



EFFECTIVENESS OF A PROJECT-BASED APPROACH IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPEAKING SKILLS IN HIGH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the investigation of the effectiveness of a project-based approach in the development of speaking skills in high school. A project-based approach is a learning model that enables students to participate actively in making a project within the group to improve English language skills. The research attempts to examine the impacts of a project-based approach on students' fluency, accuracy, pronunciation as well as motivation. As the present research is empirical, observation and a questionnaire were applied to collect data. A ten-step model for implementing projects in language teaching was used during the research process. The class chosen for research had never been engaged in making a project in previous lessons. Therefore, findings show that a project-based approach could improve students' speaking skills and raise their motivation.

KEYWORDS

Project-based approach, project work, project-based assignments, EFL teaching, teaching speaking, speaking skill, fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, motivation, high school.

INTRODUCTION



Since the English language is spoken all over the world and has attained the status of lingua franca, the demand for learning this global language is growing day by day. Foreign languages are usually acquired and practiced through four aspects (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), each of which provides unique concepts and skills. Among four language skills, speaking is regarded as the core skill in foreign language teaching as it is what learners generally want to be able to do. Specifically, a large percentage of the world's language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking (Jack C Richards and Renandya Willy, 202, p. 201). Thus, speaking is an aspect that requires special attention and instructions in the context of EFL teaching.

For high school students, having good speaking skills is a requirement in the English subject. As Richards (2006) states the goal of teaching speaking is to provide learners with communicative competence and classroom activities that develop learners' ability to express themselves through speech. Moreover, getting students to speak or use the language they are learning is a vital part of a teacher's job (Harmer, 2004). However, it is inevitable that English teachers face challenges in teaching speaking which can be explained by the lack of students' motivation, low level of participation, shyness, pronunciation problems, and so on. In this context, a project-based approach can be of great help to eliminate the problems encountered by both teachers and students in speaking classes.

In the course of teaching English globally, various approaches have been applied to develop

students' speaking proficiency. One of them is the Project-based approach (also referred to as Project-based learning). As the name suggests, the Project-based approach involves students improving their language skills through the completion of projects both in and outside of the classroom. It requires teachers to create a classroom culture of creativity and engagement in which students share their work and reflect on the processes they use to create and complete their projects (Cooper & Murphy, 2016). In particular, learners are engaged in purposeful communication to complete authentic activities (project-work), so that they have the opportunity to use the language in a natural context and participate in meaningful activities which require authentic language use (Fragoulis, 2009).

The aim of the present research is to examine the effectiveness of a project-based approach in the development of speaking skills of high school students at Uzbek state school. By observing the implementation of project works in English classes and conducting a questionnaire among students the research attempts to explain the impact of project-based learning on students' speaking skills as well as motivation.

Literature review

Teaching speaking

Speaking skill is regarded as the ability to use a language in oral communication. As stated by Ann Burns and Joyce, before EFL teachers decide to teach speaking skills, they need to find the background data about the students' needs and goals. Another important task of English instructors in teaching speaking is to advance the



development of fluent, accurate, appropriate, and authentic language on the part of their learners. This requires an understanding of the nature of speaking, the principles of error correction, pragmatics, methodology of teaching in order that teachers can promote oral communication skills in the target language (Celce-Murcia & Brinton, 2014).

While developing speaking skills teachers should be able to plan lessons properly and particularly, focus on the speaking activities. According to Penny Ur (2012), there are several characteristics of successful speaking activities. First, learners are talking a lot during speaking class. It implies that the instructors are required to provide the activities in which the student talk time exceeds teacher talk time. Second, the participants have the same chances to speak. It infers that classroom activities should not be dominated by active students. The third, motivation is high. It means the activities should make the students eager to speak because they are interested in the topic and assignment provided.

Project-based approach

According to Thomas (2000), a project-based approach is a learning model that provides an opportunity for students to participate actively in making a project within the group or individual work to improve English language skills, particularly speaking skills. Project-based learning is based on the constructivist learning theory, which claims that learning is deeper and more meaningful when students are involved in constructing their own knowledge. Dikli states

that “any type of method that displays what students know about a specific topic, i.e. development of plans, artwork, research proposals, multimedia presentations, is considered a project” (Dikli, 2003, p. 15). As was emphasized by Harmer (2001), projects involve investigation, reporting, commitment, and dedication from students and the most important thing here is the end product. From those statements, it can be inferred that project-based learning (PBL) is a method that makes students actively engaged in the learning process and improves their language as well as critical thinking skills.

Bülent Alan and Fredricka L. Stoller (2005) enumerate some possible options for the end-product of the project work which may be a brochure, oral presentation, class newspaper or wall newspaper, poster, graphic display, guide book, simulation, survey report, theatrical performance, letter, video or film, maquette, multimedia presentation and written report. When teaching English teachers can assign various engaging project works to develop multiple skills (language skills, subskills, critical thinking skills) according to the aims of the lesson, students’ interests, age, and level. In a nutshell, the teacher creates a student-centered learning environment and facilitates or guides students through the completion of their projects.

Previous researches

In EFL and ESL teaching field a number of investigations have been conducted on the effect of a project-based approach to speaking skills in various contexts. Gökhan Baş (2011) investigated



the effects of project-based learning on students' academic achievement and attitudes towards English lessons of 9th-grade students. In order to test the significance between the groups, the independent samples t-test was used. The results of the research showed a significant difference between the attitude scores of the experiment group and the control group. Moreover, project-based learning was more effective in terms of students' academic achievement.

Pryla Rochmahwati (2016) in the article entitled "Project-Based Learning to Raise Students' Speaking Ability: Its' Effect and Implementation" carried out research to investigate the effect of Project-Based Learning on students' speaking ability at the College of Islamic Studies in Indonesia. The researcher used questionnaires, tests, observations, and interviews as data collection. During the teaching process, meaningful and authentic project works such as making puppet shows of the Cinderella story, preparing traditional food, and presenting unforgettable holidays, were assigned to students. The result of the analysis indicated that there was a significant effect of Project-Based Learning on students' speaking ability. The researcher suggested several effective procedures for the implementation of Project-Based Learning which are dividing the class into groups, explaining the project, and performing the project. At last, the students showed a significantly positive attitude toward the implementation of Project-Based Learning in speaking class (Rochmahwati, 2016).

Research questions

The following research questions were formulated based on the theoretical basis and the aim of the study:

1. To what extent is a project-based approach effective in the development of speaking skills of 8th-grade students?
2. How can a project-based approach improve students' motivation at Uzbek state schools?

Methods

The research utilizes both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Structured observation and questionnaires were used as data collection tools. Observation is a very powerful and useful method for gaining insights into situations.

The present research was conducted at state school № 112, in M.Ulugbek district, Tashkent. High school students, particularly, 8th-grade students were chosen as research participants. The number of students was 12. The students were often taught using traditional methods by the teacher and they were rarely engaged in making projects.

Before starting an investigation, the researcher analyzed the school textbook of 8th grade "Teens' English" and familiarized herself with the situation in the class. The analysis of the school textbook enabled the researcher to design 2 projects for students, based on the topics covered in the textbook as the activities should be relevant to the language material taught during the lessons. For each project work, 2 lessons were devoted and they were assigned in different terms.



In the course of project work implementation teachers followed a popular methodological model which consists of a ten-step procedure for implementing project-based assignments proposed by Stoller (1997). The steps can be briefly described as follows:

Step 1: Agree on a topic for the project, discussing and activating background knowledge, dividing groups.

Step 2: Determine the final outcome of the project, basing on the goal set.

Step 3: Structure the project body, deciding on what information students need, and how to find them, and agreeing on assessment criteria.

Step 4: Prepare students for the language demands of information gathering.

Step 5: Gather information with teacher support regarding sources.

Step 6: Prepare students for compiling and analyzing the information.

Step 7: Analyze and synthesize the information and decide on reports.

Step 8: Prepare students for the presentation of their project products.

Step 9: Present the final product in front of the class.

Step 10: Evaluate the projects.

Project 1. The project work was making a poster presentation on how to protect the environment. In the first meeting, the teacher introduced the topic “Environmental problems” and started a discussion activating students’ background knowledge and several initial steps of the above-given model were applied. Furthermore, the teacher provided students with

a text about environmental issues in order that learners can analyze and do reading comprehension activities. In general, the first lesson was dedicated to the preparation for students’ project work. For the next class, students were divided into groups and assigned a poster presentation on different environmental problems and their solutions.

Project 2. The second project was a theatrical performance. The students were required to read a short story and perform a play. Firstly, learners read a story in class, and the teacher conducted follow-up activities in order to clarify the plot, characters, and the moral of the story. At the end of the class, each group chose a story provided by the teacher and the students were asked to read the story, divide roles and prepare a performance for the next lesson. The second lesson was dedicated to the theatrical performance of students. Students presented the final product, i.e. their play in front of the class.

After the implementation of the project-based approach, the researcher observed the performance/presentation of students’ projects and assessed their works according to the rubric. The benefit of this structured observation is that it “enables the researcher to generate numerical data from observations” (Reid, 2012, p. 41). Thus, the investigator applied a specially designed rubric to measure the effect of project-based instruction on learners’ speaking skills. The rubric covers the aspects such as fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation which are core constituents of speaking skills. Also, the assessment of the final product, i.e. poster presentation and theatrical



performance was included. Each project work as well as each student’s speaking skills have been assessed on a five-point scale.

A questionnaire was given to the students to investigate their attitude towards project works. A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. The present research questionnaire consists of 8 questions and encompasses dichotomous, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was carried out after the completion of two projects.

Results

For this study, we analyzed the data collected from observation and a questionnaire. It is important to correctly interpret the results. Based on our observation of students’ performance and the data collected, we can reflect that students’ accuracy level was higher than fluency and pronunciation (see Table 1).

Because in previous terms learners were taught mostly grammar and there was insufficient attention to other language skills. Therefore, there was a slight difference among these aspects. It can be inferred from the table that students’ speaking skills have improved moderately between the two projects since the research had small scope. The fluency increased from 70% to 80%, accuracy from 73,3% to 81,6% and pronunciation from 66,6% to 75%. In general, as the students were required to plan, discuss projects, and analyze materials for the presentation, project-based instruction made them speak more and communicate with the teacher and classmates to accomplish the tasks. These conditions could have a positive impact on speaking skill development. In addition, the researcher took into consideration the delivery, content and creativity of students while observing the oral presentations.

Table 1. Assessment of students’ speaking skills during the project works

Groups	№	Students (initials)	Fluency		Accuracy		Pronunciation		Final product	
			Project I	Project II	Project I	Project II	Project I	Project II	Project I	Project II
1	1	AA	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	5
	2	IN	3	3	3	3	3	4		
	3	KA	4	5	4	5	5	5		
	4	JD	4	4	4	4	3	4		
2	5	MS	2	3	3	3	3	3	4	5



3	6	AT	3	3	3	4	3	3	5	5
	7	QA	4	5	4	5	4	5		
	8	RM	4	4	4	4	3	4		
	9	KhR	5	5	5	5	5	5		
3	10	SS	3	3	3	4	3	3	5	5
	11	PU	4	5	5	5	4	4		
	12	BSh	2	3	2	3	3	3		
Total			42	48	44	49	40	45	13	15
Mean (average)			3.5	4	3.6	4.08	3.3	3.75		
Percentage			70%	80%	73,3%	81,6%	66,6%	75%		

In the process of project work completion, most of the students showed responsibility towards the tasks assigned as it was the first time, they were fulfilling such projects. However, some students were highly reluctant and considered the task too difficult to handle.

Another research instrument, the questionnaire indicates that the implementation of the project-based approach could increase students' interest to learn English. A short

questionnaire was designed to ascertain the participants' attitudes toward project-based assignments. The first question was designed to find out whether students like working in groups as projects require collaboration. From the results, it is clear that the majority of learners (84%) enjoyed working in groups whereas 16% of students expressed a negative attitude toward group work (Table 2).

Table 2. Questionnaire items and results

№	Questions	Students' responses		
		Yes	No	
1	Did you enjoy working in groups during project work?	84%	16%	
2	Which project did you like the most?	1 - Poster presentation 34%	2-Theatrical performance 66%	None 0%



3	Do you think the projects increased your interest in learning English?	Yes 92%	No 8%	
4	What difficulties have you encountered while preparing your projects?	Frequent responses were: - performing a play - using the internet to find relevant information - understanding the story		
5	Do you think project-based learning helped you understand the topic better?	Yes 66%	No 44%	
6	Have you noticed an improvement in your speaking after the project works?	Yes 75%	No 16%	Partially 9%
7	Through project work, I could learn more new words and develop my grammatical competence. Do you agree with this statement?	Agree 75%	Disagree 25%	No opinion 0%
8	Would you like to make such projects in the next English classes?	Yes 92%	No 8%	

Since 2 different project works were assigned to the class more than half of the students (66%) had a preference for the second project work. Since school students usually perform plays only on special occasions such as celebrations, holidays and birthday events, the second project seemed unusual and unexpected to them. Nevertheless, most of them started discussing the distribution of roles and requisites for their performance after the task specifications had been announced, which demonstrated their eagerness. Moreover, the third question asked participants to indicate whether the projects aroused great interest in language learning, and almost all of them answered in the affirmative.

According to the results of the questionnaire, the majority of students face difficulties in using the

internet to find relevant information, understanding the stories, and presenting their projects. The problems can be explained by the fact that the students had a different levels of language proficiency. Thus, students with a lower level of language proficiency encountered misunderstandings with the content of language material.

As autonomy and motivation play large roles in project-based learning a number of students did not consider the approach as useful as traditional ones. Because students explore new knowledge independently and the teacher’s role is to be a facilitator. Also, observations show that students wanted the teacher to give explicit instructions. Therefore, only 66% of students think project-



based learning helped them understand the topic better.

The 6th and 7th questions were intended to investigate whether the skills such as speaking, vocabulary and grammar were developed through the project works. As the findings show, 75% of respondents could notice an improvement in their language skills. The responses to the last questionnaire item were mostly positive because the students enjoyed the process of making and presenting their project works.

DISCUSSION

The main conclusion that can be drawn is that the application of projects such as poster presentation and theatrical performance in English classes for the 8th-grade students at school was quite effective in terms of speaking skills improvement and motivation. As for the speaking skill, there has been observed incremental progress in students' fluency, accuracy and pronunciation. In addition, the findings provide additional information about the changes in students' general attitudes, interests and motivation to learn English. The researcher noted how students were engaged in learning, how much better they worked together, and how they enjoyed working on their projects.

Referring to the result of observation, it can be implied that the steps in implementing a Project-Based approach in speaking class, suggested by Stoller, proved their effectiveness as a ten-step

model could prepare students for the successful accomplishment of their project works. In a nutshell, each step was of huge importance because clear instructions should be provided by the teacher in the process of dividing the class into groups, explaining the project and performing the project. Therefore, for English teachers, it is advisable to follow the stages of implementing the project-based approach so that not no cause any misunderstandings on the part of students.

The limitations of the present study naturally include time limits and a small number of research participants. As the research was carried out during a two-month period it was impossible to see substantial progress in students' speaking skills. Moreover, the number of students did not enable the teacher to indicate the significant effect of the approach applied and explain whether the same attitudes were observed in other high school students. Future investigations are necessary to validate the kinds of conclusions that were drawn from this study. Future research should consider the potential effects of project-based instruction on students' language skills more carefully, for example, by utilizing other types of projects and analyzing their effects in various classes.

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