Implementation of Group Projects to Improve Speaking Skills in High School

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ABSTRACT

Project-based learning (PBL) has been variously applied in EFL classes to promote learners' language skills. As school students usually encounter difficulties while producing speech and communicating in English this study attempts to investigate the effect of PBL, particularly group projects, on students' speaking skills in high school in Uzbekistan. The research utilized paired t-test which allowed collecting quantitative data before and after the implementation of project works. In the course of the study two speaking tests were conducted (pre-and post-tests). The results of this research revealed a significant improvement in students' speaking skills, namely range, accuracy, fluency and interaction, after the application of group projects. These findings suggest that both English teachers and young learners can benefit from team projects since they develop not only speaking skills but also critical thinking and increase motivation to learn the language.

Introduction

Learning foreign languages has been necessity to meet the requirements of modern life. As it provides a great deal of opportunities in many spheres such as business, tourism, education, science, media, etc. more and more people are striving for success by acquiring foreign languages. In this regard, English has become an international language and it is increasing in popularity everywhere including Uzbekistan. Therefore, the government is taking measures to bring foreign language teaching to a new level by creating opportunities for English teachers and making changes in curriculum.

The role of each language skill is significant in teaching English and numerous methodologies have been applied to develop them. Since the principles of conventional approaches, emerged in the last century, do not correspond to the needs of current generation in terms of language acquisition, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been one of the major directions in EFL and ESL teaching. Because developing communicative competence and speaking skills are considered as the main aim by a large proportion of the world's language learners. Therefore, today's language instructors are concerned much about the innovative methods enabling to improve students' speaking skills. The speaking skill is a productive skill and it requires much time and great effort to develop. In fact, encouraging students to produce speech or communicate in the target language is arduous work for language teachers.

In FLT context, instructors provide students with the opportunity to study the subject, but it is also essential that learners have willingness to acquire language. Hence, most teachers and researchers agree that motivation has a very important role in determining success or failure in any learning situation. Gardner (2002) says that "motivation is the key factor in successful language learning – teaching process, because those students who can learn a language will be better if there is motivation by the teacher". Moreover, motivation plays crucial role in the development of speaking. Because the more motivated students are, the more they are willing to speak and communicate in the target language. Harmer (2007) states that one of the factors which influences students' motivation is the method applied by teacher in the classroom (p. 98). In this context, one of the ways of motivating students is creating learner autonomy which can be achieved by applying *project works* in the classroom.

Using various project works in pedagogy has found its reflection in literature as project-based learning (PBL). Project-based approach has been proved to motivate students to learn and facilitates the development of language skills (Li, 2013). Furthermore, it has been utilized for decades in a variety of content areas and in a variety of settings. PBL involves students improving their language skills through the completion of projects both in and outside of the classroom. As emphasized by Harmer (2007), projects involve investigation, reporting, commitment, and dedication from students and the most important thing here is the end product (p. 278). For instance, it can be brochure, oral presentation, class newspaper or wall newspaper, poster, guide book, survey report, theatrical performance, letter, video or film, multimedia presentation and so on (Alan & Stoller, 2005, p. 15).

As teaching methods are supposed to be crucial in motivating learners to participate in speaking activities, especially, in school context, the present research is intended to emphasize the effectiveness of project-based learning, particularly, group projects. Group projects enable students to investigate certain topic, problem or driving question together with the team, subsequently, initiating discussion or communication among group members. The aim of this research is to implement group projects in English classes at high school and examine the effect of this method on students' speaking skill.

Literature review

In the field of EFL and ESL teaching, with the use of project works numerous researches have been carried out to facilitate language acquisition and improve certain language skills in different settings. Simpson (2011) tried to determine whether PBL can enhance English major students' English language proficiency, their self-confidence and learning skills in an English for Tourism course. Qualitative and quantitative data indicated that PBL had a significant effect on the development of students with the low and medium ability. The high ability students showed progress in productive skills, i.e. speaking and writing, but not for their listening and reading skills. The findings also defined that PBL enhanced their learning skills (teamwork, higher-order thinking and presentation skills) along with self-confidence. The research drew conclusion that PBL could be highly effective in teaching English as a foreign language.

Moreover, several studies were conducted to assess the effectiveness of the PBL approach in developing speaking skills. Ahlfeldt (2003) examined the use of PBL approach in contrast with the traditional learning approach. Outcomes of the investigation made it clear that PBL was a more effective instructional method as learners produced better speeches than students who learn in traditional classrooms. In addition, students in PBL were involved in the course material that helped them to cope with their speaking anxiety, which was not the case in traditional classrooms. Rosalina (2013) implemented PBL approach in an EFL university speaking class in Indonesia. Her study revealed that the use of PBL not only could improve students' speaking skills but also positively impacted the sub skills such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Similarly, Rohim (2014) implemented PBL approach to improve speaking skills of a

heterogeneous group consisting of multiple nationalities. His research employed a mixed method approach using action, observation, and reflection during the experiment. The findings showed a considerable improvement in the students' speaking skills (p. 6).

The review of previous studies reveals that the PBL approach provides learners with more choices, autonomy and self-determination to maintain their motivation. For instance, Mossuto (2009) in his empirical research discovered that using PBL in settings where learners studied in interactive groups and their learning depended on open-ended tasks was important in initiating students' thinking throughout the learning process and keeping them highly motivated. Huang (2012) made experiment with PBL in EFL classrooms in order to investigate its feasibility in real situations. Four variables were qualitatively investigated including students' attitude, satisfaction, motivation, and self-achievement. Findings detected that students' attitude toward learning became positive and their motivation level increased significantly compared to the traditional group.

However, except positive influence of projects on students there may occur some difficulties during the implementation of PBL. As the results of the research conducted by Fragoulis (2009) on the implementation of PBL in Greek primary school indicates, some students were not familiar with the group work. In the initial stage, although the roles of group members were assigned clearly, some students were rather dominant during the work, while others did little work. Another difficulty was that some students found the duration of the project too long. Moreover, students seemed to have lost their interest and motivation by the end of the project (p. 117). In addition, several students had problems accepting the new role of the teacher as a facilitator and coordinator, and not as a source of knowledge and provider of solutions.

This study aimed at answering the following research question:

Is there any difference in students' speaking skills before and after the implementation of group projects?

Methods

Research design

The present research focuses on collecting, analyzing, and reporting quantitative data. The study applied paired samples t-test. Pre-test and post-test design were utilized to collect quantitative data about students' speaking performance to answer the research question. Speaking test was organized to assess students' speaking proficiency before and after the treatment (PBL).

Research instruments

The research instruments involved in the current research work are speaking rubric, speaking tests, different group projects, JASP software for statistics. During the pre-test and post-test, the researcher used speaking rubric which consisted of 4 qualitative features of spoken language according to CEFR: range, accuracy, fluency, interaction (Table 1). Students were rated on a three-point scale. As the 10th grade students should obtain B1 language proficiency level the best performances on each criterion were given three points or considered as B1 level. Moreover, 2 speaking tests were administered to see the effect of project-based learning on speaking skills.

Participants

The research participants were 15 pupils studying in 10th grade at one of the state schools in Tashkent (9 male and 6 female students). The participants' age ranged between 16 and 17 years old. The projects provided in the textbooks had often overlooked because of the time limit and the students had not been instructed to complete project works in groups on English subject. Thus, participants were not so familiar with projects and group works.

Table 1. Speaking rubric based on qualitative features of spoken language provided in CEFR framework

	Range	Accuracy	Fluency	Interaction
B1 **3**	Has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express themselves with some hesitation and circumlocutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel and current events.	Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used "routines" and patterns associated with more predictable situations.	Can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production.	Can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can repeat part of what someone has said to confirm mutual understanding.
A2 **2**	Uses basic sentence patterns with memorized phrases, groups of a few words/signs and formulae in order to communicate limited information in simple everyday situations.	Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes	Can make themselves understood in very short utterances, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.	Can ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements. Can indicate when they are following but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of their own accord
A1 **1**	Has a very basic repertoire of words/signs and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations	Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorised repertoire.	Can manage very short, isolated, mainly prepackaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate less familiar words, and to repair communication	Can ask and answer questions about personal details. Can interact in a simple way but communication is totally dependent on repetition, rephrasing and repair

Procedure

Pre-test (speaking test). The test was conducted in pairs (not individually) in order to assess not only accuracy, fluency and language range but also the ability to initiate and maintain conversation. Speaking tests consisted of 3 parts: general questions (name, family, hometown, friends, etc.), picture description and discussion on a familiar topic. Each student's speaking skill was evaluated according to the speaking rubric (Table 1) and the average score was calculated with the use of JASP program.

Group projects. In the course of the experiment several project work ideas, i.e. poster presentation, creating short video and food guide were implemented. Students worked on their projects not only during the lesson but outside of the classroom as well. For instance, making

research on the provided topic or problem, finding relevant information and pictures were assigned as home task. High school students completed their project works in small groups consisting of 3 or 5 members depending on the type of projects. Each project was conducted at the end of the units, which allowed the teacher and students to summarize the content and language material acquired throughout the unit. Before each project work teacher introduced its specification or requirements to the students.

Students carried out their first project on the topic of "Food" and were required to write food guide about Uzbek and British food for tourists in the form of booklet. At home they planned what food and restaurants to include and printed out their pictures. During the lesson final product was created in groups and presented to the class. The next project made students use electronic devices such as mobile phones as they had to shoot short videos with each team member on how to protect the environment. For this creative project students might choose certain environmental problem and give practical advice for people to reduce its harmful effects. Although most of the work was done out of the class each group shared their videos in the classroom and voted on the best idea and performance. The last project, poster presentation, is one of the frequently used ones by English teachers since it helps brainstorm ideas and manageable or feasible in the classroom. Thus, the teacher instructed to make a poster about one famous market in the country including its location, working hours, discounts and products offered there.

Post-test (speaking test). Upon the completion of all group projects post-test was administered in the same way as the pre-test. Although the questions were different from the first test their difficulty level was the same. After the data had been collected the researcher compared the results of 2 speaking tests.

Results and analysis

Paired samples t-test enabled the researcher to compare the speaking test results in terms of range, accuracy, fluency and interaction.

Range

As the notion of range in CEFR presupposes vocabulary or lexical resource the students showed significant progress after the accomplishment of three group projects, which can be seen in the mean score of pre- and post-tests (Table 2). Difference between average scores was approximately 0.7. Since project works made students investigate the topics and initiate autonomy, they acquired a lot of new words and phrases in English.

Table 2. The effect of PBL on students' vocabulary range in speaking

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Pre-test_Range	15	1.800	0.528	0.136	0.293
Post-test_Range	15	2.467	0.481	0.124	0.195

Accuracy

Although students tried to use different tenses and grammatical structures in their speech there were still some mistakes related to native language interference. Therefore, the increase in their accuracy was not as high as vocabulary range. In this case, average score of pre-test indicates 1.5 and the results of post-test shows 2.06 (Table 3). However, thanks to the project presentation learners practiced using appropriate and correct grammar in their speech.

Table 3. The effect of PBL on students' accuracy in speaking

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Pre-test_Accuracy	15	1.533	0.611	0.158	0.399
Post-test_Accuracy	15	2.067	0.594	0.153	0.287

Fluency

According to the results of the experiment students became more fluent compared to pre-test speaking performance. Because while participating in group works, they were told to speak only in the target language to their teammates. Thus, the implementation of projects triggered more student talk time and consequently, led to an increase in fluency of speech to 0.8 points (Table 4).

Table 4. The effect of PBL on students' fluency in speaking

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Pre-test_Fluency	15	1.633	0.516	0.133	0.316
Post-test_Fluency	15	2.400	0.387	0.100	0.161

Interaction

Table 5 presents outcomes of the speaking tests on students' interaction. As the third part of the test required students discuss the given question in pairs it was possible to rate their interaction in conversation. Students asked questions and replied to them so that to maintain discourse. Remarkable improvement of this skill (from 1.4 to 2.4) can be seen in the results of the post-test because learners developed it while completing their projects in groups interacting with each other.

Table 5. The effect of PBL on students' interaction in speaking

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Pre-test_Interaction	15	1.433	0.417	0.108	0.291
Post-test_Interaction	15	2.400	0.431	0.111	0.180

Overall results

In general, implementation of project works was successful as the progress was noted in each aspect of speaking skill. Upon the calculation of all above-given results the researcher concluded that group projects could develop overall speaking skill from 1.6 to 2.3 points (Table 6).

Another way to justify the considerable difference between pre and post-tests is to check the p-value (Table 7). The teacher obtained 0.002 on p-value which is less than 0.05 and this means the difference is statistically significant.

Table 6. Overall speaking test results

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Pre-test_Speaking	4	1.600	0.156	0.078	0.098
Post-test_Speaking	4	2.333	0.180	0.090	0.077

Table 7. Paired Samples T-Test

Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
Pre-test_Speaking	Post-test_Speaking	8.043	3	0.002	4.022	1.622

A significant effect of the implementation of PBL or group projects on students' speaking skills
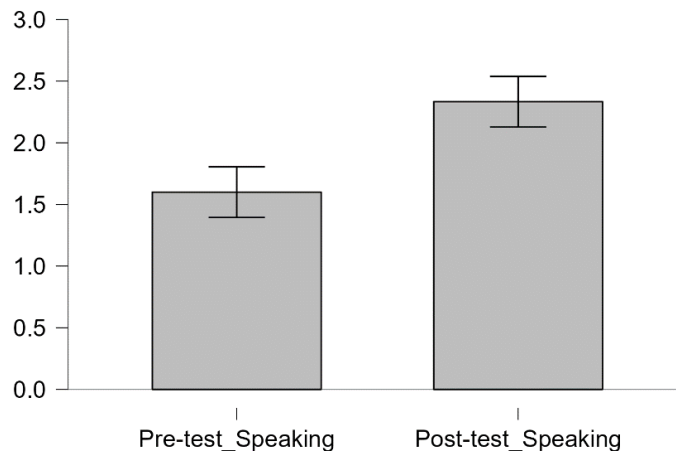
is clearly shown in the figure below.

Figure 1. Bar Plots

Discussion/ Conclusion

The current study attempted to investigate the impact of group projects within the framework of PBL approach on speaking skills of 10th grade students. The findings of the empirical study indicate substantial progress in students' overall speaking skill and its qualitative aspects such as range, accuracy, fluency and interaction. The group projects, namely creating food guide, short videos and poster presentations had positive impact on speaking skills. Moreover, projects raised interest to the subject, built learners' confidence and autonomy as well as supported the development of creative and critical thinking.

However, in the course applying PBL the teacher and students encountered some problems. Mostly, projects caused difficulties associated with organization. For instance, little time, dedicated to projects in school curriculum, did not allow to develop more extended projects in the classroom. Another problem was that some students became more dominant compared to shy and low-level learners even though they all required to take part. In addition, noise and the use of native language made it difficult to manage the class.

Future research can be conducted by examining the effects of PBL on students' other language skills and by organizing other projects and study design.

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