ENHANCING STUDENTS' SPEAKING PROFICIENCY BY APPLYING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Project-based learning has proven its strengths in improving language learner's abilities and teaching method diversity. Although it is widely used in teaching a second language like English worldwide, in Vietnam, especially in Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), it is the very first step to prove its benefits in language teaching and learning here. This study is conducted in order to investigate its advantages in improving ESL students' speaking proficiency, which is considered as the most challenging skill with Asian students for its productive aspects.

Keywords: *ESL students, speaking skill, proficiency, project-based learning, TUEBA*

INTRODUCTION

1. Rationale for research

1.1. Project-based learning overview

PBL, which uses problems to start the lesson is a learning approach first developed in the 1960s at the McMaster's Medical School. According to Roh (2003), this methodology is a learning context that involves students in both knowledge comprehension and problem-solving. This method beginning with the real problems; hence, it motivates students to study and develop their critical thinking. As Arends and Klicher (2008) state, PBL enhance students' thinking, problem-solving, communication, and interpersonal skills better than the other learning approaches and by inference, the students will improve their self-confidence. These skills and abilities are essential in language learning. Especially, self-confidence is the initial issue in improving students' speaking ability.

By applying PBL in students' studying, they are able to build their own understanding because PBL includes five phases of construction (Arends and Klicher (2008)). These phases are demonstrated in the following table.

The PBL Pedagogical and Learning Phases

Phases	Teachers' Activities
Orient students with the problem.	The teacher explains the learning objectives and learning material. The teacher also motivates students to be actively involved in the learning process to solve problems.
Organize students for study.	The teacher helps students define and organize the tasks that are related to the problems.
Assist independent and group investigation.	The teacher encourages students to collect data and information, experiment, and solve the problem clearly.
Develop and present artefacts and exhibits.	The teacher helps students collaborate with others and present the results.
Analyse and evaluate the problem-solving process.	The teacher facilitates students to make reflection and evaluate the problem-solving process.

Despite plenty of benefits, this approach got quite many criticisms. The first drawback which is stated by Finucane, Johnson, and Prideaux (1998) is costly. Besides, Berkson (1993) states that there is no confirmation

that this method is better than the traditional one in enhancing the motivation and facilitation of the developments of interpersonal skills. Another opponent is that the actual multiple-choice test conducted by students who using PBL in their study is poorer and they do not fully understand the concepts (Norman and Schmidt (1992)).

Although there is some opposition to this methodology, it can be denied that this methodology has its strengths to language learning and teaching. As Thomas (2000) stated "project-Based Learning utilizes complex task, based on challenging question problems that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigate activities, allow students to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time, and culminate in realistic products or presentations. "

1.2 Impact of PBL on learners' speaking skill

According to Harmer (2002), two factors that make good speaking are language features and the ability to process information. The first criteria include pronunciation, stress, intonation, pitch, grammar and fluency while the second one is how much information is covered in the language processing or comprehending. It is also the ability to interact with other people to produce a natural conversation. Therefore, in order to improve learners' speaking proficiency, the teaching and learning process must provide them with effective and authentic communication. This is stated by Kayi (2006), who thinks that teacher should organize speaking activities where meaningful communication takes place instead of leading them to parrot memorization. Wallace, Stariha and Wallerg (2004) added that teachers have to supply students with chances to practise their English speaking skill.

Basing on its procedure and advantages in teaching, PBL has significant impacts on enhancing learners' speaking skill because it helps them to maximize the ability to produce their language. In addition, it is a tool to improve learners' self-confidence which is defined as a belief that students can help themselves and others to achieve their goals (Schunk, 2012; McElmeel, 2002; Schiraldi, 2001). For second language learners, the ability to speak fluently and confidently in front of the crow or in a very simple situation like a daily conversation is limited due to the fear of making mistakes. Therefore, self-confidence is one of the crucial factors that help learners to overcome these difficulties in language learning because it allows them to have positive opinions and be able to manage themselves (Srivastava (2013).

Thus in this research study how PBL motivate and enhance students' positive opinions towards their speaking and group works during their study.

1.3. Project-based learning in TUEBA

Although English has been paid much attention from both leaders of university and lecturers, it seems to be a serious challenge to all learners. Numerous teaching methodologies and extra curriculums have been proposed and applied, but they have not proved to be effective. Due to the benefits proved by Kloppenborg & Baucus, (2004) who indicated that learning becomes fruitful for learners because they exhibit their abilities to plan, manage, and accomplish projects through their content knowledge and language skills, project-based learning (PBL) has been considered to used in English teaching to make another new approach to students' learning and teachers' teaching. PBL has been applied in several Advanced classes in TUEBA, and it has shown its strength in improving learners' language proficiency. However, its positive effects on a particular skill like Speaking has not been reported. Thus, this study is conducted to aim at answering the question **"How does project-based learning influence first-year second language learners' speaking skill in TUEBA?"**

1.4. Research context

Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA) is the place that educates majors such as administration, economics, economic laws, accounting, banking and finance. English is a compulsory subject for all these majors but students seem not to be interested in it. Although educators and lecturers have created a variety of activities and continuously changing and adapting new teaching methods and teaching materials, it is still left behind. Recently, PBL has been applied in language teaching in this school to enhance students' motivation in language learning for Advanced classes, and it has shown its positive trend for language study in this school.

Advanced classes are in the Advanced Programme of TUEBA. This programme requires students to study all subject in English. Thus, in the first year of the programme, students are asked to take part in the probation course in English, which provides them with the necessary skills and language proficiency to continue to study their major in the following years. The curriculum includes…. subjects and project-based learning is launched in the second semester in the name Cultural Project-Based Learning which lasts for 18 weeks with 2 phases:

In the first phase which is in 11 weeks, students are required to create a brochure, which is designed themselves with vivid images to introduce different cultural identities of not only Vietnam but also other countries in the world. They are free to choose the destination to do their investigation. They have to write drafts, make changes and report to a supervisor who gives comments on their works and assists help during their team working. In this phase, students are required to make their presentation on what they have done too.

In the second phase, they are asked to prepare for a cultural festival, in which they will perform the cultural issues they have written in their brochure. During the left 7 weeks, they practice presenting these cultural items in groups and create these cultural products model. At the festival, there will be a board of judgements who are lecturers of English to evaluate their presentation and cultural products.

1.5. Research participants

The research was conducted among 30 fresher students of one advanced class in TUEBA. All of them underwent the first semester of studying English for all skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. They also had the chance to join in an extra-curriculum subject which required them to themselves make a presentation about different cuisine in a Vietnamese meal. Thus, they somewhat understood how to deal with a project. Through this activity along with other subjects taught in English, they find it hard to deal with speaking skills due to their lack of vocabulary, grammar, ideas to talk and especially the ability to express their ideas thoroughly to the listener.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Instrument

The semi-structured interview was used in order to involve the participants to recall the details of their experience with the presentation of the interdisciplinary-based project through a series of open-ended questions that enabled the interviewer to build upon and collect the answers to each question for further analysis. The semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to supplement other relevant questions to obtain more information, apart from a written list of guided questions. The interviews were conducted in the students' native language (i.e. Vietnamese) to avoid misunderstanding in conveying a message.

2.2. Procedures

Since the cultural project required students to work collaboratively, students were asked to form their teams voluntarily. There were a total of 5 groups of six students representing one project in this English course. After introducing the theme of the project, every group of students was asked to interpret the theme and decide how they would present their ideas on the cultural identities of the place they chose. Each group had seven weeks to work on their presentation and cultural performance before performing or presenting their project in class. After their presentation, each group was interviewed about their project using the guided questions which were related to project title, presentation style, and student's satisfaction with the presentation, benefits and obstacles in doing the project. Interview data were recorded, fully transcribed, and translated into English. For reliability purposes, the translated data were double-checked and corrected.

2.3. Data Analysis

Transcripts from the interviews were coded by themes related to project implementation and skills enhancement issues.

3. Results

3.1. Students' viewpoints on the implementation of PBL in their studying curriculum

PBL was implemented as the compulsory subject in addition to the other skill subjects like speaking, writing, listening, reading which aims at encouraging the students to maximize the use of English skills they had acquired in class as a medium to present content and exchange information about the cultural issues they had studied about. The collected data illustrated 3 main issues concerning the implementation of the project. It can be seen in table 1, the matters contain presentation schedule, students' language competence and project recommendation.

In term presentation schedule, students of four groups agreed that they had enough time to prepare for that. They had time to help each other dealing with preparing, practising and performing. However, members of group 5 suggested presenting earlier or later due to other's subject deadlines and assignment at the final term. They felt stressed with the workload and pressure of the preparation so they could not have a better performance.

The second issue got the most comments from all group. Most of the group thought that their language had got better because most of the time they have to use English to search for information, write the scenario and practice speaking. While four groups were satisfied with their improvement, group 2 got troubles in dealing with the language of presentation. Although the lecturer had a lesson on how to make a good presentation, they found it hard to apply and perform in front of others.

The last concerns related to the project recommendation got the whole agreement of five groups. They recommended having more subjects like this one so that they could have more chances and pressure to improve their language skills and group cooperative.

Table 1: Examples of Interview data on implementation-related issues

Issues	Interview Data Examples
Presentation schedul	G1: "We had enough time to prepare for the presentation. We divided tasks to each member and set the deadline for those so that we completed punctually." G3: "We had a clear plan at first, and then we got the advice from my supervisor to make it more efficient. And we finished it perfectly, I think." G5: "We're so stressed with it because we all have to. We didn't have much time to prepare and rehearse. There were a lot of assignments to do."
Language competence	G4: "We did the project from what we have studied about. It's interesting to know more about other culture in our country and the world. In addition, we have adopted many languages that we use in our daily lives." G3: "There are many things we can learn themselves and use in our daily conversation. We used to use the dictionary to look up those words when we wanted to introduce our culture to my foreign friends, but now it is easier" G2: " We have been adapted quite a lot of vocabulary and knowledge but when we tried to perform these, we made troubles both in pronouncing and expressing because many words are abstract and difficult to remember."
Project recommendation	G1: "We have experienced a great time together when we worked in a group. We had quarrels, disagreement, debate and discussion all the process we did this project. However, we realized that we have learnt a lot from this. It makes our friendship more solid, and our knowledge broader. We hope to have more projects like this in the coming semester." G2: " If only we could learn this subject earlier. It is an authentic learning way". G3: "We find this subject interesting because we can do everything ourselves with the help of our instructor who gave us a lot of advice to make our products better." G4: "I wish all subjects in our curriculum were conducted in this way because we are able to learn by applying in real life so that it is easier to understand. G5: Although it is quite stressful for us because we have to deal with the subject matter ourselves in addition to another subject workload, it is an enjoyable subject. This is the only subject that we can learn naturally and do not have to deal with true/ false or multiple-choice exercises."

*** Note: G stands for Group. For example, G1 represents interview data from Group 1;*
G2 represents interview data from Group 2.

3.2. Students' opinion about the impact of PBL on their speaking skill.

According to interview data, the students believe that their language competence including reading, writing, speaking and listening improved due to their process of researching, analyzing, collecting, categorizing documents and materials supporting their project. In order to complete the brochure in the 1st phase of the project, they had to do research on a wide range of materials on the Internet, books and other sources. After then, they had to read through and select which information was needed in their products. As a result, their reading skill improved because they had to deal with a range of documents within a short time. After selecting the necessary materials, they had to write and rewrite several times until the final draft was produced. This enhanced their writing skill.

In the second phase, their preparation for presentation required them to practice speaking more so that they could perform confidently in front of the audience. They thought that this phase gave them a particular turning point for their speaking because they had to rehearse their speech as well as at the stage. Each member of the group listened and gave comments on other's speech and then they fixed their problems together. Group 2 said that it was an effective way for them to look back and recognize their mistakes, which were hard to do before. Group 4 added that their fluency developed because they were more confident to speak even they made mistakes. Group 5 stated that they stopped laughing at other's mistakes when they saw they had the same trouble.

Table 2: Examples of Interview Data about speak skill enhancement

Interview Data Example

G1: "After this project, our writing and speaking developed significantly. Especially with speaking, we are more confident to speak what we think without hesitation."

G2: "It's so helpful when we listen to other's speech. We recognize their mistakes when they say something, and we help each other to correct them to make our speech better. The top of that is we can avoid those mistakes."

G3: "We wrote down what we intend to speak in our presentation, learn by heart and practice speaking. At first, it was so difficult because it made my speech as reading aloud without any intonation and rhythm. By practice saying again and again and omitting some complex structures in writing, our speech gets better."

G4: "I think the most remarkable issue here is our fluency enhanced. We talk more in English to each other so the speed of speech is better although we made mistakes."

G5: "When we practised for the first time, all of us laughed at each other because we said something that we could not understand. It was because of our bad pronunciation and word combination. After that, we took a serious look back at what we had laughed at and realized that we had the same problems."

Note: G stands for Group. For example, G1 represents interview data from Group 1;
G2 represents interview data from Group 2.

4. Discussion

The present study of enhancing speaking skill through using PBL has shown some significant results. The most interesting finding is the students' positive attitude towards this compulsory subject and the suitability in the process of applying it in English learning. Even it receives the suggestion of applying in all other subjects from students because it helps them integrate their language skills and background knowledge to complete the project.

This finding corroborates findings from numerous studies for this matter, which show that PBL activities allow students to combine language skills and content knowledge to complete the projects (Fried-Booth, 1997; Simpson, 2011; Solomon, 2003; Srikrai, 2008; Stoller, 1997; Willie, 2001).

However, one problem which needs consideration in future implementation is the schedule. Though most of the groups found it efficient to conduct the project with a time limitation, one group found it hard because of their heavy workload of other subjects along with this one. This might be explained by the lack of students' time management skill because they are familiar with provided schedules and deadline, which are set by their teachers for certain activities. Thus, the adjustment of the implementation plan and the additional time management instruction regarding English presentation should be included for future launching.

With respect to the enhancement of students' speaking skills, the findings of the study are consistent with those of Srikrai (2008) and Simpson (2011) who found that students' language skills were developed through project-based activities. In the current research, students confirmed that their reading, writing and especially speaking improved significantly. They felt more confident to perform their language ability on the stage and knew how to help each other to solve problems and correct language mistakes when they made. They added that speaking fluency and speed also developed and the hesitation to talk was minimized. These findings indicate that integrating authentic activities in language practice processing information from a variety of sources can enhance language skills (Stoller, 1997).

5. Conclusion

The current study was conducted to investigate ESL students', particular students in the advanced class at TUEBA viewpoint about how project-based learning, a compulsory subject in their school curriculum can be launched in groups in a language class to motivate learners to apply their language competence and knowledge to complete a task. It also collects data about students' opinion about how much this learning and teaching approach enhances their speaking skill.

The analysis of learners' interview data illustrated project implementation and skill improvement issues. Students believed that this project is suitable for them and the course because they can apply their background language knowledge in addition to their own research on carrying the project. This learning approach does not only help them to enhance their language skills especially speaking but also provide them with chances to recognized their common mistakes to avoid and their language ability to improve. Moreover, this task supplied them with opportunities in applying their language skills in real-life situation.

Despite students' attitude toward PBL, their point of view reveals some limitation of the study. It is the teacher's instruction for time management in dealing with a scheduled – project. As a result, some students found it hard to meet the deadline due to their overload of other assignment and their poor skill in time management. One more drawback that needs consideration is the lack of confidence of some students when they present. Some students still got troubles when they stand in front of others to speak English.

According to a current study, it can be denied that this has proved two important implications. Firstly, PBL is an appropriate learning and teaching method in an English class especially in the TUEBA context where opportunities to use English are limited. Secondly, this approach can motivate students to maximize their language skills learned from English class and improve their confidence in using English. Thus, using the project as a part of accessing the system seems appropriate. However, this research is an investigation about how PBL improve learners' speaking skill; therefore, the generalizability of this study is limited. This limitation will be discussed in further studies, and other methods of assessing learners' speaking skills enhancement will be focused on.

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