplace is probably the most important place where English is used as a medium of communication. Undeniably, English is fast becoming the lingua franca of most big companies in the world today. Faced with this reality, university graduates need to equip themselves with a good command of the English language for them to enter the job market, be it locally or internationally.

Upon graduating from higher education, a student's next course of action is usually to seek employment. This is true even for those who intend to pursue further studies, as they still need to go through a waiting period for their results to be announced and for their graduation ceremonies. Keeping this immediate need of the students to join the job market in mind, it would be best if universities equip their graduates as best they can to meet the requirements of the workplace. This entails not just supplying graduates with the know-how of academic subjects, but also helps prepare them with techniques for them to secure employment. According to the Star Jobs online news, "it is learnt that 67% of the jobless graduates studied in public universities and 33% at private institutions." At the same time, it has been reported in Malaysia Today on July 4, 2006 that "some 70% of public universities and institute of higher learning graduates in the country are unemployed" (Ram B. S., 2006). This is a matter of serious concern especially for public universities as it highlights the fact that most graduates who are jobless are actually those who graduated from the

public universities. It is also important that this issue be tackled so as to upgrade the image and most importantly the quality of higher institutions of learning in Malaysia.

In today's world, English has become an almost vital language for anyone to acquire. "As never before, people have had to learn a second language, not just as a pleasing pastime, but often as a means of obtaining an education or securing employment" (Ellis, 2003: 3). It would be of priceless value to possess good language skills that would increase graduates' chances of securing employment. Not only that, it would also be of great advantage to be able to communicate effectively in English, in addition to other languages, while facing prospective employers. The English language's position as a second language in Malaysia in itself is an indication of the society's acknowledgement of the importance of English. Most importantly, English language skills are crucial for graduates in their daily communication and collaboration with other people at the workplace. When properly equipped with English for the workplace skills, they will be able to exchange ideas, understand and analyze information in English thus increasing their employability.

One serious social concern of the Malaysian government today is the increasing trend of the unemployment rate. The Deputy Minister of Human Resources Malaysia, Datuk Abdul Rahman Bakar has cited 3 factors that contributed towards the inability of graduates to secure jobs: Lack of working experience, poor command of English and incompatibility of the area of study with the jobs offered. He went on further highlighted that it is the duty of higher learning institutions to prepare graduates for the workplace. A meeting of a special committee formed to address the problem of unemployed graduates held in July 2006 and chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Najib Razak has also agreed that "weak command of English and poor communication skill" are also acknowledge as the main reason for graduates'

unemployment. According to him, the Education and Higher Education ministries will review school and university curriculum to tackle this problem (Loh, 2006).

As can be clearly seen, the lack of English language skills has been identified as one of the reasons Malaysian graduates fail to secure jobs upon graduating from schools. How far true is this statement? Is it really the higher institution of learning's fault or is it the problems of the individual graduates themselves. The main intention here is not to argue upon these questions. Instead, no matter what the real reasons are behind a graduate's failure to secure employment, it is still imperative that higher learning institutions prepare their students as best they can so that these students will be highly employable in the job market. As put by Evans, (2002: 1) "universities are there to teach students and award degrees; and society need a qualified workforce."

As concern about university graduates unemployment rate heightens, the Minister of Human Resources Malaysia, Datuk Seri Fong Chan Onn advised undergraduates "to place emphasis on developing soft skills like communications and language as well as adopting a right working culture – do not hesitate to learn things hands-on and be willing to work hard and to learn new skills, and to tackle work related challenges." The same advice is also given by Ahmad Shabery, the Foreign Ministry Parliamentary Secretary, who said that "university students need to work on their 'soft skills' like interpersonal relations, public speaking, leadership, report writing and crisis management." (Chow, 2006)

In spite of globalization and the wide spread use on English in almost every areas of the modern life, standard of English among Malaysian students continues to decline. Universities are still producing graduates who cannot speak English and this will lead to greater dilemmas in future when these graduates attempt to seek employment. It not only prevents these graduates from securing jobs but also

prevent them from contributing to the society as a whole. To curb this social distress, the government of Malaysia has been contributing much effort to improve the levels of English of Malaysian students. Among their latest efforts is the teaching of Mathematics and Science subjects in English in schools in hope that the students get more exposure to the English language before they venture further into higher education or the job market. Though of late there are much pressure from the general public for the government to reconsider this implementation and revert to the initial state, many parties still recognizes the immediate need to emphasise the mastery of the English language to prepare Malaysian students for better future job prospects.

Higher learning institutions face the daunting task of having to produce graduates that are all rounded and valuable to the job market. Apart from providing them with academic knowledge, moral and ethical values, these higher learning institutions are also expected to equip students with English language skills that could help them to market themselves to prospective employer. Though there is no denying that exam results play an important role, students who are not equipped with the skills to secure the opportunities offered in the job market would not have the chance to prove their employability to the prospective employers and subsequently contribute their knowledge to the society as a whole. Hence, a missed opportunity for all parties concerned.

Indeed possessing good English language skills is not the only concern of both universities and students. Much has been said about graduates' inability to secure jobs due to their lack of social skills in addition to poor communication skills. Employers seek future employees that could blend well into their companies and businesses. They required highly skilled man power and people who possess great abilities in interacting with clients, collaborating with colleagues, and communicating

with the management. All these social skills are part of what language classroom should provide to students instead of just language skills per se.

There has been considerable interest as to how social skills can be included into the curriculum and syllabuses of English language classrooms. Many practitioners strive to include social skills that would ease students' transition into the real world. Ideas such as group work, task-based instruction and project work have been tried and tested. The main concern now is to see if these methods and strategies are reaping the rewards and whether they are really effective.

It is for this very important reason that this study analyses the use of task-based group project in the English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) Course in a higher learning institution. The English for Occupational Course's main focus is in equipping future graduates with vital generic workplace English communication skills needed for them to function well in their future job arenas. The main aim of the study is to investigate whether the use of task-based group project is more effective than conventional methods of teaching. Additionally, the study will also seek to obtain students' perceptions towards the use of task-based group project work in the EOP course. All these would lend support to the use of task-based group project in the EOP classroom.

There has been many issues regarding the employability of graduates and what is most vital is the need to ensure that the English courses offered by universities, especially those that helps to prepare students for future work place needs, are studied extensively. It is also crucial that the students' opinions be taken into considerations in the implementation of the said courses. Hence a survey of the students' perception in the use of group work project is imperative in evaluating the desirability and value of the course in preparing the students with the English language communication skills that would later prove to be priceless in securing jobs.

Universities have the duty of grooming their graduates with English language skills that would ease the graduate's transition into the job arena. How can this function be fulfilled by the universities? One way for this to be possible is through the inclusion of English for Occupational Purposes in English courses offered in the Universities. The offering of such courses can bring about much benefit to the students. As a means to prepare students to face the communication needs in the workplace, it is vital that they be exposed to conditions where they are required to communicate in situations that approximate real world settings. The problem here is to create a English language classroom that could simulate the environment of the workplace. The researcher hence sees the merit in including a task-based group work project in EOP courses to conjure up a language classroom condition that would help expose and train students accordingly.

1.2 Background of the study

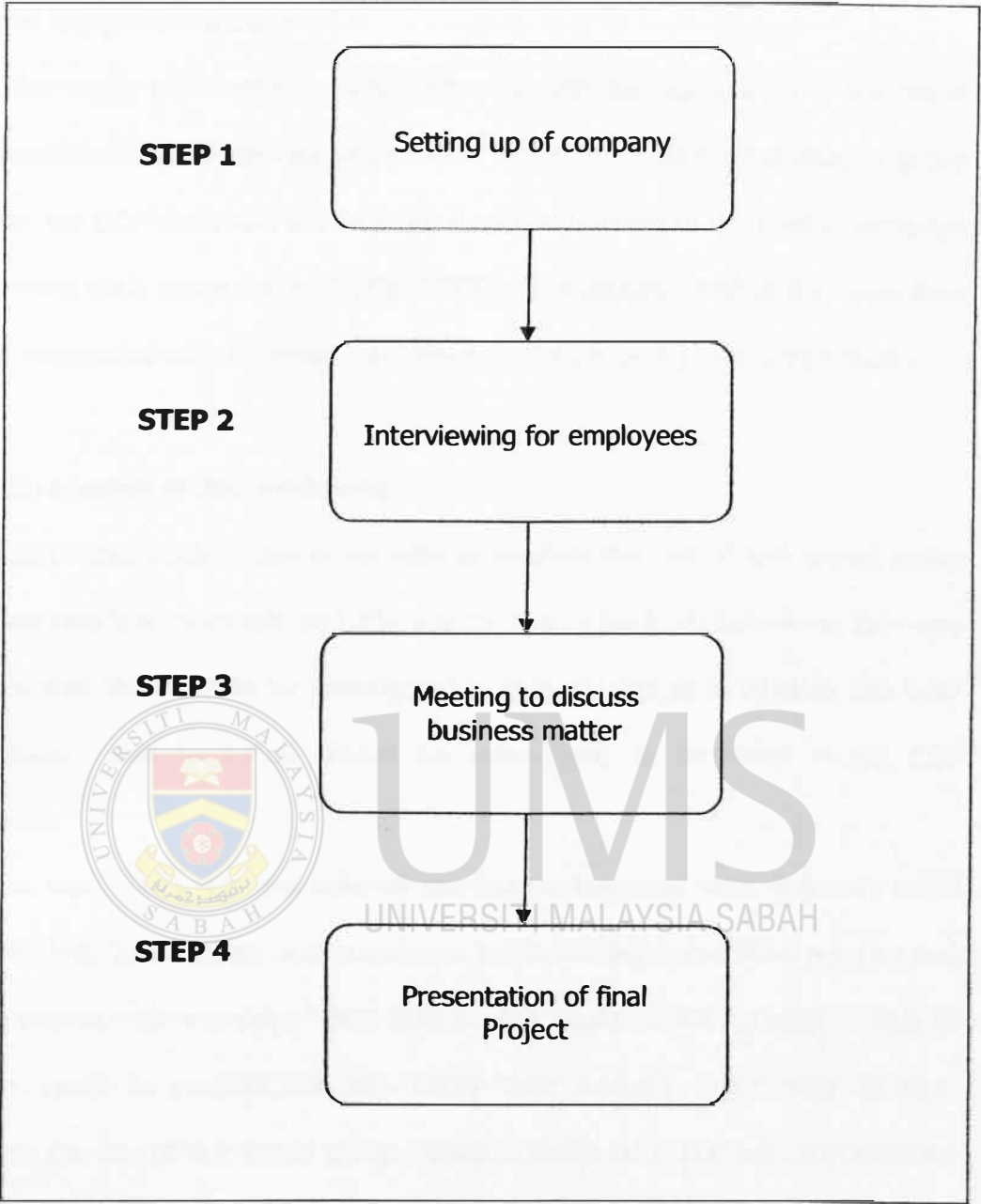
Surprisingly, despite having numerous studies and researches done on the use of task-based group work and project work, research and study on the use of these methods in ESP remains quite limited. Due to the reason that this area is still largely unexplored, especially in the Malaysian context, the researcher strongly sees the need for further and deeper investigation. It would also justify the need and necessity of having this research conducted to spark interest in this approach of English language teaching. It is necessary to first establish whether the inclusion of the task-based group project approach is desirable in an EOP course. At the same time, it is important to investigate if the use of task-based group project method reaps better results compared to the conventional methods of teaching the EOP course in terms of students' language skills performance. At the same time, student's perceptions have to be taken into consideration when implementing task-based

group project work in the EOP classroom to see whether students value and favour this method of learning. Since students are the main participants in any language learning classroom, their opinions regarding this method of teaching and learning should be given weightage.

This study will focus on the implementation of a group project method in English for Occupational Purposes course in Universiti Malaysia Sabah. The group project is characterized by the use the task based approach and an on-going theme for the whole project where students' discussions, activities and tasks all revolves around a main project that they will need to initiate at the beginning of the course and complete successfully at the end of the EOP course.

In the group project, students are required to set up a new company from scratch. The group begins with an idea of the company or business that they wish to set up. Later, they will proceed to oversee the operation of the business and conduct language activities that revolve around their newly established companies. The brief framework of the project work is as presented in Figure 1.1 on the next page.

Figure 1.1: The Task-Based Group Project Framework



As illustrated in Figure 1.1 above, the group project is an on-going project that involves students' active participation in the newly established company to ensure the ongoing success of their business. Each task or activity in the project directly contributes to the success of the project as a whole. Students are exposed to the on-going processes similar to a real business where they are required to work step by step (through tasks such as interviewing for employees, attending company's

meeting and presenting business ideas), and with other group members for successful completion of the project.

This study is therefore mainly concerned with the application of the group project method as illustrated above and aims to find out if such application of group project in the EOP classroom will facilitate students' learning of the English language by improving their scores for each of the EOP skill assessed, while at the same time develop their social skills to better equip them for future work place requirements.

1.3 Statement of the Problems

The problem this study is concerned with is whether the use of task-based group project method is a favourable and effective method in the EOP classrooms. It is very important that this problem be investigated to gain insights as to whether the task-based group project method should be encouraged to be used in the EOP classrooms.

As many graduates will need all the English language skills that they could muster to help them secure and maintain a job in future, universities need to find ways to promote the learning of EOP skills so that students' will not only be able to learn as much as possible but also enjoy their learning experiences as well. Therefore, the use of task-based group project is designed in EOP with the intention of delivering both fun and effective learning experience for the students. Nevertheless, although the task-based group project is designed to achieve these purposes, it is necessarily to investigate and gauge whether the use of task-based group project work is truly effective and whether students' perceive their learning experiences positively as they undergo the task-based group project in their EOP course.

A study done by Beckett, G (2005: 199) in Vancouver, Canada shows that "students' perceptions of project-based instruction were not uniformly positive." Some of the students who perceive the learning experience positively are those who enjoyed the fun learning experience and added opportunities to improve other skills such as using the computers, writing and doing research. Those who view the experience negatively expressed that the project based instruction was "too difficult for them" and is "too much work".

In another study by A. H. Abdul Raof and Masdinah Alauyah Md. Yusof on the English for Specific Purposes programme for civil engineering students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (2006: 144) finds that overall the learners indicated positive perception towards the ESP project work and many of the learners believe that as a result of the ESP project work, they become better English language learners.

At the same time, some of the students' problems in learning English stem from the fact that they are not able to enjoy their English lessons as they do not see the immediate relevance of the EOP skills the teacher laboriously tries to convey to them. By incorporating the task-based group project work, it is hoped that this problem can be solve. Through task-based group project work, students would be able to practice what they learn as they apply their knowledge in creating a simulation company and perform other vital workplace job functions of the created company such as interviewing, meeting and presenting their project using the English language that they acquired. The created company will act as a platform that provides a context for students to apply what they have acquired in the language classroom. This involvement in the task-based group project is anticipated as the catalyst for students to improve their EOP skills while simultaneously engage them in meaningful and enjoyable language learning experience.

If such method proves to be both favourable and effective for the students, there is then a strong urge to promote the use of this method in EOP classrooms to aid students' learning of the EOP skills to prepare them better for future work place challenges.

1.4 Research Questions

The research problems as highlighted in the previous section are posed as the research questions below:

1. Does the use of a task-based group work project approach affect students' performance in acquiring EOP language skills?
2. Is using a task-based group project work more effective than the conventional method of teaching EOP in improving students' language skills?
3. What are the students' perceptions towards the use of task-based group project in EOP course?

1.5 Aims of the Study

This research aims to investigate the effectiveness and desirability of the use of task-based group work project in an EOP course to equip students with workplace English language skills. At the same time, it will study students' perceptions towards the use of task-based group project work in English for Occupational Course.

1.6 Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are listed below:

1. To investigate whether the use of task-based group project work in EOP course affect students' performance.
2. To compare and observe whether the use of task-based group project work is more effective than the conventional method of teaching EOP skills
3. To gauge students' perception towards the use of task-based group project work in the EOP classroom.

1.7 Research Hypothesis

The hypotheses of this study are stated as below:

- Ho1: There will be no effect of the use of the task-based group project on students' acquisition of EOP language skills.
- Ho2: The use of task-based group project is no better than conventional methods in improving students' EOP language skills.
- Ho3: Students' perceptions of the use of group project in the EOP course are no better than their perceptions of the use of conventional methods.

1.8 Operational Definition

This section will provide the operational definitions and clarify some of the terms that will be used in this study.

1.8.1 English for the Workplace

For the intention of this paper, English for the workplace is defined as the English language skills that are required at the workplace. It encompasses the English language competency needed to serve students' in meeting workplace

communication needs. It is sometimes also known as English for Vocational Purposes (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 6). English for Occupational Purposes may be very area specific and may be related to the requirements of a certain occupation, for example, English for Engineers. At the same time an EOP course can be quite generic where, a general EOP course deals only with the generic English language skills needed for the workplace. For example, telephoning and conducting meeting skills.

1.8.2 Employability

The operational definition of employability that will be used in this study is the ability to secure, maintain and perform well in a job. According to Knight & Yorke, (2004: 9), employability is “understood as suitability for graduate employment.” In order to be employable, graduates should possess specialized knowledge and personal and social attributes that are desirable in the job market. The Work Experience Group, 2002 concluded that “many of the skills required for success in work are the same as those needed for success in life more generally” (Knight & Yorke, 2004: 8). This is hardly a fact that could be disputed upon. In order to achieve success in the society, a person needs to be both knowledgeable and able to work with other society members. This will ensure that all tasks undertaken can be completed effectively hence contributing to the person’s accomplishment in serving the society as a whole.

1.8.3 Task-based instruction

The term task-based instruction is “an umbrella for a variety of different pairwork and group work (PW/GW) task types, whose purposes can be

broadly classified under 'independent collaboration' and/or 'communication' (Bruton, 2002: 280). This definition by Bruton, 2002 is the one that will be used for the operational definition of the term "task-based" for the purpose of this research. Generally, task-based instruction is concerned with the performance of tasks through working and interacting with others towards the common goal of completing the assigned task successfully. Communication and collaboration are very important aspects in task-based instruction as the successful completion of the activity relates very much to the participants' ability to work effectively with one another. This is the aspect that is most valuable for any language learning to take place.

1.8.4 Project Work

In this study, project work is defined as "a language socialization activity" (Beckett, 2005) that merges linguistics and social knowledge and skills in the carrying out of a series of tasks. In this study, the term project work involves all activities in the language classroom that requires the students' active participation in planning, researching, reflecting, problem solving, negotiating, justifying and presenting ideas by using the English language.

1.8.5 Performance

As this research seeks to understand whether the use of task-based group project work affects students' performance, there is a need to clarify what performance in this study means. The term performance here refers to the students' results or specifically, the scores that they get for the EOP skills that they are tested on. If students' scores are higher when they participate in the task-based group project work compared to students who learn through the