

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter is divided into five main parts. The first part provides a brief summary of the research study. The second part discusses the important issues found in the study in relation to theories and relevant background literature. The third part concludes the study findings. The fourth part describes the implications of the findings, and the final part presents the recommendations for further research.

#### Summary

The main objective of the study was to investigate the effects of the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach in enhancing Thai EFL undergraduate students' oral communication ability. This research employed the one-group pre-test-post-test research design which compared the same group of subjects' oral communication ability before and after the treatment. The Simulation Oral Communication Test or the Group Project Simulation Task (GPST) was utilized to measure the students' oral communication ability. The two sets of scoring criteria band scales—the Analytical Rubric for the General Oral Communication and The Analytical Rubric for Oral Presentation—were designed to evaluate the students' oral ability in the GPST test. A paired sample *t*-test was used to compare the mean scores of each student on the pre-test and post-test to determine whether there was any improvement in their oral communication ability and oral presentation ability after the implementation of the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach. A paired sample *t*-test was also used to determine whether the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test were significantly different at the level of 0.05. Additionally, the qualitative research methodology was used in data collection and data analysis. The results derived from the qualitative methods were utilized to triangulate and increase the breadth and depth of the quantitative findings. More importantly, they were used to shed light on the pattern of variability found in individual students' oral linguistic and non-linguistic performances as well as their opinions toward project work instruction.

The subjects of this study were 22 KU undergraduate students who were enrolled in the course entitled 'Listening and Speaking I' in the first semester of the academic year 2006. Four to five students were randomly selected to form fixed groups, which remained intact all through the semesters, for all projects. The pre-test was administered before the implementation of the oral English communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach. The average oral communication ability scores of every group of students were quite similar at  $47.11\% \pm 4.5\%$ . Later on, the students were taught by the researcher using the 15-week project work instruction designed based on the findings from the students' needs analysis and the Project-based Learning Approach. The class met every Wednesday for three consecutive hours during which the students had a chance to practice the language and skills necessary for developing, presenting, and evaluating projects individually, in pairs, and in groups in the first three weeks. Then, they completed the three projects within the remaining 11 weeks. All students were also required to complete the learner logs during the course of instruction, and the diary of the students' performances was recorded by the researcher. When the students finished the last project, they were post-tested using the GPST which was the same test as the pre-test in the last week of the instruction to measure their oral communication ability after the treatment. The opinion questionnaire was also distributed to the students to collect data regarding their opinions towards the project work instruction. Finally, the students in the focus group were individually interviewed.

To assess the students' oral communication gain scores, the average scores from the pre-test and post-test were compared. The students' performances were also assessed by using the evidence collected from the three qualitative instruments—learner logs, student interviews, and teacher's diary to triangulate the results from the GPST oral test. The explanation of the quantitative and qualitative data will be explained in more detail as follows.

The result of the paired sample *t*-test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test scores and the post-test scores. In other words, it was found that the English oral communication ability of the subjects was enhanced after the implementation of the project work instruction. The results from the analysis of the learner logs, student interviews, and the teacher's diary revealed the same finding that the project work instruction was effective in enhancing the students' oral communication ability. Most of the students indicated in the learner

logs and the interviews that they were able to improve comprehensibility, pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary in the general oral communication category. However, the results from the analysis of the teacher's diary indicated that most students improved all skills in the general oral communication category which included grammar. The analysis of the qualitative data also indicated that the students' overall oral presentation ability was improved, especially pronunciation, fluency, and content.

Apart from the improvement of oral linguistic ability, project work offered other benefits to the students. The findings from this study revealed that the students' motivation to practice oral communication was increased. Besides, the students' working skills were improved as the interpersonal relationships were established while they were working as a group. They were able not only to develop their working skills but to make use of these skills to accomplish the project goal as well.

In brief, the evidence from the test scores and the qualitative findings indicated that the students successfully improved their overall oral communication ability and had positive opinions toward project work instruction. However, it is worth noting that some students pointed out the drawbacks of the project work. Some commented that they did not see any improvement in their grammar after learning with this method, while others perceived that project work was too time-consuming for them; thus, the engagement in project work meant less time to fulfil other course requirements or personal obligations.

## **Discussion of findings**

### **1. The effects of project work instruction on development of oral communication ability**

As mentioned earlier, the results of the comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores revealed that the students' oral communication scores increased with statistical significance after they completed the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach. One plausible explanation for the increase in the students' post-test scores, which signified the positive effects of the project work instruction in enhancing language learners' oral communication ability, is the enabling characteristics of the Project-based Learning Approach which facilitate oral

language development. These enabling characteristics of the Project-based Learning Approach are as follows:

1. Project work provides opportunity to engage in language interaction.

Interaction is an important factor in improving EFL learners' oral ability as stated by Rivers (1987: xiii) that "communication derives essentially from interaction." As previously mentioned, the two functions of spoken language are interactional and transactional. The primary intention of the interactional function is to maintain social relationships, while that of the transactional is to convey information and ideas. Interaction plays an important role in foreign language learning by providing learners with the meaningful communication situations and environment, so it would be the key to teaching oral language for communication.

In this study, as the students were engaged in the first two stages of the project process—to agree on a theme or topic and to determine the final outcome, the situations that required the students to interact with their peers and the teacher during discussions were created. Although the communication occurred in the classroom, it was a meaning-focused activity. The meaningful conversations were in the social contexts when the students exchanged the information through discussion and possible negotiation. The similar environment was also created during the third and fourth stages when the students structured the project and planned all the steps of the project in details in small groups, and they needed interaction to complete the tasks. They learned to listen to others, to talk with others, and to negotiate meaning in shared contexts. Consequently, their oral communication skills developed through the interaction during the first four stages of the project.

After planning, the students moved further to stage five to collect the information that they had planned. Having interaction with English speakers to gather the needed data, the students had the opportunities to exchange the messages with the English interlocutors, especially the expert and native speakers. Examples of this included interviewing foreign tourists on the topic "Seven wonders of the world" and interviewing the managers in order to gather the information about expected employees from the employers' perspective for the third project. In doing so, the students learned to convey their intentions and retrieve information through real-life communication, the situation in which the students incorporated their grammatical

competence with discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; and Swain, 1984) to further develop their communicative competence. As a result, they were able to improve their oral communication ability in the language-promoting interactions.

Apart from interaction with expert users of the target language, the students were able to develop this particular ability while engaging in a conversation with their peers and other people they talked to. When the students became involved in casual conversations with others using the target language, both in and out of the classroom settings, such as talking about the weather, music, sports events, etc., they created senses of social communion with their peers. Accordingly, the students' oral communication ability was further enhanced through this kind of conversation.

Project work is an effective interactive instruction that involves learners in using English for a variety of communicative purposes. It provides learners with the intensive exposure to the authentic language or real-life conversations in the real-world situations in which learners interact with each other in natural behavior. Hitotuzi (2008) investigated the effects of interaction tasks on learners' communication and found that learners who were engaged in meaningful interactions tasks had better interlanguage communication. Another study by McDonough (2004) which explored the use of pair and small group activities in the language classroom with undergraduate students in the Thai EFL context revealed a similar result. The study also investigated whether the students who actively participated during the pair and small group activities showed improved production of the English forms. The results indicated that the students who had more participation during the pair and small group activities demonstrated improved production of the English forms, even though they did not perceive the activities as useful for learning the language.

However, research evidence has revealed a conflicting finding when it comes to the ESP context. For instance, Eguchi and Eguchi (2006) report the failure of project-based learning on EFL students' communication indicating that the English magazine projects were an enjoyable experience for the students, but they did not have a strong positive effect on students' English speaking and writing abilities. The author explains that the use of L1 in the classroom and the lack of natural contact with English speakers outside of the classroom were the main reasons for such failure. However, despite such findings, the results of Eguchi and Eguchi's study yield further support to the assumption that the lack of interaction in the target language is the key

to the failure in foreign language learning, whereas the interaction tasks that allow students to communicate orally and meaningfully in the target language will promote students' oral communication ability, as also pointed by Earl (1986) and Rust et al. (2003).

Brown and Yule (1983) explain that language can be seen as having two functions: transferring information or *transactional function*, and establishing as well as maintaining social relationships as called *interactional function*. They suggest the idea that interactional language is "listener oriented," but transactional language is "message oriented" and that what the learners who intend to develop the communicative competence need more is the learning of both functions. However, the learners should develop more on transactional language if they intend to improve their oral communication ability, but the interactional function should not be neglected. As the students in this study were participating in the whole class discussions, small group discussions, and all kinds of interaction with English speakers whether they were teachers, peers, or expert users of the language, they were listening and exchanging information with the interlocutors. They learned to receive the information, process and decode the message, and respond to it by transferring the information across verbally. They also learned the social relationship to continue a smooth conversation during the course of the conversation. Through and with project work instruction, the students developed the ability to transfer the information or the transactional function as well as the ability to maintain social relationships—interactional function or transactional function—in real-life situations. Therefore, the students improved their transactional and interactional oral communication ability after learning in the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach.

## 2. Project work offers scaffolding-rich learning environment.

The study findings confirmed the benefits language learners can reap from an appropriate use of scaffolding in language instruction. As suggested by Bruner (1966), the curriculum in the present study was organized in a spiral manner so that the students could continually build upon what they had already learned. Put another way, the students were offered a series of scaffolding tasks that enabled them to construct their oral communication ability and other necessary skills useful for

organizing projects. To elaborate, the tasks in the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach were purposively designed based on the constructivism theory (Bruner, 1966, 1990), starting from the easy task in the first stage to develop the students' self-confidence and oral communication ability in the whole class discussions. Then, the students participated in a more demanding small group discussion. Later on, they interacted with the English speakers in the real-world situations to collect the data that they planned for in advance, which was even more demanding in terms of language. An example of such spiral series of task was when the students, after participating in small group discussions, interviewed two native English speakers who volunteered to work for a charitable foundation to assist early-age candidates to elicit information to be subsequently presented to the class. When attempting to carry out demanding tasks like this, the students were able to successfully increase their oral communication ability as well as other learning skills from their scaffolding-rich project work instruction.

The other form of scaffolding that took place in the present study was when the students were put into mixed-ability groups according to their levels of language proficiency. The sociocultural theory of learning is associated with Vygotsky's ideas about learning in a social context and the construct of Zone of Proximal Development that is used to explain the difference between the level of independence problem solving performance of the low ability students and the more capable peers. In this study, each study group was composed of one low oral ability learner, two to three average oral ability learners, and one high oral ability learner. The goal of such an arrangement was to create the opportunities for the students with low oral communication ability to learn from the guidance of the more capable peers. At the same time, the more capable students could further enhance their oral fluency when they acted as a language model who continuously offered language support to their less able classmates, hence a chance to exercise their thinking process and transferring their thoughts into verbal communication. When engaging in mutual practice of receiving, decoding, processing, and responding to information orally in the target language, both the students with high and low oral communication abilities were enabled to develop their oral communication skills at their own pace and level. One instance of such provision of scaffolding was when one student reflected in her learner log how she assisted one of her low ability peer to carry on the role-play when he forgot his script by giving guiding questions to help ease his recollection.

The findings of the present study were in congruence with those reported by Ronen and Langley (2004). They explored the potential and challenges of using online submission of assignments via asynchronous networking as a strategy of providing differential scaffolding in the preparation of complex tasks, which was regarded as learning from expert peers. They found that scaffolding by providing the low ability students with opportunities to learn from higher ability peers benefited both groups of students. The low ability learners learned from the more highly capable ones when they received suggestions and guidance in terms of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge, e.g. pronunciations, vocabulary, and working skills, etc. At the same time, the higher-ability students learned from the outer resources as well as from the low ability students. They usually asked for help from the experts and native speakers of English, and they consulted the Internet websites if they themselves needed more explanations about grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Moreover, they sometimes reviewed their performances and mistakes according to their peers' as well as low ability students' comments during the reflection sessions as seen from the interview analysis. These comments encouraged higher ability students to reflect and review their previous performances for further development. As such, it can be concluded that when scaffolding is provided in the learning environment, such as one in which project work instruction is implemented, enhancement of language skills, especially oral communication skill, can take place.

### 3. Project work promotes cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning means small groups of learners working together to accomplish shared goals (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Cooperative learning primarily offers more advantages over competition and individualized learning in a wide array of learning tasks. Compared to competitive or individual work, cooperation leads to higher group and individual achievement, higher-quality reasoning strategies, more frequent transfer of these from the group to individual members, more meta-cognition, and more new ideas and solutions to the problems. From this explanation, the cooperative learning theory puts an emphasis on the social dimension for improving learners in various aspects and is developed based on the social constructivism theory.



Johnson and Johnson (1989) emphasize that cooperative learning cannot be obtained by merely putting learners in groups and letting them go. There need to be at least 'three conditions' that lead to successful cooperation. Firstly, learners must see themselves as positively interdependent so that they take a personal responsibility for working to achieve group goals. Secondly, learners must engage in considerable face-to-face interaction in which they help one another, share resources, give constructive feedback to one another, challenge other members' reasoning and ideas, keep an open mind, act in a trustworthy manner, and promote a feeling of safety to reduce anxiety of all members. Lastly, effective group process skills are necessary for the first two to prevail. In fact, group skills are never mastered unless learners continually 'reflect' on their interactions and 'evaluate' their cooperative work. While group work aims at achieving common goals, each member fulfills a particular role or accomplishes an individual task. Then, both group and individual improvement will be developed simultaneously.

The findings from the present study showed that all students agreed that cooperative learning was a factor that helped improve their learning. The students perceived that they had to be responsible for their own work as can be seen from the final product presentation. They understood that the presentation could never be delivered if only one member of the group had not been responsible for his/her own work as everyone had to take a role in each presentation, and he/she needed to practice with the other members of the group before giving the final presentation to reduce possible mistakes and increase the quality of the presentation. In this study, the group work tasks provided the students with ample opportunities to learn cooperatively to do most of the tasks. Put another way, project work did offer the students the three conditions that led to successful cooperation. In this study, the students were responsible for their own learning as well as for driving the group towards the goals which could be seen from the successful oral presentations. The students also engaged in the face-to-face interaction and benefited from constructive feedback from both the teacher and their peers in the reflection sessions. In addition, they were able to reflect on and evaluate their own performances when they completed their learner logs for their further development. Due to such ample opportunities for learning cooperation, the students were able to learn how to develop their oral communication skills as well as other learning and interpersonal skills.

Similar findings have been reported in the study of Tinker et al. (1999) which compared the effects of transmission learning versus cooperative learning in facilitating English language development in three Hong Kong secondary schools. The findings showed that there were no significant differences in the oral performance between the experimental and control groups. The students indicated that the teachers were taking too much time to set up the task and that the teachers should spend less time preparing the students with the structure and vocabulary needed for completing the tasks. More time should also be devoted to the students for discussion, interaction, and getting the feedback in small group tasks. Such evidence revealed the reason why this study was a failure. It might be because of the so-called cooperative tasks in the study, which, in fact, deprived the students of the opportunities to be responsible for their own learning, to discuss and to interact in groups, and to reflect on their own performances due to the time limitation and the design of the tasks. The results from Tinker's study confirmed the notion that cooperative learning should contain at least three conditions which would lead to an effective cooperation, which in turn would result in successful language learning and teaching.

Success of the implementation of cooperative learning was reported in the study conducted by Liang (2002) to investigate the effects of cooperative learning on Taiwanese EFL junior high school learners' oral communication ability and motivation toward learning English as a foreign language. The findings revealed that the experimental students' oral communication scores as well as the motivation toward learning English as a foreign language were significantly higher than those of the control students. Thus, based on the findings of the present study and Liang's study, it could be concluded that cooperative learning is a factor influencing not only development of language learners' oral communication ability but also enhancement of motivation toward learning provided that cooperative learning tasks are carefully designed and appropriately implemented.

#### 4. Project work is an important source of learning motivation.

According to Day and Bamford (1998), motivation makes learners decide to do or not to do something. It is generally accepted that one of the best learning situations is the situation in which learners enjoy doing something. To be more exact, the best learning situation is one in which learners have the motivation to learn.

Positive motivation is the key to successful language learning, and the findings of the present study suggested that project work is particularly useful as a means of generating this. The results from the qualitative analysis and the survey questionnaire revealed that project work was a good learning experience which increased the students' learning motivation. This can be explained in relation to the nature of project work instruction as follows:

#### A. Authentic tasks and students' responsibility

Firstly, the students' motivation was increased due to a variety of authentic tasks which were designed by the students themselves when they were involved in planning the projects in the fixed small groups. As seen from the interviews, the students responded that they spent a lot more time on planning and practicing for their presentations. To do so, the students became more responsible for their own learning and they had more motivation to complete the tasks and achieve the set goals. In addition, the students learned to motivate and help their friends learn and be responsible for their tasks because the achievement of an individual's task would eventually result in the accomplishment of the group's goal. According to Holec (1987), when learners have a chance to act as managers of their own learning, to be responsible for their own learning, and to be able to determine their own learning tasks and outcomes, they are likely to have more motivation to learn and to become more successful in learning, as evidenced by the findings of the present study.

#### B. Learning through doing

Secondly, project work is a very active medium of instruction. When project work instruction is applied, learners are not just following some instructions and completing the tasks assigned to them. Instead, they create the goals of learning, design their final product, carry out the methods of getting the desired data, collect needed information, produce scripts and visual aids, and rehearse for the final oral presentations by themselves. In brief, project work is a kind of instruction that promotes learning through doing, which is completely different from traditional teacher-centered instruction that most students are familiar with.

In this study, most students mentioned that they were willing to accept project work as a means to increase their oral communication ability. The results from the analysis of the opinion questionnaire indicated that the students strongly agreed that project work helped them improve their oral skill better than learning from a text book and that the project work encouraged them to speak or interact in English with others. The students also indicated that learning oral communication by using a text book would not be so stimulating as leaning by using project work and that the improvement in oral communication ability from learning by using a text book would not be as good as that of project work instruction because they would have less interaction, less motivation, and less participation when they were learning from a text book. On the other hand, they did experience learning by doing, having interaction, being active learners, and having more participation in all tasks in the project work instruction. As a result, the students had more motivation to learn, and they were able to achieve the goal to improve their oral communication ability successfully. Likewise, Rihova (2007) conducted a study to prove the usefulness of project work in teaching English in mixed-ability class and its influence on students' autonomy, cooperation, motivation, and communication. She discovered positive effects of project work on both the students' communication and their motivation.

### C. Sense of achievement

Lastly, project work gives a clear sense of achievement. It enables learners to produce a worthwhile product. Some students who participated in this study indicated that they were able to transfer the knowledge gained from organizing a project in the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach to organize the projects in other subject matters. Evidently, low oral ability students took pride from being a part of the group's success when they finished each project and presented the final product in front of the audience although they may not have really been able to produce an excellent oral presentation by themselves. Nevertheless, they could still contribute to the project by do something else such as constructing the Power Point Presentation or dealing with the tasks by using computer programs. Regardless of their oral communication ability, the students would take pride in making the project successful by making a good project and giving a great oral presentation. It is assumed that such sense of success will make them want to engage

more in project work, hence eventually have more chances at gradually developing their oral communication proficiency.

The findings of the present study yielded support to the findings of Rıhova (2007) that project work is a successful learning experience to all students, including the weaker or problematic learners. According to her, although it has its difficulties, working on a project can be a good opportunity for students to use English creatively and to do something different. For mixed-ability class in particular, this approach can bring many advantages. In addition to reinforcing social skills, independence, and responsibility, students of different levels of proficiency can benefit from the group work as well as positive atmosphere established during the work. When all the contributions are valued and students can express themselves, they may experience the true feeling of success and satisfaction.

However, a failure of project work instruction to promote learners' communication was reported by Eguchi and Eguchi (2006). Nevertheless, they still found that the English magazine projects used in their study was an enjoyable experience for the students who developed a sense of achievement when they were able to complete a series of tasks involved in the project. Thus, it could be concluded that regardless of the extent to which project work instruction can enhance language learners' oral communication ability, engaging in a project brings about a sense of achievement that helps establish learners' motivation to learn.

##### 5. Project work enhances learners' self-confidence.

Self-confidence refers to a mental attitude of trusting or relying on oneself. To increase self-confidence to give oral presentations in English, learners need training with step-by-step instruction. The English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach provided the tasks that enabled the students to develop their self-confidence.

In this study, the students learned and practiced effective oral presentation skills and oral presentation strategies step by step. Within the first three weeks, the students practiced giving three presentations individually. The topics of the presentations which the students were familiar with such as 'Introduce yourself,' 'News report,' and 'My favorite free-time activities' were designed to lessen students' constraints in terms of content so that they could concentrate more on practicing

delivery skills. Most of the positive oral feedbacks were given to the students by the teacher at the end of each session to increase their confidence, while only a few negative oral feedbacks were carefully offered to the whole class without referring to any student's name to avoid embarrassment.

The findings from the qualitative analysis indicated that one of the reasons why most of the students were able to present the third presentation better than the first two was that they had less anxiety and more confidence. For instance, they volunteered to give the oral presentation without waiting for their names to be called by the teacher as they did in the first two presentations.

Furthermore, a workshop session was arranged and presented by the teacher and a guest speaker who was an expert sales representative in an international company to equip the students with skills and strategies necessary to effectively deliver good presentations. When having a chance to learn from the 'expert,' the students accumulated the trust on their presentation abilities and believed that they were able to give good presentations with more self-confidence and definitely with less anxiety.

In terms of oral communication training, the project work instruction encouraged the students to practice a wide range of communication skills. In this study, the students participated in the whole class discussion tasks during the first two stages of the project process. Then, they moved further to the next step to determine the final outcome. These stages of project work provided opportunities for the students to talk, discuss, negotiate, explain, and convince their friends as well as the teacher for a final decision. The tasks enabled high oral proficiency students to share their ideas, while the teacher encouraged the low oral ability students to speak. When the students got involved in the discussion, they would have to listen to their friends' opinions and ideas. They would support their friends' opinions if they agreed with them. If they did not, they would propose their own. When the students had more opportunities to get involved in this kind of interaction, they not only became more fluent but also gained more self-confidence, especially when they felt that they were able to convince their friends to follow their opinions and suggestions.

It was not surprising that the low oral proficiency students may not get involved in the discussion at the beginning of the course. It was probably because they might not have enough self-confidence to speak or their language ability was limited. However, these students were able to gradually accumulate self-confidence to

speak as well as acquire linguistic knowledge from listening to their friends' discussions. At the same time, the teacher who acted as the facilitator always motivated and encouraged them to talk and introduce their ideas and opinions. When they were able to gather enough experiences in terms of self-confidence and language ability, they would be ready to take part in the discussion more.

In addition to whole class discussions, the students were fully provided with opportunity to participate in small group discussions. At the very beginning of the small group discussions, low oral proficiency students did not speak since they were probably not familiar with the group members or felt too embarrassed to express their ideas and opinions. When they became accustomed to the group members, they would have less anxiety and feel more relaxed. Subsequently, they gradually increased their self-confidence and were more able to interact orally. This is supported by the study of Han (2007) which reports that EFL students tended to prefer small group discussions because they could participate in class discussion with less anxiety.

Increased self-confidence and decreased anxiety are believed to help the students improve their oral communication ability and oral presentation ability as suggested by Oxford (1990). She posits that the affective side that concerns psychological factors of the learners is probably one of the most important influences on language learning success or failure. The affective factors related to foreign language learning include self-confidence. Brown (1994) also points out that foreign language learning is a complex task that is susceptible to human anxiety which is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, and apprehension. Therefore, teachers should provide the learning situations in which learners are able to learn with less anxiety, uneasiness, and frustration. Besides, the tasks should be designed to appropriately facilitate learners to increase their self-confidence and motivation. In this study, the project work instruction provided the students with the appropriate series of tasks to increase their self-confidence and to reduce their anxiety to communicate and present orally. These were considered the affective factors that promoted the students' overall oral communication ability.

Support for these findings can be found in the study conducted by Inozu, Tuyan, and Surmeli (2007) to improve foreign language learners' social and emotional learning skills. It was discovered that affective variables played an important role in EFL learners' motivation to improve language learning. This was because if learners lacked interests in learning, they would not receive any beneficial

language inputs. In the present study, the tasks involved in project work instruction were carefully designed and appropriately implemented to train the students to increase their language skills, lessen their anxiety, and promote their self-confidence; consequently, the students were able to develop their oral communication ability successfully to a certain extent.

## **2. Other interesting findings**

There are two other interesting findings derived from this study. They are discussed below.

### **1. Students' realization of significance of English oral communication**

The findings revealed that most of the subjects perceived the need to develop their English oral communication ability. The reasons underlying the findings might be attributed to the perception of the students toward the significance of English for their future careers or further studies after graduation. It is acknowledged that graduates with superior English oral communication skills are likely to be admitted into more prestigious educational institutions or get a better job and become better employees in the national and international workplaces. This is because it is widely accepted that effective oral communication skill is one of the most important qualifications for graduates who wish to further their studies or enter the workplace. Although the features of language use in the workplace are determined by the communicative functions (Rungnirundorn and Rongsa-ard, 2005), English oral communication is required in all types of businesses and industries such as tourism industry, fashion industry, health science industry, food industry, automobile industry, and information technology industry (Sukhathummo et al., 2005). The students' realization of the benefits that English oral communication skills can offer may be the most important reason why they indicated that they preferred to practice English oral communication in the elective courses offered by the university.



## 2. Drawbacks of project work

Even though project work instruction was found to result in positive language development experience of the students, according to the study findings, there are two drawbacks of project work instruction that were raised by the students who participated in this study. The first is the time-consuming nature of project work; the second is the failure of project work to enhance development of grammar.

### A. Time-consuming nature of project work.

The findings of this study revealed that some students expressed their negative attitudes toward project work instruction employed in the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach, arguing that project work was too time-consuming a task for them. They mentioned that it took much longer to search for and collect information from various sources, analyze the derived data, prepare scripts and visual aids, and practice presenting a project when compared to the activities included in the more traditional classroom settings. As a consequence, they had less time to spend on doing assignments of other courses or to fulfill personal obligations.

Rihova (2007) admits that to prepare and realize a good project is a very hard and time-consuming work for both the teachers and the learners. However, since the benefits learners can gain from their engagement in project work instruction outweighs the investment of time, it becomes the teachers' responsibility to make learners aware of how project work is a rich learning experience that allows them to acquire the target language both in and outside the formal setting of a classroom. In other words, learners should be made to understand that what really matters in project work instruction is the quality of the valuable learning experiences that results in their oral communication skill development, not the large amount of time required to carry out and complete a project, as Hutchinson (1990: 16) points out, "the positive motivation that projects generate affects the students' attitude to all the other aspects of the language program...project work is actually a very cost-effective use of time. There is no substitute for quality."

## B. Failure of project work to enhance grammar

Project work offers ample opportunity for learners to enhance their oral communication ability. However, in terms of grammar, a number of students who took part in this study reported that they were unable to detect improvement in their grammar after engaging in project work instruction, and this seemed to be a cause of concern for these students.

In Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), comprehensibility or the ability of learners to make meaning across seems to be more important than the correctness of forms or grammar features of the language. Put another way, grammar is generally not a focus of instruction that aims to promote language learners' communicative competence, including oral communication ability.

In the present study, as most of the students had been studying English for many years since they were in primary and secondary schools, and as they had already taken the three English foundation courses that equipped them with the necessary English grammatical structures, they were assumed to have some background in grammar and grammar lessons were not included in the project work instruction. Students were only informed that they were able to seek for language supports from the teacher if necessary. It is not surprising then that when the students who used to receive grammar instruction found that there were no explicit grammar lessons in their project work instruction, they readily assumed that their grammar was not improved when in fact the findings showed that the students indirectly acquired grammar from the contexts and from the more capable speakers of English. Also, some students were aware of using correct grammar and structures when they made an attempt to correct grammatical mistakes during project presentation.

To solve such misconception, Stoller (1997) suggests that teachers can prepare, perhaps in consultation with students, the language demands and grammar support. For example, teachers can plan language instruction activities to prepare students for information gathering tasks when doing projects. They might plan exercises on question formation, introduce conversational patterns that will be used for gathering information, or review letter formatting. Besides, learners should be provided with opportunity to seek for language assistances including grammar from other resources such as from text books, the Internet, and resource persons. In so doing, they should be more satisfied with the chance to practice grammar and other

language features despite lack of explicit grammar instruction in the project-based classroom.

## **Conclusion**

Project work or project-based learning is an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting students with products to develop. This study explored the effects of project work instruction in enhancing KU undergraduate students' overall oral communication ability. The results indicated that students were able to improve their oral communication and oral presentation abilities through project work instruction. It was also discovered from this study that project work was effective to promote not only students' oral skills but also their self-confidence and interpersonal skills because of the cooperative nature of the project work.

## **Implications of the findings**

1. Good as it is, project work may not be suitable for all learning situations. As project work requires learners to work with the target language in an authentic situation, preferably one rich in language resources including availability of the Internet and presence of English speakers, project work may not be appropriate in all environments or settings such as when learners are in the remote areas where there is no access to language resources other than textbooks used in classes or where there are no chances to engage in authentic situations. For this reason, course designers and teachers should take at least two factors into consideration before adopting the Project-based Learning Approach to promote learners' oral ability: 1) the environment where learners are able to use English in an authentic situation and where the social contexts can be created and 2) learners' linguistic background knowledge and skills necessary for them to undertake the course of interaction properly. If ideal circumstances are not available, nor is learners' linguistic knowledge adequate, the outcomes of the implementation of the Project-based Learning Approach may not be as desired or expected.

2. As it is believed that cooperative learning is one of the factors signifying the success of project work instruction to develop oral communication ability of learners,

teachers should provide learners with opportunity to work in groups to accomplish a shared goal. In addition, it was found in this study that the students with low level of proficiency in particular tended to prefer tasks that employed working in a mixed-ability group. As a result, teachers should provide learners with tasks that require them to work in small groups of three to five members. In doing so, low oral ability learners will have a chance to increase not only language skills but also their self-confidence from working cooperatively with more capable others. At the same time, more capable learners may be able to develop themselves further from their giving assistance to the less able group members. However, teachers should take the component of group members into careful consideration because if the levels of proficiency of the learners are too different, expert learners might feel reluctant to work with very weak peers.

3. It is accepted that motivation plays a major role in language learning and that one source of motivation comes from learners' realization of the significance or relevance of their learning tasks. For this reason, teachers should try to improve learners' oral communication ability by integrating creative interaction and communication skill tasks relevant to learners' particular needs or appealing to their personal interests into the lessons. Furthermore, interactions that occur in real-life situations are more likely to motivate learners to get involved in task completion. As such, teachers should design tasks that involve interaction between learners and learners and between learners and other users or speakers of the target language, preferably in an authentic setting, to create learning motivation. In short, class activities should incorporate tasks that require interaction among learners while focusing on relevant and up-to-date topics of interests to learners to ensure their learning engagement and motivation to keep on carrying out and to finally complete the assigned tasks, hence further language skill development.

4. The findings from this study revealed that some students felt that project work was too time-consuming because they had to spend a large amount of time collecting information, analyzing data, preparing scripts and visual aids, and practicing presenting a project, and this made them have no time to spend on other course requirements or personal obligations. Previous studies (Yan, 1998; Young, 1991; Wen, 1997) have reported that affective factors such as having less motivation,

self-esteem, and self-confidence negatively influenced language learning, so a negative perception of the nature of project work would adversely affect learners' motivation and subsequent learning engagement. To solve this problem, teachers should explain to learners how this kind of instruction can benefit them. Another possible option for using project work is to attach project work to a mainstream or more traditional course when feasible and appropriate. For instance, teachers can ask learners to do two or three projects as a supplement activity in a skill-based course to familiarize them with this kind of instruction while enhancing their language development. Even though learners may not be accustomed to this kind of self-directed learning, project work with more controlled process in which learners work cooperatively to identify the topic, final outcome, detailed plan, and time arrangement can eventually lead learners to acceptance of this type of instruction and become more willing to accept the time-consuming nature of project work instruction, especially after they have gained first-hand experience of the positive outcomes project work instruction offers them.

### **Recommendations for further research**

1. The present study employed a one-group pre-test-post-test research design which is generally considered a rather weak design due to the lack of the control group and the presence of uncontrolled-for threats to internal validity that may explain the results of the post-test. Therefore, a true experimental study with the control and experimental groups with random sampling and random assignment should be carried out to further determine the effectiveness of the Project-based Learning Approach in enhancing language learners' oral communication ability. In addition, the delayed post-test may also be utilized to determine the effects of project work instruction on language learners' oral communication ability over time.

2. Qualitative studies should also be conducted to further explore the effects of an English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach on the individual affects of language learners including their learning engagement, motivation, and attitudes toward cooperative learning through project work instruction so as to shed more light on the effectiveness of this type of instruction.

3. Longitudinal studies may be carried out to better determine the long-term effects of project work instruction on language learners' development of communication ability as well as their learning engagement, learning motivation, and attitudes toward project work instruction over time.