

Weaving Words: Enhancing English Language Proficiency of Grade 5 Students through Handicraft, Visual and Performing Art

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Abstract:

This action research explores the efficacy of integrating handicrafts, visual arts, and performing arts into English language instruction for Grade 5 students in Thailand. Grounded in Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences and experiential learning principles, the 17-week Learning by Project (LBP) program employed a mixed-methods approach to evaluate improvements in language proficiency, confidence, and environmental awareness. Quantitative analysis of pre- and post-implementation grades revealed statistically significant improvements in English ($p = 0.0007$), Conversation, and Phonics. Qualitative data highlighted enhanced fluency, creativity, and collaborative skills. The findings advocate for arts-integrated pedagogy as a transformative strategy for language education in diverse, mixed-ability classrooms.

Keywords: Arts-integrated learning, English language proficiency, Grade 5 students, Handicrafts, Thailand.

Introduction

Thailand has long faced challenges in English language education, with national Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) scores consistently averaging below 40/100 over the past decade (Noomura, 2013). Traditional rote-learning methods, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teacher training have contributed to student disengagement and underperformance (Dhanasobhon, 2007; ONEC, 2003). These systemic issues underscore the urgent need for innovative pedagogical strategies that cater to diverse learning styles and foster intrinsic motivation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (2008), which posits that individuals possess distinct cognitive strengths, including linguistic, kinaesthetic, and interpersonal intelligences. By integrating arts-based activities, the program aligns with Bastianoni’s (2006) argument that handicrafts enhance language retention while nurturing creativity and fine motor skills. Additionally, the immersive language environment draws on Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1985), which emphasizes the importance of meaningful, context-rich exposure to target languages.

Research Objectives

1. Assess the impact of arts-integrated activities on English proficiency across speaking, listening, reading, and writing domains.
2. Evaluate improvements in vocabulary retention, confidence, and cross-curricular skill transfer.
3. Explore student and teacher perceptions of creative pedagogy and its role in fostering engagement.

Methodology

A mixed-methods action research design was implemented over 17 weeks (November 2022–March 2023) with 27 Grade 5 students at a Thai primary school. The study combined quantitative grade analysis with qualitative insights from interviews, observations, and surveys to triangulate findings.

This study applied an intervention through a Learning by Project Program. This program integrated three core components, namely: handicrafts, performing arts, and written tasks. In here, students created recycled paper bags, painted designs, and engaged in weaving activities using recycled papers. These tasks required them to follow English instructions, discuss materials (e.g., “straws,” “recycled paper”), and describe their creative processes. As to the performing arts, environment-themed skits, songs, and dances provided platforms for practicing pronunciation, intonation, and expressive language. For example, students rehearsed dialogues about recycling, such as, “We should reuse bottles to reduce waste.” Finally, as to the written tasks, worksheets, mind maps, and creative writing exercises reinforced vocabulary (e.g., “sustainability,” “eco-friendly”) and grammatical structures while encouraging critical reflection on environmental issues. All activities were conducted exclusively in English, fostering an immersive environment aligned with principles of language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Two types of data were collected and analysed. The quantitative data was acquired from the pre- and post-implementation grades in English, Conversation, and Phonics were analyzed using paired *t*-tests to measure statistical significance. Meanwhile, the qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 10 students and two teachers which explored perceptions of the program’s impact. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns in engagement, confidence, and skill development.

Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 1, the English subject shows average grades improved from 90.85% (pre-implementation) to 95.90% (post-implementation), with a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.0007$). The scores in Conversation surged from 82.96% to 94.42%, peaking at 99.52% in February 2023. Students in Phonics subject achieved a perfect 100% average in the final month, demonstrating mastery of phonetic patterns.

Table 1. Pre- vs. Post-Implementation Grade Comparison

Subject	Pre-Implementation Mean	Post-Implementation Mean	<i>p</i> -value
English	90.85%	95.90%	0.0007

Conversation	82.96%	94.42%	<0.001
Phonics	90.56%	97.47%	<0.001

This marked improvement in Conversation scores aligns with Bastianoni's (2006) assertion that collaborative arts activities enhance oral communication. Similarly, the Phonics results reflect the effectiveness of kinaesthetic learning in reinforcing phonetic rules (Gardner, 2008).

Furthermore, subject teachers observed fluency and confidence to have been positively affected. Students demonstrated improved articulation during performances, with one participant noting, "I used to fear speaking English, but the skits made it fun." This echoes Krashen's (1985) emphasis on low-anxiety environments for language acquisition. Furthermore, creativity and collaboration was highlighted. Group projects fostered problem-solving and teamwork. For instance, during bag-weaving tasks, students delegated roles (e.g., "You cut the paper; I'll weave"), illustrating Vygotsky's (1978) concept of social learning. Group effort and responsibility among learners who desired to complete their project was generally perceived. Additionally, environmental awareness was a significant integration in the program. The incorporation of sustainability themes resonated with UNESCO's (2017) Sustainable Development Goal 4.7, which advocates for education that promotes sustainable lifestyles.

The success factors of the Learning by Project were summarized into three. First is *Immersive Environment*, where exclusive English use accelerated proficiency, consistent with Lightbown and Spada's (2013) findings on language immersion. Second is *Scaffolded Activities*. The gradual complexity in tasks (e.g., simple greetings to scriptwriting) ensured skill mastery, aligning with Bruner's (1966) spiral curriculum model. The third factor is *Parental Engagement*. Transparent communication about program goals increased home support, a critical factor noted by Epstein (2018) in sustaining educational interventions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that arts-integrated pedagogy significantly enhances English proficiency, creativity, and collaborative skills in Grade 5 students. The statistically validated improvements in language grades, coupled with qualitative gains in confidence and environmental stewardship, underscore the viability of creative, multimodal approaches in addressing Thailand's language education challenges.

Implications for practice include curriculum reform wherein integration of arts-based activities is emphasized into national language curricula to cater to diverse intelligences (Gardner, 2008). Also, teacher training is optimized to prioritize workshops on experiential learning strategies, particularly in low-resource settings. Finally, policy advocacy where there is alignment in educational policies with UNESCO's (2017) holistic frameworks to promote sustainability and creativity.

Recommendations for future research would be conducting longitudinal studies to assess long-term retention of language skills through Learning By Project. Moreover, It is recommended to scale the model to rural schools, adapting activities to local cultural contexts (e.g., traditional Thai crafts).

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