Roi Et Rajabhat University

RERU ICET 4

New Normal

May 21st, 2021

Proceedings

The 4 Roi Et Rajabhat University National and International Conference on Education and Technology Research 2021: New Normal

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Project-Based Learning (PBL): The Implementation of Sentence Patterns to Improve Learners' English Competency

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the quality of implementing Project-Based Learning on the English sentence patterns necessary for the TOEIC Incomplete Sentences Session by shedding more light on the sentence (clause) elements within each sentence structure, in a variety of grammatical forms and functions. The analysis was theoretically based upon *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Quirk et al. (1985), the 1800-page reference for any research with attempts to describe the syntax of the English language and the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English by* Biber et al (2007)*, a reference inclusive of an extensive corpus analysis. 162 third-year students enrolling in the TOEIC preparation during academic term1/2020, Aviation Personnel Development Institute, Kasem Bundit University, were selected as the participants of this study by convenience sampling. The students' references (summary) of the target contents instructed in class, later further researched systematically aligning with feedback were descriptively analysed, suggesting that students were able to realise and analyse problems and difficulties hampering efforts to score better on the TOEIC part 5. This was ascertained by the percentages of the pre & post scores indicating that 92.60% of the participants scored better on the post-test while only 7.40% of them scored lower, and the TOEIC Reading Comprehension accounting for 63 % of participants with increased scores and 37% with decreased scores. The recommendations of using PBL to implement reading strategies for the TOEIC Reading Comprehension Part 7 and using a one-group, pre/post test methodology were suggested for further studies to help support more concrete findings.

Keywords: Sentence Patterns, Clause Elements, Project-Based Leaning

Introduction

Now that the English language is, no doubt, an indispensable medium for all professions, especially in cross-cultural and transitional settings, job candidates are required to submit a proof of their English proficiency when seeking a job. Among these, TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication is on the top list. According to ETS, the TOEIC program has been a standardised tool for assessing English-language skills needed in the workplace for more than 40 years, widely used around the world, with 14,000+ organizations across more than 160 countries trusting TOEIC scores to make decisions. Particularly in the EFL context, Thailand was ranked the second lowest out of 49 countries containing 500 or more test takers scoring on the TOEIC with a national mean of 485, on the TOEIC Listening & Reading Test (ETS, 2019). Nevertheless, 53% of Thais were reported to sit the test for the purpose of job applications; a percentage surpassed only by test takers in Costa Rica at 66%.

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Significance of the Problem

Having instructed the TOEIC preparation courses for learners in higher education, the researcher has realised that students enrolling in TOEIC preparation courses, academic year 2019, scored lower on the test with the mean score of 285 when compared with a national mean of 485.

Accordingly, a needs survey was carried out among 162 students. They considered Reading Comprehension, mainly the TOEIC part 5 (Incomplete Sentences), on which area most takers worldwide scored low, more challenging and, therefore, needing improvement.

English Sentence Patterns (Central Elements of the Clause)

Quirk et al. (1985) write that the form-function distinction is relatively crucial to analysing the constituency of the clauses and that the main verb is core, wholly or largely determining certain valencies (often called clause patterns).

Likewise, Biber et al. (2007), hereafter LGSWE, developed the earlier work of Quirk et al. (1985), hereafter CGEL, by examining 37,000 texts with 40 million words in British and American English. Biber and his colleagues embrace the older grammatical classification of verb uses, distinguishing one-place verbs (combining with a subject only), two-place verbs (combining with a subject and another element), and three-place verbs (combining with a subject and two other elements) when analysing the main clause patterns.

Taking into account the same observation, a clause embedded in a larger structure by a subordinating conjunction is considered a **dependent** clause (**subordinate** clause) and is analysed according to that of the main clause pattern. According to *LGSWE*, there are two types of embedded clauses, termed either **finite** or **non-finite.**

Finite Dependent Clauses

Biber et al. (2007) categorise **nominal** clauses, **adverbial** clauses and **adjectival or relative** clauses into finite dependent of a type in which it is marked by a subordinator or a *wh*-word and contains subject-verb concord.

Non-Finite Clauses

Non-Finite Clauses are, however, not embedded. Neither carrying a subject-verb agreement nor a clause link, they are loosely integrated into the main clause and, therefore, considered dependent. **Infinitive** Clauses, **Ing**-clauses and **Ed**-clauses are non-finite yet play very crucial roles in the English Grammar.

Biber et al. (2007), however, conclude that the grammatical roles of either finite or non-finite dependent clauses are varied according to certain types of the verb phrases they are closely associated with. There is no overt distinction whether particular elements should be considered constituents or parts of other structures. Therefore, the research in this paper will shed more light on main clause elements constituting the sentence.

The fruitful benefits of implementing **Project-Based Learning** (PBL) in EFL context are supported by many research studies, which found that employing a PBL process and a product-oriented approach brought about student-centeredness whereby learners plan, develop alignment with their teacher's facilitation, and finally create their works, learning cooperation along with sharing information

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and giving feedback (Thuan, 2018). PBL could also assist the development of low-medium English learners with target contents (Simson, 2011). Furthermore, while learning using a PBL approach, students had positive attitudes while their cooperative skills and motivation were being enhanced (Ballentyne, 2016).

The researcher has also noticed that all materials selected for the previous TOEIC preparation courses deal with grammar and vocabulary but the structures of sentences. Despite having the very knowledge to some extent, students are unlikely to realise how sentences are constructed. Taking all these into consideration, the emphasis of this study is placed upon the implementation of sentence patterns through PBL Approach to help students tackle with the TOEIC part 5 (Incomplete Sentences), examining the sentence (hereafter clause) elements as well as their functions more effectively.

Research Questions

1. What are the sentence patterns found problematic when taking the TOEIC part 5?

2. Can the project-based learning approach help to improve learners' English competency resulting in having better TOEIC Reading Comprehension scores?

Research Methodology

Participants:

The participants of this study were 162 third-year students of Airline Business, Aviation Personnel Development Institute, Kasem Bundit University. All enrolled in the TOEIC preparation during academic term1/2020 and, hence, were selected by convenience. The participants' English competency was rather low with the Reading Comprehension mean score of 109.

Data Collection

This research paper was conducted throughout a 15-week course within one academic term, 1/2020. All 162 students enrolling in the TOEIC preparation course were taught the English sentence patterns though Project-Based Learning. There were 6 stages to this procedure.

Week 1

Stage 1: A needs survey was sent out to the participants questioning what part on the Reading Comprehension they needed to improve. The result showed that the TOEIC part 5 (Incomplete Sentences) was the one most of their concern.

Week 2

Stage 2: A pretest was conducted to find students' most frequently missed test items carrying problematic sentence patterns inclusive of clause elements (see Table 1)

Stage 3: Project-Based learning was introduced to the class after having them know their most frequently missed questions.

Stage 4: Each group of five was given a topic based on their interest for their Project-Based Learning outcome.

Week 3 – Week 14

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State 5: Students created and developed their own reference (summary) of the target contents instructed in class, aligned with their own research synthesising information systematically retrieved from reliable sources, following Project- Based Learning with frequent feedback.

Week 15

Stage 6: By the end of the 15-week course, a posttest carrying the same test items on the pretest was conducted to examine students' competency on the target knowledge.

Target Contents of the Lessons

INTRANSITIVE (one-place verbs combining with a subject only), followed by no obligatory element and occurring in type **SV**, as in, *Someone was laughing.*

Monotransitive (two-place verbs combining with a subject and another element), occurring in type **SVO**, as in, *My mother enjoys parties.*

Ditransitive (three-place verbs combining with a subject and two other elements), occurring in type **SVOO**, as in, *Marry gave a visitor a glass of milk.*

Complextransitive (three-place verbs combining with a subject and two other elements), occurring in type **SVOC**, as in, *Most people consider these books rather expensive* and type **SVOA**, as in, *You must put all the toys upstairs.*

COPULAR/LINKING (two-place verbs combining with a subject and another element), followed by a subject complement or an adverbial and occurring in type **SVC**, as in *The country became independent* and type **SVA**, as in *I have been in the garden.* (Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 2007)

Data Analysis

The students' summary of the target contents categorised systematically, were further descriptively analysed by examining the students' ability to identify central clause elements and their functions associated with certain verbs. The percentages of the pre & post scores consisting of test items on the English sentence patterns and the TOEIC Reading scores were utilised to establish more concrete results.

Results

Table 1: Most Missed Test Items of Pre & Post Tests

Most Missed Test Items	Pre-Post
Someone was laughing. **SV.** *L*was laughing. **SV.**	36/12
Raising funds for a cancer charity still goes. **SV.** *To raise funds for a cancer charity* still goes. **SV.**	135/128

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That we cannot find alternative resources continues. **SV.** *Why we cannot find alternative resources* continues. **SV.**	150/136
My sister is eating a *cake.* **SVO.** My sister is eating *it.* **SVO.**	15/3
I remembered *to finish the project within one month.* **SVO.** I remembered *finishing the project within one month.* **SVO.**	120/96
I don't understand *what he's saying*. **SVO.** I don't understand *why he's saying such.* **SVO.**	112/45
Marry told *him* the objectives of this project. **SVOO.** Marry told *John* the objectives of this project. **SVOO.**	65/24
If you had told me *that you were coming*, I would have picked you up. **SVOO.** If you had told me *when you were coming*, I would have picked you up. **SVOO.**	112/85
I heard you *sing*. **SVOC.** I heard you *singing*. **SVOC.**	156/92
I call him *John*. **SVOC** We entitled this project *the power of women*. **SVOC.**	149/84
We voted John *the project manager*. **SVOC.** We elected him *the Prime Minister*. **SVOC.**	141/76
The manager wanted someone *to finish this project*. **SVOC.** The manager had *this project finished*. **SVOC.**	145/80
We find this project *what we need to finish first*. **SVOC.** We consider John *who we look up to most*. **SVOC.**	153/84
You must put all the toys *upstairs*. **SVOA.** You must put all of them *here*. **SVOA.**	45/29
John placed all documents *on the table*. **SVOA.** John preferred his money *in a bank.* **SVOA.**	113/74
I will keep my car *where it was this morning*. **SVOA.** I will get John *wherever he wants to go*. **SVOA.**	76/32
To finish this project seems *easy*. **SVC.** Finishing this project sounds *easy*. **SVC.**	128/46

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The first task is *to conduct a needs analysis.* **SVC.** The first task is *conducting a needs analysis.* **SVC.**	**155/68**
He has become who *we look up to most.* **SVC.** The problem remains *that we cannot find more budgets. SVC.*	**152/58**
Our boss is *outside.* **SVA.** He is *there.* **SVA.**	**68/26**
This road leads *to Bangkok.* **SVA.** He is sitting *under the tree.*	**112/86**
I have always been *where I was born.* **SVA.** He has always lived where *I was born.* **SVA.**	**139/95**

Table 1 shows test items on sentence patterns inclusive of elements at word, phrase and clause levels that students missed on the pre and post tests. The results suggested that a majority of students got the questions in sentence pattern SVOC and pattern SVC wrong at all levels. Students also had difficulties understanding infinitives, gerunds and noun clauses functioning as either a subject or an object in pattern SV and pattern SVO. Like other sentence patterns, finite dependent clauses encountered in SVOO, SVOA and SVA were also reported problematic.

Table 2: Pre & Post Test Score Comparisons

Pretest Scores (22)	Posttest Scores (22)	Scores Increased	Scores Decreased
19-21=0	19-21=3		
16-18=5	16-18=21		
13-15=14	13-15=38		
10-12=25	10-12=49		
07-09=28	07-09=16	07-09=26	
04-06=78	04-06=35	04-06=52	04-06=1
01-03=12	01-03=0	01-03=72	01-03=11
162 students = 100%	**162 students = 100%**	**150 Students = 92.60%**	**12 students = 7.40%**

Table 2 shows a comparison of pre & post test scores in which 78 out of 162 students initially scored mostly between 4 and 6 out of 22 marks, and 12 of them scored relatively low between 1 and 3 marks; whereas, a majority of 49 students scored in the post test between 10 and 12 marks, leaving no one with scores between 1 and 3 marks. The results also show that 150 students or 92.60% scored better on the post-test while a minority of 12 students or 7.40% scored lower.

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Table3 TOEIC Reading Score Changes

Pre-Test Reading Scores (495)	Post-Test Reading Scores (495)	Scores Increased	Scores Decreased
350-395=0	350-395=1		
300-345=0	300-345=0		
250-295=1	250-295=1		
200-245=1	200-245=5		
150-195=17	150-195=16		
100-145=87	100-145=92	100-145=1	
50-95=56	50-95=47	50-95=23	
05-45=0	05-45=0	05-45=78	05-45=60
162 students = 100%	162 students = 100%	102 students = 63 %	60 students = 37%

Table 3 shows the TOEIC Reading Comprehension scores between academic term 2/2019 and academic term 1/2020. A comparison indicated that 102 students or 63 % with increased TOEIC RC scores outweighed the 60 students or 37% with decreased scores.

Table 4 Students' Compilation of Central Clause Elements: Class Work

S	V	DO	ID DO	OC	SC
Noun Pronoun Infinitive Gerund Noun Clause	Intransitive (Adverbials)				
	Monotransitive	Noun Pronoun Infinitive Gerund Noun Clause (Adverbials)			
	Ditransitive		Noun Pronoun Noun Clause		
	Complextransitive	Noun Pronoun Infinitive		Adj, N, Pro, Infinitives,	

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		Gerund Noun Clause		Present & Past Participles, Noun Clause	
	Copular/Linking				Adj, N, Pro, Inf, Gerund Noun Clause

Table 4 shows central clause elements at all word, phrase and clause levels (core parts), researched and compiled by all groups of students and completed as a single class work. In contradiction to previous literature (Quirk et al. 1985; Biber et al. 2007), this compilation indicates that adverbials (word, phase, and clause) are peripheral and therefore additional to sentence patterns SV(A) and SVO(A). It likewise illustrates students' ability to recognise functions of central clause elements encountered in the aforementioned sentence patterns. Appearantly, students displayed understanding on the finite verbs followed by certain valencies, realising that a noun, a pronoun, an infinitive, a gerund and a noun clause can function as a subject and a direct object occurring in SV(A), SVO(A), SVOC; whereas, an infinitive and a gerund are not considered either a direct object or an indirect object occurring in SVOO. Furthermore, such elements as a subject complement occurring in SVC and an object complement occurring in SVOC may vary depending on the subtypes of the finite verbs. Students further categorised both copular/linking and complextransitive verbs sharing the same attributes whether current/be relationship (often stative verbs) or resulting/become relationship (often dynamic verbs); accordingly, the clause elements functioning as subject and object compliments are only found identifying (often definite nouns, sometimes noun equivalents) or characterising (often adjectives, sometimes adjective equivalents) a subject in SVC or an object in SVOC.

Discussion

According to Tables 1 and 4, it can be interpreted that more than 100 students had very limited knowledge on sentence pattern SVOC and pattern SVC. The major cause would be the lack of understanding of types of finite verbs followed by certain valencies. Unsurprisingly, those who answered test items on pattern SV and pattern SVO wrongly had no difficulty recognising a noun or a pronoun as either a subject or an object. The problem arose when such noun equivalents were larger constructions as infinitive, gerund and noun clause. Lastly, nominal clauses found in SVOO and adverbial clauses encountered as SVOA and SVA were of great trouble due to the length and complexity of the embedded finite clauses joined by a subordinating conjunction.

Consequently, after having been taught sentence patterns following the PBL approach, students were systematically capable of creating their own summary of the target knowledge acquired. Tables 2 and 3 likewise indicate that PBL practically improves students' English competency, assisting 150 students increase scores on the post test and 102 students who scored better on the TOEIC Reading Comprehension.

Conclusion

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PBL used in class to teach the target knowledge can be considered a very useful instrument as it involves student-centeredness and team-cooperation to achieve learners' learning goals. Therefore, it is expected to be useful for those, especially low-medium English learners, who are struggling with the TOEIC Incomplete Sentences (Part 5). A major limitation of this study was not being able to implement reading strategies for the TOEIC Reading Comprehension Part 7 through PBL within one academic term. Another was the use of a one-group, pre/post test methodology. Therefore, further studies are recommended.

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