

Student Engagement and English Language Skills Development through Activity-Based Learning in English Preparation Course

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Abstract

This article aimed: (1) to assess whether activity-based instructional tasks improved students' language skills, (2) to examine the extent to which the tasks influenced students' learning engagement and behavioral patterns, and (3) to explore students' perceptions and experiences of the course design. A mixed methods approach was used. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-tests covering five language skill areas and analyzed using paired-sample t-tests. Qualitative data came from course reflection forms using a five-point Likert scale and semi-structured interviews with 30 students, analyzed through thematic analysis. Participants were 125 first-year undergraduate English major students enrolled in five parallel course sections. The results showed statistically significant improvement in all five language skill areas. The overall post-test mean score increased from 27.22 to 34.92 ($t = -21.201$, $p < .001$, $n = 125$). The greatest gain was in grammatical structure (+1.85), followed by reading and writing (+1.72) and listening and speaking (+1.57). Student self-assessment of engagement and collaboration was high, with a total mean of 4.32 out of 5.00 ($SD = 0.48$). The highest score was in collaboration in groups ($M = 4.64$). Interview data showed that group work, positive teacher feedback, and game-based activities were the main factors that supported student confidence and participation. Activity-based learning is effective for improving English language skills and promoting student engagement in university EFL preparatory courses. EFL teachers and course designers should use collaborative, interactive, and task-based instruction to support both language development and active student participation.

Keywords: Student engagement; English language skills; Activity-based learning; Teacher and task designs; Undergraduate learners

Introduction

Academic and linguistic backgrounds have an important role in students' access to higher education, particularly first-year students. First-year students may encounter difficulties in adjusting to the new learning environment because of the differences between high school and university. It may be difficult for some to adapt to a new lifestyle, new financial obligations, new study habits and new teaching styles. This change is complex in the English language user environment. A good level of English at the beginning of the English major course helps students to be more confident in mastering the whole academic course. On the contrary, students with limited English proficiency may find themselves at a compounding disadvantage from the very beginning of their degree and might have to make a great effort to succeed.

A fundamental factor for academic success in this early period is student engagement. Hattie (2009) identified classroom engagement as one of the most consistent predictors of long-term learning outcomes. Fredricks et al. (2004) described engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising three interrelated components: behavioral engagement, which refers to participation in learning activities; emotional engagement, which encompasses students' affective reactions to teachers, classmates, and school; and cognitive engagement, which involves psychological investment in learning and the use of self-regulated learning strategies. Previous studies in EFL contexts (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Hiver et al., 2024; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022) have revealed that higher engagement leads to better language performance, higher willingness to communicate, less anxiety, and greater motivation to continue learning. From the above evidence, it can be concluded that the traditional method in many universities is teacher-centered, with the focus on teacher-centered teaching, grammar explanation and teacher-led questions and answers. These methods have been criticized for providing students with superficial knowledge that they are unable to transfer to new communicative situations, as well as for not fostering the autonomous learning skills needed for ongoing academic success (Freeman et al., 2014; Prince, 2004). When students rarely need to use the language they are exposed to, their engagement may drop, and a gap can appear between classroom performance and actual communicative competence.

Activity-based learning is an alternative approach for EFL learners based on theory. It is built on the basis of constructivist theory, providing students with an active role in language learning, allowing students to learn through problem-solving and engaging in creative activities with their peers rather than being taught. They are more likely to develop their critical thinking skills and feel autonomous when learners take responsibility for their learning and work independently from the teacher (Demirci, 2017, p. 132). This classroom revolution is particularly relevant in the context of EFL, as it has been reported that the use of interactive and collaborative tasks is linked to improvement in language proficiency, motivation, and reduced anxiety and inconsistent participation of learners (Prince, 2004; Seemanath & Watanapokakul, 2024). Although the evidence has been growing, the problems faced by first-year English major students in Thai

universities have been little investigated. Many universities in Thailand admit students from diverse secondary school backgrounds, and many students enter English major programs with low communicative competence in English (Seemanath & Watanapokakul, 2024). There were significant number of students in the beginning year of studies in our English language program had problems with grammatical structure which effects to speaking and writing production. The identified weaknesses were covered and integrated in the course with activity-based tasks. Yet few studies have investigated the possibility of a comprehensively redesigned activity-based English preparatory course to improve language skills in various aspects and to motivate first-year EFL students' behavioral, cognitive and collaborative involvement. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the effectiveness of a sequence of teacher-designed, activity-based instructional tasks in one English preparation course for the first year students in our English language program to booster both their language performance and engagement.

Research Objectives

1. To examine whether the activity-based instructional tasks designed for the English preparation course were effective in improving students' knowledge and language skills.
2. To investigate the extent to which participation in the course's activity-based tasks influenced students' learning engagement and behavioral patterns.
3. To explore students' perceptions and experiences of learning through the activity-based course design.

Literature Review

Student Engagement in EFL Contexts

Engagement has been described as the effort, time, and energy students devote to academic experiences and activities to achieve desired learning outcomes. The three-dimensional structure, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional, is the most frequently referenced in research. In the EFL context, learners' active participation in language tasks may influence development across all four language skills, as well as long-term academic performance and motivation to learning (Hiver et al., 2024). Behavioral engagement is the extent to which students are actively involved, including their voluntary participation, persistence in tasks, and initiation. Emotional engagement includes affective aspects, including belonging, interest, and enjoyment. Cognitive engagement is an investment of intellectual effort, involving strategic processing and self-monitoring. These dimensions provide an overall picture of student involvement in the EFL classroom. Participation in communicative tasks is supported by a positive environment characterized by high-quality socio-emotional interactions. Teacher factors (rapport, caring) and classroom context (supportive classroom environment) are shown to be significant factors that influence student perceptions of engagement.

Activity-Based Learning in EFL

Active learning is an umbrella term for teaching methods that involve students in activities and not just passive learning. It is a method in which students are engaged in an activity and interact with one another to create meaningful learning experiences, according to Prince (2004). Switching from lecture to active instruction in an EFL context is associated with substantial improvement in language ability, motivation and communicative confidence (Freeman et al., 2014; Prince, 2004). Rezai et al. (2025) found important aspects of active learning, including the focus on higher-order thinking and the active development of student attitudes. Brainstorming, role-plays, information-gap tasks and creative production are examples of these tasks in EFL. These tasks involve learners to produce, negotiate and reflect instead of just receiving information. These strategies have been shown to have a positive impact on language acquisition, attention, and participation. In this study, activity-based learning refers to the deliberate sequencing of tasks to facilitate learning through "doing" rather than passive exposure. This approach is grounded in constructivist principles, in which knowledge is built through social interaction (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978), and in communicative language teaching. These positions authentic interaction as both a means and a goal of teaching and learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Collaborative Learning and Group Work

Collaborative and group-based tasks have received strong empirical support in EFL research. Among the various activity types that are associated with active learning. Collaborative techniques are useful in English language teaching, as they allow students to practice language skills through discussion and collaboration on tasks. In addition, collaborative learning promotes strong relationships among group members and supports a classroom environment that improves students' learning. Research shows that cooperative learning improves students' language proficiency, confidence, and social interaction skills (Andrade Morán & Aguaiza Iza, 2024). Their critical thinking skills are enhanced by learning to argue, defend positions, and question ideas. These skills can deepen and extend their learning. Alzubi et al. (2024) demonstrated that collaborative learning interventions led to significant improvements in EFL students' language skills and social interaction compared with conventional instruction. However, the effectiveness of collaborative learning does not occur simultaneously; it develops well when all group members take responsibility for their roles. While instructors also play an important role in designing, preparing, and fostering a collaborative atmosphere that encourages motivation and engagement, the combination of teachers' roles and students' enlighten their language learning. However, the quality of task design depends on students' roles in group work, their accountability mechanisms, and feedback exchanges during genuine interaction.

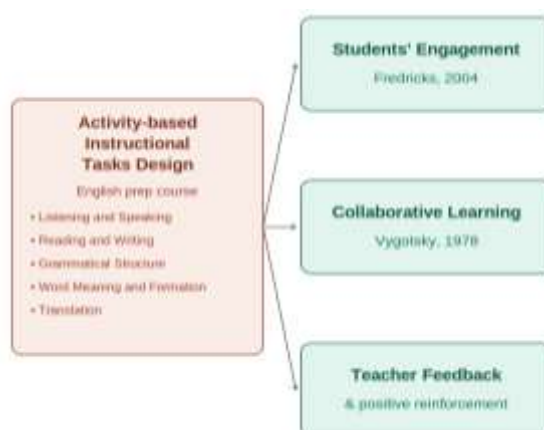
The Role of Teacher Feedback and Positive Reinforcement

Alongside task design, the instructor's feedback behavior plays a crucial role in shaping student engagement in EFL classrooms. Teacher compliments are a necessary basis of support for effective student involvement in the learning process. Positive reinforcement and teacher praise are shown to increase students' motivation and encourage desirable learning behaviors, particularly in EFL settings where anxiety and low confidence are common challenges (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Krashen, 1982). In EFL contexts, students' anxiety about making mistakes often

creates a barrier to participation in the classroom (Horwitz, 2001). Teachers who accept mistakes and who consider attempts more important than correctness provide emotional safety, which enables students to take communicative risks (Krashen, 1982). In addition, specific and encouraging feedback from the teacher helps foster a growth mindset, boosts student confidence and engages students in lessons (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Building positive relationships and rapport with students is also a key factor in sustaining engagement, as students are more likely to participate when they feel supported and respected. This aligns with Derakhshan et al. (2022) on teacher care and rapport, suggesting that the teacher-student relationship plays a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of engagement, beyond just the characteristics of the tasks. Research on EFL has increasingly focused on the engagement that is produced by incorporating games and competition into EFL learning. These gamification elements, including leaderboards, points, and incentives, offer a very real incentive for active engagement and motivation. Game-based activities are designed to be integrated into the language-learning process and to make it more enjoyable and effective when combined with structured instructional goals. Although there is a huge amount of evidence in the literature in favor of collaborative and activity-based learning in EFL, most of the studies are conducted separately and with a focus on a specific skill, and they are based on either quantitative or qualitative data in isolation. There is a lack of investigations that use a mixed-methods design to evaluate a comprehensively redesigned course across multiple dimensions of engagement in a natural classroom setting. This research aims to address this gap by analyzing how the holistic impact of the tasks designed by the teacher on the language skills, engagement behaviors and students' perceptions are in one preparatory English course.

Theoretical Framework

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of the Study



Methodology

Research Design

The instructional design and program evaluation used in this study were conducted in the classroom through mixed methods analysis to assess the activity-based learning in the English preparation class. The unit of study is the design of the instruction, not the learner. The core problem addressed in this study is that first-year English major students in Thai universities often enter the preparatory course with low English proficiency and limited experience with communicative, student-centered instruction. Traditional teacher-directed approaches used in many preparatory courses do not provide sufficient opportunities for active language use, peer interaction, or self-directed engagement, which are known to be important for both language development and academic motivation (Hiver et al., 2024; Prince, 2004).

This study was therefore designed to investigate whether replacing teacher-centered instruction with a structured sequence of activity-based tasks could produce measurable improvements in language skills and engagement. The findings are intended to benefit course designers, EFL instructors, and curriculum planners who are looking for evidence-based approaches to improve both language outcomes and student engagement in university preparatory English programs. To preserve participant anonymity, all data were analyzed at the group level using anonymized aggregated data. The assessments and reflection forms were regular components of the teaching and not specific research tools. This is in line with the "teacher-as-researcher" and practitioner inquiry traditions (Burns, 2010; Wolkenhauer & Rutten, 2025) in which educators intentionally improve their teaching, rather than experimenting on their students.

Defining Context and Participants

The study was carried out in one of the first-year university English preparation courses at Kasetsart University Kamphaeng Sean. The course combined five parallel classes in the first semester of 2025 academic year. A total of about 125 first-year undergraduate English major students were recruited for the course and constituted one naturally occurring classroom for analysis. There were five course sections; each taught by an instructor with a graduate degree in English, applied linguistics, or a related field, and who had many years of experience teaching EFL and developing materials. A total of 20 instructional hours were spent on a variety of English language skills and knowledge areas covered, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammatical structures, vocabulary development and translation. The same curriculum framework was used throughout all sections, and structured activity-based tasks were prepared by the instructing team and used in each lesson.

The Activity-Based Instructional Design

A shift in the course was made from a traditional teacher-centred approach to an activity-centred approach. In the past, the teaching method used was lecturing and class discussion, which provided limited opportunities for independent work, peer interaction, or student-initiated

learning, while delivering important content and language frameworks. In addition, students' participation was not given much importance, and systematic follow-up measures for learning outside of classes were not available. The gaps are identified and addressed in the redesigned curriculum through structured activities and tasks based on activity and collaborative learning. These included brainstorming activities requiring students to generate and organize ideas before engaging with content; pair and group work tasks requiring genuine exchange and shared output; question-and-answer sequences demanding verbal participation from all members; game-based and competitive activities creating motivational engagement through structured play; and presentation and role-play tasks requiring performance-based language production. The sequencing of activities within each lesson followed a deliberate progression from teacher-supported to learner-independent production, reflecting the gradual release principle (Vygotsky, 1978).

Data Collection

Three sources of data were collected and analyzed.

Pre- and post-tests. A parallel set of 50-item diagnostic and achievement assessments, covering all five language skill areas taught in the course, was administered at the beginning and end of the instructional period. These assessments were integral to normal instructional procedures and were analyzed at the group level to identify patterns of change across skill areas.

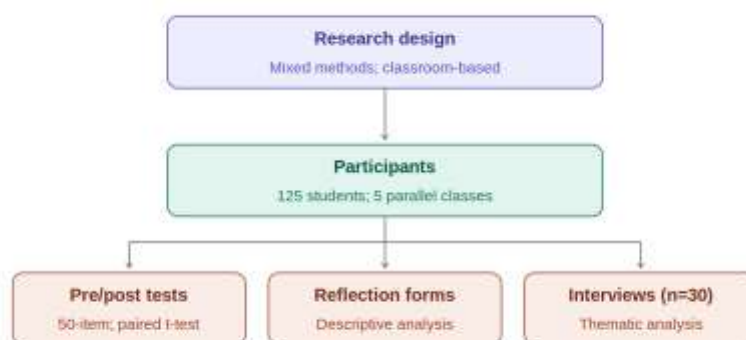
Course reflection forms. A structured course reflection form is completed anonymously by all enrolled students after the course. The reflection data were used to capture patterns in students' self-reported learning engagement, task performance, and collaborative behavior. The form used a five-point Likert scale across three broad areas and was analyzed both descriptively and at the aggregate level.

Semi-structured Interviews

Following the course, a purposive sample of 30 students was selected for individual semi-structured interviews. Two criteria were used for selection. First, students had to be willing to participate. Second, students were selected to represent varied levels of self-reported engagement based on their course reflection form scores. These comprised students who self-rated as high, moderate and highest. This method guaranteed that a variety of viewpoints on the learning experience were represented. The interviews focused on three key areas. Students were first asked about their experiences of engagement in the course activities. Secondly, they were asked what influenced their confidence and involvement in class. Thirdly, they were asked about the impact the course had on their English language development. Students were also requested to provide feedback on strengths and areas for improvement in the course design. Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted in accordance with the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, P. 87-93). The six stages were: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Three researchers independently coded

the same 30% of the interview data to verify the reliability of the coding. This indicates that each researcher read the same transcripts independently and coded them without initially consulting the other researchers. The results were then contrasted. Cohen's kappa was used to determine inter-rater reliability. Strong reliability was obtained with an agreement coefficient of .82. This indicates that the three researchers had similar findings without relying on the interpretation of one researcher and that the themes were not based on the interpretation of only one person. All three researchers met to discuss each disputed code in a peer debriefing session when there were disagreements in coding. Discussion was carried on until a consensus was reached. This procedure helped to enhance the consistency and credibility of the resulting themes. An audit trail was kept during the analysis to ensure transparency. At each stage of the process, the researchers recorded their coding decisions and provided the rationale for each theme. Lastly, the participants' direct quotations were used to substantiate each theme.

Figure 2 : The Overview of Research Methodology



Research Design and Ethical Positioning

This study adopts a classroom-based instructional design and program evaluation approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine the effectiveness of activity-based learning in an English preparation course. It is important to clarify that the study focuses on the instructional design as the primary unit of investigation, not individual learners as research subjects. All data were analyzed at the group level using anonymized, aggregated classroom information, with no individual identification involved. The course assessments and reflection forms used were standard components of normal instructional practice and were not administered for individual research evaluation. This framing positions the study within the tradition of teacher-as-researcher and practitioner inquiry (Burns, 2010; Borg, 2013), in which educators systematically examine and refine their instructional practice to improve the learning environment, rather than conducting experiments on the learners within it.

Results

Students' Knowledge and English Language Skills Gain

To examine whether the activity-based instructional tasks designed for the English preparation course were effective in improving students' knowledge and language skills, the pre-test and post-test were employed with 125 students before and after the class. The scores of the both tests were analyzed to see the language skills development. Results of the *Paired-Sample t-test* showed that the activity-based instructional tasks were effective in improving students' English language skills in all five aspects. The mean scores for the post-test were significantly higher than the pre-test scores for all the skills ($p < .001$), and the effect sizes were large for all the skills ($d = 0.98 - 1.47$). This finding is a direct response to research objective 1: the activity-based tasks did produce measurable and statistically significant gains in language knowledge and skills. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1, and complete inferential results for each skill area are shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Pre- and Post-Tests Across Skill Areas (n = 125)

Language Skills	Pre-test		Post-test	
	X	S.D.	X	S.D.
Listening and Speaking	6.06	1.43	7.63	0.88
Reading and Writing	5.26	1.21	6.98	0.97
Grammatical Structure	4.58	1.37	6.43	1.09
Word Meaning and Formation	5.36	1.49	6.86	1.18
Translation	5.64	1.39	6.99	1.17
Total	27.22	4.76	34.92	4.22

Table 1 shows that mean scores increased in all five skill areas after the course. The highest increase was in Grammatical Structure (+1.85), followed by Reading and Writing (+1.72), Listening and Speaking (+1.57), Word Meaning and Formation (+1.50) and Translation (+1.35). There was a gain of 7.70 points in the overall mean score from 27.22 to 34.92. All five skill gains and the total gain were statistically significant at both the individual skill level and overall, as confirmed by paired-sample t-tests.

Table 2 provides full inferential statistics for each skill area, including t, df, p, and the effect size. The effect sizes of all were large ($d > 0.80$), with the largest effect size of $d = 1.47$ for Grammatical Structure and the lowest effect size of $d = 0.98$ for Translation. Overall comparison resulted in the $p < .001$ level. The highest t-value for the total score was obtained ($t = -21.201$, $df = 124$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.90$), which showed that the effect of the activity-based course on the English language development of the students was very large.

Table 2: Paired-Sample t-Test Results for Each Language Skill Area (n = 125)

Language Skill	Pre	Post	Gain	t	df	p	d
Listening and Speaking	6.06	7.63	+1.57	-12.867	124	< .001	1.15
Reading and Writing	5.26	6.98	+1.72	-15.659	124	< .001	1.40
Grammatical Structure	4.58	6.43	+1.85	-16.429	124	< .001	1.47
Word Meaning and Formation	5.36	6.86	+1.50	-11.991	124	< .001	1.07
Translation	5.64	6.99	+1.35	-10.992	124	< .001	0.98
Total	27.22	34.92	+7.70	-21.201	124	< .001	1.90

p < .001.

Student Engagement and Learning Behaviors

To investigate the extent to which participation in the course's activity-based tasks influenced students' learning engagement and behavioral patterns, the reflective form was used to capture patterns in students' learning engagement, task performance, and collaborative behaviors. The data showed that activity-based tasks had a strong positive influence on students' learning engagement and behavioral patterns from the course. Students reported high to highest levels of engagement in all three dimensions assessed: behavioral engagement (actively participating in class activities), cognitive engagement (completion of tasks and understanding of lesson content), and collaborative engagement (engaging in group work and peer interactions). The mean score for the overall self-assessment was 4.32 out of 5.00 (highest level), with collaboration in groups being the highest rated ($M = 4.64$). Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6 show the detailed results.

Table 3: Overall Self-Assessment Results by Area (n = 125)

Assessment Areas	X	S.D.	Levels
1. Engagement in Learning Activities	4.15	0.63	high
2. Task Performance	4.17	0.68	high
3. Collaboration in Groups	4.64	0.48	highest
Total	4.32	0.48	highest

The mean for the overall self-assessment was 4.32 out of 5.00, and was rated at the highest level. The highest sub-score ($M = 4.64$) was found for collaboration in groups, and the highest individual item score ($M = 4.87$) was for the item "I respect the opinions of all group members". This trend indicates the effectiveness of collaborative task structure in promoting students' shared responsibility and mutual respect.

Table 4: The frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation of students' engagement in learning activities.

Students 'Learning Engagement	Level of Opinions					$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Rating
	Highest	High	Moderate	Low	Lowest			
1. I actively participate in all classroom learning activities.	54 (43.20)	52 (41.60)	18 (14.40)	1 (0.80)	-	4.27	0.73	highest
2. I pay close attention and engage in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and responding to questions during class.	38 (30.40)	60 (48.00)	23 (18.40)	4 (3.20)	-	4.06	0.79	high
3. I feel enjoyable and enthusiastic about learning when participating in task activities.	46 (36.80)	53 (42.40)	20 (16.00)	6 (4.80)	-	4.11	0.84	high
Total						4.15	0.63	high

In the Engagement in Learning Activities sub-scale, the highest individual rating was for active participation in classroom activities ($M = 4.27$), followed by enjoyment and enthusiasm during tasks ($M = 4.11$).

Table 5: The frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation of students' opinions on task performance

Task Performance	Level of Opinions					$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Rating
	Highest	High	Moderate	Low	Lowest			
1. I can complete all assigned tasks as required.	54 (43.20)	47 (37.60)	22 (17.60)	1 (0.80)	1 (0.80)	4.22	0.82	highest
2. I can understand the lesson content well through classroom activities.	30 (24.00)	62 (49.60)	29 (23.20)	3 (2.40)	1 (0.80)	3.94	0.80	high
3. I can submit my work on time with appropriate quality.	65 (52.00)	41 (32.80)	17 (13.60)	1 (0.80)	1 (0.80)	4.34	0.80	highest
Total						4.17	0.68	high

In the area of Task Performance, timely and quality submission of work was the highest individual rating ($M = 4.34$), and task completion was next ($M = 4.22$). The results suggest that the activity-based design of this course motivated students to be active in the class and maintained effort and task responsibility throughout the course.

Table 6: The frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation of students' opinions regarding collaboration in groups.

Collaboration in Groups	Level of Opinions					X	S.D.	Rating
	Highest	High	Moderate	Low	Lowest			
1. I can work effectively with my classmates in group activities.	81 (64.80)	36 (28.80)	8 (6.40)	- -	- -	4.58	0.61	highest
2. I respect the opinions of all group members.	111 (88.80)	12 (9.60)	2 (1.60)	- -	- -	4.87	0.38	highest
3. I take an active role in sharing ideas or helping other members in the group.	76 (60.80)	32 (25.60)	15 (12.00)	2 (1.60)	-	4.46	0.77	highest
Total						4.64	0.48	highest

The mean score for collaboration in groups was at the highest level ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.48$), suggesting that students had very positive perceptions of their own collaborative behaviours during group activities. An item-level analysis revealed that all three statements were rated in the highest opinion level. The highest mean score was for "I respect the opinions of all group members" ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 0.38$), with 88.80% of the respondents rating it the highest, indicating that the collaborative behavior of mutual respect was the most consistent behavior among students. The next highest item was "I can work effectively with my classmates in group activities" ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.61$), 64.80% of the students rated this item at the highest level, indicating that the students feel effective in performing cooperative tasks. The lowest of the three, but still very high, was "I take an active role in sharing ideas or helping other members in the group" ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.77$); 60.80% of the students chose the highest rating. The standard deviation for this item is slightly higher than that of the other two behaviors, indicating that students' self-perceptions of their active participation vary more than the others. In general, the results show that students had a good collaborative attitude, especially regarding respecting others' contributions. The slightly lower mean for active idea-sharing might indicate that students were receptive to and cooperative with group discussion, but that there was a bit more variability for proactively participating in group discussion.

Student Perceptions and Experiences

To explore students' perceptions and experiences of learning through the activity-based course design, the semi-structured interview with 30 students were analyzed. The thematic analysis revealed that students held positive perceptions of the activity-based course design and

reported meaningful learning experiences across three areas: factors that drove engagement, factors that built confidence and motivation, and perceived impact on language development. The data yielded five themes. First, students reported that collaborative group work was the most engaging and enjoyable part of the course. Second, game-based and competitive activities were perceived as good motivators to boost energy and motivation to take part. Thirdly, teacher support and positive feedback led to a psychologically safe environment, and the students were comfortable taking communicative risks. Fourth, authentic and creative tasks such as voice over, competitive translation, and role play were seen as directly connected to real language use. Fifth, students perceived clear improvement in their English proficiency, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and overall communicative confidence. These themes are elaborated in the sub-sections below.

Engagement Factors

In terms of engaging in activities, 40% of those interviewed considered group work and cooperation to be the most effective, and they stated that group work created a low-pressure environment for peer interaction. Meanwhile, 23.3% indicated game-based and competitive activities as key motivators. Moreover, the students appreciated the question and answer session (16.7%) and the presentation and role play session (13.3%) as they stimulated the critical thinking and natural language use and improved pronunciation and creative confidence, respectively. Lastly, a small minority (6.7%) highlighted the importance of teacher explanations to help them better understand and thus be willing to participate.

Factors Enhancing Confidence and Motivation

The most important factors affecting student confidence were teacher support and positive feedback (26.7%). Participants always reported that the teacher's affirmation of mistakes and encouraging words helped them to participate in class. Note that 20% of the participants in each group reported that peer support and authentic and creative activities (voice over, competitive translation, and performance activities) were the source of their confidence. In addition, 16.7% of the students mentioned that well-paced and fun lessons were important for keeping them motivated and interested during lessons.

Impact on Language Development

The majority of interviewees (26.7%) indicated overall improvement in all four language skills, which was due to the integrated, communicative task design. Increased knowledge of grammar was mentioned by 23.3% of students, with many reporting that they had been taught grammar more in-depth than in other courses. Moreover, 16.7% of the respondents learned about the English major curriculum and academic pathways, the improvement of vocabulary acquisition and the improvement of using a dictionary. The same percentage (16.7%) reported improvements in translation awareness and cultural sensitivity, such as the non-literalness of idiomatic expressions. Complete descriptive statistics for these areas are given in the appendix.

Discussion

Activity-Based Learning and Language Skill Gains

The pre- and post-test results show that the activity-based instructional tasks were effective. All five language skill areas showed statistically significant improvement ($p < .001$). The effect sizes were large throughout, ranging from $d = 0.98$ to $d = 1.90$. This finding is consistent with Prince (2004), who showed that active learning produces better academic outcomes than passive, lecture-based instruction. It also aligns with Alzubi et al. (2024), who found that collaborative learning interventions led to greater language gains than conventional teaching. However, this study goes further than most prior studies, which focus on only one skill or a small set of outcomes. This study demonstrates that gains can be substantial in five language skill areas simultaneously in a single redesigned course. This indicates that activity-based design is not only impacting one skill but also has a general impact on language development. The most significant result was that grammatical structure showed the greatest improvement among the five skills. The mean gain was +1.85, and the effect size was $d = 1.47$. This finding is surprising and of theoretical significance. Most EFL studies regard grammar as an aspect of language that is hard to improve through communicative activities. This is because during interaction, learners pay more attention to meaning than to form (Krashen, 1982; Li, 2025). At the same time, other lines of SLA research, particularly on form-focused and processing instruction, have shown that grammar can also improve through structured, meaning-based practice (DeKeyser, 2007). However, this pattern is not applicable to the case of Thai EFL learners. In the Thai secondary education system, grammar rules are emphasized. This means that most first-year university students are already familiar with much grammar. They do not get the opportunity to apply that knowledge in real communicative situations. Activity-based tasks in this course helped to address that gap. The tasks involved the students in using language by means of pair work, group discussion, role play and translation. There were no new grammar rules for students to learn. Rather, they were to use the grammar that they already knew in meaningful contexts. DeKeyser's (2007) skill acquisition theory accounts for this. The theory suggests that meaningful practice can transform declarative knowledge (knowing a rule) into procedural knowledge (automatic use of a rule). This finding has an important implication. For learners who already have strong passive grammar knowledge, communicative activity-based tasks may produce grammar gains more quickly than for learners who are starting from scratch.

Collaborative Learning as the Primary Driver of Engagement

Collaborative engagement was the strongest dimension across all measures, with the self-assessment mean for Collaboration in Groups reaching $M = 4.64$, the highest-rated area overall, and 40% of interview participants identifying group work as the most engaging element of the course. This finding aligns with Alzubi et al. (2024), who found that structured collaborative tasks produced greater EFL gains than individual instruction, and with Warsah et al. (2021), who showed that collaborative learning strengthens critical thinking through peer argumentation. However, the present findings go beyond these studies in one important respect. The effectiveness of collaboration in language output or critical thinking has been reported in most previous studies. This study reveals that collaboration generated the highest language gains (via interactive tasks) and the strongest engagement response (via group cohesion), indicating that collaborative design is a single mechanism that operates to increase language gains at the same time as it increases

the engagement response. One interesting result was that the highest mean of the individual items was for the item “I respect the opinions of all group members” ($M = 4.87$), and 88.80% of the students rated this item the highest. This suggests that the course design was effective in fostering interpersonal norms, which are essential for effective collaborative learning (Warsah et al., 2021). This finding is especially noteworthy in the Thai EFL context, where cultural norms of face-saving and peer deference may make students less likely to openly express or defend opinions (Seemanath & Watanapokakul, 2024). The structured task design, including clearly defined roles, shared goals and accountability, seems to have offered a structure for students to feel safe to express their ideas and respect others' ideas. This is a typical issue in EFL group work, as there is unequal participation and social loafing that lowers the quality of the group work (Rusticus et al., 2023). The result thus indicates that well-structured collaborative tasks are able to change the group dynamics in the Thai university classroom in measurable and positive ways. These findings also reflect Long's (1983, 1996) Interaction Hypothesis, which states that the negotiation of meaning in interaction is key to language learning. In this course, group tasks were used that involved students' communication with a clear purpose and interdependent outcome, which generated real communicative pressure to pay attention to form and content. These tasks provided students with an opportunity to identify and self-correct language as opposed to abstracted grammar exercises. This distinction may account for the greater and more stable gains found in the present course as compared with courses which were based on individual practice only.

Teacher Feedback and the Affective Dimension of Engagement

Student confidence and participation were most strongly influenced by teacher support and positive feedback. 26.7% of the interview respondents reported this. It was the most common factor that came up in the qualitative data. This is in line with Hattie and Timperley (2007), who revealed that effective feedback is one of the most powerful factors that affect learning outcomes. This is also consistent with Derakhshan et al. (2022), who reported that teacher care and rapport influence student engagement in addition to the impact of task design. Language anxiety is a common problem that hinders participation in Thai EFL classrooms. Students are afraid to make mistakes in front of others (Horwitz, 2001; Krashen, 1982). The interview data reveal that the teachers in this course decreased that anxiety in three ways. First, they affirmed students' efforts. Secondly, they accepted errors as a natural by-product of the learning process. Third, they used encouraging language throughout the lessons. These practices contributed to students' sense of confidence and willingness to speak, try things, and take communicative risks. A key discovery was that this positive classroom environment was not a coincidence. It was incorporated into the design of the course. All five course sections used the same feedback approach. This consistency across sections shows that a supportive affective climate can be created through deliberate instructional practice. It does not depend only on the individual teacher's personality. As no direct data on individual teachers' behavior or instructional fidelity were collected, this interpretation is offered as inferential rather than directly tested. This finding differs slightly from Derakhshan et al. (2022), who focus on the personal relational qualities of individual teachers. The present results suggest that feedback behavior can be planned and standardized as part of

a course framework. This has direct implications for teacher training and curriculum development in Thai university EFL programs.

Knowledge from Research

The results show that affective climate is as important as task structure in activity-based lesson design. A well-planned activity will not work well if students do not feel psychologically safe. It will also not work if mistakes are seen as failures rather than steps toward learning. In this course, all five sections showed positive affective responses. This suggests that an instructional culture was in place where effort was valued more than accuracy. This environment was not a side effect. It was the result of conscious instructional design.

Data show that 23.3% of the students reported that game-based and competitive activities were highly motivating, which corroborates the potential of gamification in EFL teaching. Gamification features, including points, team competition, and rewards, motivate engagement, which can prompt teachers to incorporate gamification into their course planning. In this course, these elements were not simply used for fun but rather as a vehicle for instruction, enabling the creation of a dynamic environment where language production was not forced but was part of the fun. The literature indicates that there are varying learner responses to the competitive formats despite the positive feedback. In the future, competitive and cooperative aspects of the course should be mixed together so that it is not so much game-based that it would make students sensitive to evaluative pressure, at a disadvantage.

A few drawbacks of this study should be noted. First, there is no comparison group, which means the gains could be due to a natural progression of student development or simply be the result of a new teaching approach. Second, the study was conducted in one institution, with a group of first-year English majors, and the results may not be applied to other groups of learners and other levels of proficiency. In addition, because the semi-structured interviews were drawn from students who self-rated their engagement as moderate to highest, the perspectives of students with lower reported engagement were not captured, which may limit the range of experiences represented in the qualitative findings. It should also be noted that the results across all measures were consistently positive; this pattern is interpreted with some caution, as the absence of a comparison group and reliance on self-report measures may have contributed to it. Finally, the 20-hour instructional period is adequate to observe short-term changes but not to make inferences about the longevity of these changes.

Summary

This study investigated the effectiveness of activity-based learning tasks in a university English preparation course in Thailand through three research objectives. The findings provide clear answers to all three and offer several contributions that extend existing knowledge in EFL pedagogy. *For Research Question 1*, the activity-based instructional tasks were highly effective in

improving students' English language skills. All five skill areas showed statistically significant pre-to-post gains ($p < .001$) with large effect sizes ($d = 0.98-1.90$). The largest gain was in Grammatical Structure (mean gain = +1.85, $d = 1.47$), followed by Reading and Writing (+1.72) and Listening and Speaking (+1.57). The overall mean score increased by 7.70 points, with a very large overall effect size ($d = 1.90$). These findings support the idea that a structured, activity-based course design can result in wide and deep language growth in several skill areas in one semester. The activity-based tasks in Research Question 2 showed a strong positive influence on the students' learning engagement and behavioral patterns. Students reported their overall engagement at the highest level ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.48$), and collaborative engagement as the highest level of engagement ($M = 4.64$). Behavioral engagement (active participation in class activities) had the highest rating ($M = 4.27$), while task performance (cognitive engagement) was consistently high ($M = 4.17$). The results indicate that the course design not only fostered language achievement but also the learning behaviors, including sustained effort, peer interaction and task accountability, required for success in university EFL programs. Students' perceptions of the activity-based course design were always positive for Research Question 3. The data from the interviews resulted in five themes. Firstly, the most interesting part was the collaborative group work, which provided a low-pressure opportunity for peer interaction. Secondly, game-based and competitive activities boosted energy and enthusiasm. Thirdly, teacher support and positive feedback led to psychological safety and less language anxiety. Fourth, authentic and creative tasks, like voice over and role play, linked classroom learning to the real communicative purposes. Fifth, students felt that they had improved in their own English skills, especially in the areas of grammar, vocabulary and communicative confidence. The perceptions indicate that the course design was successful and that it was perceived by the learners as meaningful and motivating.

The study has three contributions. Theoretically, the results confirm and further expand DeKeyser's (2007) theory of skill acquisition and Long's (1983, 1996) Interaction Hypothesis, indicating that both theories are applicable in a Thai university EFL context, and that the grammar gain pattern specific to Thai learners (activating passive declarative knowledge through communicative tasks) represents a context-specific mechanism not fully accounted for in existing theory. On the practical side, this study shows that a completely redesigned, activity-based preparatory course can boost the language skills in five areas and, at the same time, engage students in the multi-dimensional use of a natural classroom without the need of a separate control group or laboratory setting. The course design outlined here provides a replicable, evidence-based course design for curriculum developers and EFL instructors. Methodologically, the mixed methods approach (pre-post testing, Likert-scale self-assessment, and thematic analysis of interviews) offers a more comprehensive view of learning outcomes than do single-method studies. The interrater reliability coefficient (Cohen's kappa = .82) and audit trail further enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings.

In terms of ethical considerations, this research was conducted using practitioner inquiry principles (Burns, 2010), whereby all data were gathered through regular course assessments and reflection forms and not specially created research instruments. All data were analysed at the group level, with anonymised aggregated data being used throughout, to ensure participant privacy. Not a single pupil was identified or disadvantaged by the process of study.

Future studies should include a follow-up of language gains over time, following participants over several semesters. Research with lower-proficient learners or with learners who are not English majors would create a greater sense of generalizability. Causal claims could be bolstered by comparative studies that include a control group that is taught in the traditional manner. Furthermore, studies that examine the type of activities in the sequence that lead to the greatest improvement for each skill area would give finer-grained advice to course designers. Finally, replication of this design in other Thai university settings and in other EFL contexts in Southeast Asia would shed light on the degree to which this context-specific pattern of grammar gain is found in other contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researcher offers the following recommendations.

1. Recommendations for Applying the Research Findings

Findings from Research Objective 1 showed that the activity-based instructional tasks improved students' English language skills with statistical significance in every skill area ($p < .001$), with the largest gain in grammatical structure. The activity-based instructional design should therefore adopt to use in other university for developing English preparation courses, particularly applying tasks that give students structured practice using grammar within authentic communicative contexts, helping them apply their existing grammar knowledge more naturally.

Findings from Research Objective 2 showed that the activity-based tasks had a strong positive effect on students' learning engagement, with collaborative engagement rated highest. It would be good to encourage instructors to design group and pair tasks that give students genuine opportunities to interact, and provide training on consistent, positive feedback techniques to create a safe classroom climate that supports students' participation.

Findings from Research Objective 3 showed that students held positive perceptions of the activity-based course design across every theme, particularly collaborative group work, game-based activities, teacher support, and communicatively authentic tasks. The integration of the four elements into course design for instructor development would be considered in the university-level English programs.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

The key contribution of this study is that activity-based learning can prompt students to put their existing declarative grammar knowledge into practice, consistent with DeKeyser's (2007) skill acquisition theory and Long's (1983, 1996) Interaction Hypothesis. This design can be applied

to English preparation courses at other institutions, with attention to well-structured activities that give students opportunities to practice language in meaningful contexts.

Future research should examine the long-term effects of this instructional design across multiple semesters, its effects on lower-proficiency learners or non-English majors, and the links between specific activity types and specific areas of language development.

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