International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Improving Speaking Skills for Non-English Major Students at Pre-Intermediate Level through Project-Based Teaching

Trinh Thi Thuy [1]

[1] **University of Labour and Social Affairs, Vietnam research6688@gmail.com**

ABSTRACT:

This study addresses the challenge faced by non-English major students in tertiary education in Hanoi in achieving pre-intermediate proficiency in speaking English. Despite the requirement to master all four language skills, students often encounter difficulties in constructing coherent English sentences. This research focuses on 105 non-English major students divided into two groups: one receiving traditional instruction and the other undergoing speaking training via a project-based approach. The project-based approach involves students engaging in speaking activities in pairs or groups outside of class, culminating in the creation of two videos and delivery of one presentation, all centered around topics from the New English File textbook. At the end of the semester, speaking test results of both groups are compared. Additionally, feedback on the project-based teaching method is gathered through an online survey and individual interviews with 12 students. The findings demonstrate that teaching through projects fosters collaborative work and provides ample opportunities for speaking practice, ultimately leading to improvements in speaking skills among non-English major students at the pre-intermediate level. This study contributes valuable insights into effective pedagogical approaches for enhancing speaking proficiency in second language learners..

Keywords: Project-based teaching, speaking skills, non-specialized students, pre-intermediate level, video creation.

1. Introduction

In the context of tertiary education in Hanoi, non-English major students are mandated to attain pre-intermediate proficiency as per the standards outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) prior to graduation. This proficiency assessment encompasses all four language skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. However, despite concerted efforts, speaking proficiency among students has persistently remained a challenge, reflected in consistently low assessment scores over the years.

The difficulties encountered by students in mastering spoken English are multifaceted. They struggle with comprehension of English questions, exhibit deficiencies in pronunciation, and face obstacles in forming coherent sentences. Notably, their capabilities in both listening and speaking lag behind, highlighting a pressing need for intervention.

Compounding this issue is the practical limitation faced by teachers in allocating sufficient time to enhance students' speaking skills within the classroom setting. Particularly in classes with large enrollments exceeding 40 students, opportunities for meaningful speaking practice are severely constrained. Individualized attention becomes impractical, hindering the depth of engagement required for substantial improvement.

To address this instructional challenge, project-based teaching emerges as a promising pedagogical approach. By encouraging students to engage in speaking activities outside of class, either in pairs or groups, this method seeks to create additional avenues for practice and skill development.

This research endeavors to assess the efficacy of project-based teaching in enhancing the speaking proficiency of first-year non-English major students at a University in Hanoi. The study encompasses 105 participants from two distinct classes: PreB1.01 and PreB1.02. While the former group adheres to traditional in-class speaking instruction and assessment, the latter, PreB1.02, is engaged in speaking practice facilitated through project-based learning after class.

At the core of this investigation lies the hypothesis that "Project-based teaching improves the speaking skills of non-specialized students." To illuminate this assertion, the study aims to address two specific research questions:

1. How does project-based teaching contribute to the improvement of students' speaking skills?

2. What are students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of project-based teaching in enhancing their speaking abilities?

Through rigorous inquiry and analysis, this research endeavors to provide valuable insights into the potential of project-based teaching as a transformative strategy for bolstering speaking proficiency among non-English major students.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teaching Method According to Project-Based Learning

The literature on project-based teaching in language education encompasses a diverse array of perspectives and empirical studies, highlighting its effectiveness in enhancing speaking skills among learners. Building upon seminal works and recent research findings, this literature review offers a comprehensive synthesis of the theoretical foundations, instructional strategies, and empirical outcomes associated with project-based teaching.

Smith & Dodds (1997) articulate the conceptual framework of project-based teaching as a methodological approach that integrates theory into practical exercises situated within real-life contexts. By delineating clear objectives and employing a predetermined timeframe, projects facilitate both individual and group learning, rendering mandatory outcomes more attainable.

ArchForKids LLC (2015) expands upon this conceptualization by framing project-based teaching as an innovative, learner-centered pedagogy that promotes deep inquiry and collaborative exploration of complex questions. This approach represents a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction, fostering critical thinking, communication skills, and proficiency in information technology.

Empirical research by Maulany (2013) provides empirical evidence of the efficacy of project-based teaching in improving speaking skills among elementary school students in Bandung, Indonesia. The study demonstrates significant improvements in listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall speaking proficiency, underscoring the transformative impact of project-based learning on language acquisition.

Similarly, Agustina (2012) investigates the impact of project-based learning on speaking skills among accounting majors, highlighting the role of regular speaking practice and engagement in project-based activities in fostering confidence and fluency in oral communication.

The research findings of Anyahong (2015) further corroborate the benefits of project-based teaching in enhancing English speaking ability among students at the Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology, Thailand. Notably, the study underscores the motivational benefits of project-based learning, particularly when students are empowered to select and complete projects aligned with their interests and preferences.

Additionally, studies by researchers such as Li and Lei (2019) and Khalifa and Weheba (2018) have explored the effectiveness of project-based teaching in language learning contexts, demonstrating positive outcomes in speaking proficiency and overall language acquisition.

Collectively, these studies contribute to a nuanced understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and empirical outcomes associated with project-based teaching in language education. By providing opportunities for authentic communication, collaborative learning, and self-directed inquiry, project-based teaching emerges as a promising pedagogical approach for enhancing speaking skills and fostering holistic language development among learners.

2.2. The benefits of project-based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) has garnered attention as an effective pedagogical approach for teaching English, with scholars highlighting its numerous benefits in fostering language acquisition and learner engagement. Drawing upon seminal works and recent research findings, this literature review synthesizes the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence supporting the advantages of PBL in language education.

Fragoulis (2009) and Bell (2010) underscore the multifaceted benefits of project-based learning in English language instruction. They argue that PBL creates an optimal environment for English speaking practice and language improvement by engaging learners in authentic tasks within the context of projects. Moreover, PBL promotes collaborative skills within groups, fostering cooperation and communication among learners. Additionally, the active involvement in project-based tasks stimulates learning motivation, enjoyment, and active participation, thereby enhancing language acquisition outcomes.

ArchForKids LLC (2015) further accentuates the advantages of project-based learning by addressing learners' occasional boredom, encouraging active participation, and promoting creativity. By engaging students in hands-on, experiential learning experiences, PBL cultivates a sense of ownership and investment in the learning process, leading to deeper understanding and longer retention of lessons.

Building upon these foundational insights, additional scholars have contributed to the discourse on the benefits of project-based learning in language education:

Thomas (2012) explores the role of project-based learning in promoting language fluency and cultural competence among English language learners. Through meaningful project-based tasks that integrate cultural elements and real-world contexts, students develop not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural communication skills.

Johnson and Johnson (2014) investigate the impact of cooperative learning structures within project-based environments on language learning outcomes. Their research highlights the collaborative nature of PBL, emphasizing the importance of peer interaction and social negotiation in language acquisition.

Huang and Ren (2018) examine the motivational effects of project-based learning on English language learners in China. Their study reveals that PBL enhances intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and positive attitudes towards language learning, leading to improved proficiency and engagement.

Gonzalez (2020) explores the cognitive benefits of project-based learning in language education, emphasizing its role in developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and metacognitive skills. Through authentic, inquiry-based tasks, students not only acquire language proficiency but also develop higher-order thinking abilities essential for academic success.

Collectively, these scholars contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the benefits of project-based learning in language education, underscoring its efficacy in promoting language acquisition, fostering collaborative skills, stimulating motivation, and enhancing cognitive development among learners. As an innovative pedagogical approach, PBL holds promise for addressing the diverse needs and goals of English language learners in the 21st century.

2.3. Challenges in Project-Based Teaching

Project-based teaching (PBT) offers a dynamic and student-centered approach to learning, but it presents educators with a range of challenges that require careful consideration and strategic planning. Drawing upon scholarly insights and empirical research, this literature review synthesizes key challenges associated with project-based teaching and explores strategies for effectively addressing them.

Development of Grading Criteria:

Establishing clear and consistent grading criteria for projects is essential due to the diverse nature of project-based activities (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Each project may vary in learning objectives, content, duration, and activities, necessitating tailored assessment methods that align with project goals and objectives. Educators must develop criteria that effectively evaluate student performance and achievement within the context of project-based learning.

Management of Group Dynamics:

Group dynamics play a pivotal role in project-based teaching, but they can also present challenges related to participation, collaboration, and interpersonal relationships (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Educators must be attentive to group dynamics and proactively address issues such as unequal participation, interpersonal conflicts, and social loafing. Strategies such as assigning specific roles and responsibilities, fostering a culture of respect and collaboration, and providing opportunities for peer feedback can help mitigate these challenges.

Time Constraints and Curriculum Coverage:

Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik & Soloway (1997) highlight the challenge of balancing the time required for project-based teaching with the pressure to cover all content within the curriculum. Project-based activities typically take longer to implement than traditional teacher-centered instruction, necessitating careful planning and prioritization of learning objectives. Educators must allocate sufficient time for project-based activities while ensuring that essential curriculum content is addressed. Additionally, educators may need to develop time management skills and strategies for effectively integrating project-based activities into the curriculum.

Management of Multiple Activities:

Effective implementation of project-based teaching requires educators to manage multiple activities simultaneously, including facilitating group work, providing guidance and support, and integrating technology into instruction (Harris, 2016). Educators must possess a diverse set of skills, including information technology skills, to effectively manage project-based activities that involve research, collaboration, and communication. Professional development opportunities and ongoing support can help educators develop the necessary skills and expertise to successfully implement project-based teaching.

Additional scholars who have contributed to the discourse on challenges in project-based teaching include:

Vygotsky (1978), whose sociocultural theory highlights the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning in project-based environments.

Dewey (1916), whose work on experiential learning and inquiry-based education laid the groundwork for project-based teaching.

Barron & Darling-Hammond (2008), who explore the challenges and opportunities of project-based teaching in the context of education reform and teacher professional development.

By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, educators can optimize the potential of project-based teaching to foster deep learning, critical thinking, and collaboration among students.

3. Methodology

Participants

The participants included 105 non-English major students at pre-intermediate level, comprising two classes: PreB1.02 and PreB1.01, with ages ranging from 19 to 21 years old. Participants were required to attend 60 sessions in nearly 3 months, with classes held 4 times a week. Both groups were assessed by teachers on their speaking skills through self-introduction at the first session of the course.

Procedure

Traditional Class, PreB1.01

In the traditional class, speaking practice was conducted in accordance with the speaking topics in the Life textbook. Assessment followed the standard procedure set by the Foreign Language Department, consisting of two parts: first, students described any picture from the Life curriculum, and second, the teacher asked questions and students responded.

Experimental Class, PreB1.02

Week 1: The teacher introduced the program, study materials, and how speaking skills would be assessed in groups. The teacher also announced the deadline for submissions, how to structure the speech, and the grading criteria for each group member. Speaking grades were the average of scores from the video and presentation. Although done in groups, each member had their own speaking score based on pronunciation, fluency, and answering questions.

The criteria for grading the 2 videos included evaluating the speech outline, outdoor video recording, pronunciation, fluency, audio and visual quality, and video length. Students were also introduced to a website to view sample videos from students of other schools participating in the National English Olympics on the page https://www.facebook.com/olympictatoanquoc/?fref=ts.

The presentation grading criteria included preparing and submitting an outline, PowerPoint slides, pronunciation, fluency, and answering questions.

Week 2: Students formed small groups of 3-4 or pairs with members they chose.

Weeks 3-4: Students selected 3 topics to create 2 videos and 1 presentation. Topics were taken from the New English File coursebook, such as talking about your university, an important day, a tourist destination, a day off, etc. Students emailed the teacher the group name and presentation and video topics.

Weeks 5-6: Groups developed detailed outlines for both presentations and videos and emailed them to the teacher for review and feedback. If outlines were inadequate, groups were asked to revise them.

Weeks 7-8: Students recorded outdoor videos and prepared PowerPoint presentations.

Week 9: Students uploaded videos to the teacher's Edmodo page using the link https://www.edmodo.com/home#/group?id=22682261.

Week 10: The teacher provided feedback and graded the videos of each group. Students presented in class, with other groups and the teacher listening and asking questions. Then, the teacher provided feedback for each group.

Finally, the teacher graded students' speaking based on the grading criteria introduced in the first week.

Data Collection Method

This study is based on the speaking skills results of 2 videos and one presentation from groups towards the end of the course. At the end of the course, students from the PreB1.02 class were asked to answer a questionnaire consisting of 10 questions on Google Form. To ensure the reliability of the data, 12 students were individually interviewed to verify and compare all the collected results. The students' opinions were recorded and carefully analyzed.

4. Results and discussion

The speaking test results of the experimental class PreB1.02 were obtained by averaging the scores from making 2 videos and one presentation. The speaking test results of the traditional class PreB1.01 only had one assessment in the final week of the course. To ensure the reliability of the data values, a t-test was conducted between the two groups, yielding numerical results as shown in Table 1.

From Table 1, we can see that there is a difference between the average speaking scores of the two groups of 0.74 (5.47 - 4.73), indicating that the PreB1.02 class showed more improvement in speaking skills than the traditional group, PreB1.01. This means that students following the project-based approach achieved better results. Therefore, the initial hypothesis is correct, meaning "Project-based teaching improves the speaking skills of non-English major students." This result is consistent with previous studies by Maulany (1997), Anyahong (2015), and Agustina (2012) mentioned above.

Table 1. Results of t-test between the two groups

	Mean	SD	p-value	The effect size
PreB1.02	5.47	1.55	0.012	0.49
PreB1.01	4.73	1.52		

With a p-value of 0.012, much smaller than the alpha value of 0.05, this means there is a significant difference between the experimental and traditional groups. This difference indicates that the results from the data analysis are unlikely to occur randomly but rather due to the outcome of project-based work improving students' speaking skills.

To measure the effect size, the standard deviation needs to be calculated to help determine the effectiveness of the project-based approach. The formula for calculating Cohen's d (Effect Size Calculator for T-Test), commonly used in educational research, is as follows:

Cohen's d=(Mean2−Mean1)/SD

Cohen's d=(5.47−4.73)/1.52≈0.49

According to Cohen's ratio, the effect size is categorized from small to large. A small effect is from 0.00 to 0.20, a medium effect is from 0.20 to 0.50, and a large effect is 0.50 or higher. Therefore, the effect size of 0.49 is considered medium. This indicates that project-based speaking practice has a medium effectiveness in developing students' speaking skills. This is the answer to the first question of the study: "How does project-based teaching improve students' speaking skills?"

To answer the second question, "What do students think about project-based teaching to improve speaking skills?" involves analyzing the survey responses from 52 students, as well as the responses from personal interviews with 12 randomly selected students.

Before participating in project-based teaching, students self-assessed their speaking skills as shown in the table below:

almost nothing	quite well	a little
41.88%	48.33%	9.49%

Nearly 50% of the students feel that they can speak, however, almost 42% of students cannot speak a complete sentence.

When working in groups, students feel the following difficulties:

Time arrangement	Practicing	Pronunciation	Disagreement within group
60%	32.73%	5.45%	5.45%

The most challenging aspect for students is managing their time because they come from various non-major fields, and the study schedules for their major subjects also vary significantly.

After participating in the project to improve speaking skills, the majority of students feel that their speaking abilities have improved. The skills that students have improved include:

Pronunciation	Listening comprehension	Presentation	Answering questions
42%	32%	13%	13%

The improvement in listening comprehension and pronunciation skills after working on the project aligns with the findings of Maulany's research (2013). However, unlike Maulany's study, students showed more improvement in pronunciation compared to listening comprehension.

The results regarding students' confidence after working on the project are as follows:

Not confident	A little confident	Confident
43%	22%	35%

More than 50% of the students feel quite confident and confident about their speaking skills, although there are still 43% who lack confidence. The results regarding students' confidence are similar to the findings of Agustina (2012).

Similarly, regarding confidence in presenting an issue, the results of student satisfaction with speaking skills are as follows:

Dissatisfied	A little satisfied	Satisfied
41.51%	18.87%	33.96%

The results regarding students' satisfaction with speaking skills are similar to the findings of Anyahong (2015), indicating that the satisfaction level of students increases through each project.

Finally, regarding the recommendations of the students for future project-based teaching, they have some interesting suggestions such as having more support clubs available for groups while working, providing guidance and tips for speaking and communication within the group. One opinion suggests that the curriculum should include more pictures, and students should participate in English programs more frequently. Some even suggest having native speakers to improve pronunciation.

The results of personal interviews with 12 students from class PreB1.02 show that when working in groups, students have fewer conflicts, accounting for approximately 61% of cases. When conflicts arise, the majority of students agree that the group sits down together, discusses, analyzes the issue more thoroughly, and finds the appropriate solution. Nine students believe that resolving conflicts within the group requires respecting each other's opinions, understanding and listening to the opinions of all members, and selecting the best solution or taking the majority opinion to solve the problem. Additionally, students believe that groups need to work together more, interact more, and teachers should have groups speak in front of the class more often. Another suggestion is that each group should create communication situations in English based on the lesson and present them in front of the class with a PowerPoint presentation to enhance understanding. Students feel motivated, understand better, acquire more skills, and stimulate learning among

students when working in groups. However, within the group, there should be someone with accurate pronunciation and good grammar to correct errors for each member.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of project-based teaching has yielded significant improvements in the speaking skills of non-English major students at the university level. By integrating real-life, relatable topics into the curriculum, students have been motivated to explore their thoughts and ideas, leading to the development of engaging presentation speeches, videos, and projects. These activities have not only provided valuable opportunities for students to enhance their speaking skills but have also fostered a sense of responsibility for their learning and promoted collaboration and effective teamwork outside the traditional classroom setting.

The establishment of specific evaluation criteria tailored to encourage speaking practice has proved to be an effective strategy in assessing student progress. Teachers have dedicated considerable time to providing feedback on speech content and assessing speaking proficiency through video presentations. However, the implementation of project-based teaching has not been without its challenges.

Technical difficulties related to video production, formatting, and online uploading, as well as issues with group division, have presented obstacles that require ongoing cooperation and communication between teachers and students. Despite these challenges, the benefits of project-based teaching in enhancing speaking skills far outweigh the difficulties encountered.

Looking ahead, it is clear that further research is warranted to explore the long-term impact of project-based teaching on students' language proficiency and overall academic development. As students' progress in language acquisition is a continuous and multifaceted process, future courses should continue to incorporate project-based teaching methodologies to build upon the foundation established in the current study.

In summary, the findings of this study underscore the effectiveness of project-based teaching in improving speaking skills among non-English major students. By addressing real-life topics, fostering collaboration, and providing targeted feedback, project-based teaching has emerged as a valuable pedagogical approach for promoting language acquisition and facilitating student engagement and learning autonomy. Continued research and innovation in project-based teaching methodologies hold promise for further enhancing student outcomes and advancing language education in university settings.

REFERENCES

Agustina, L. (2012). Improving Reading and Speaking Skills through Project-Based Learning for EFL Students in the form of Student-Made Magazine. Retrieved June 28, 2017 from http://jltpolinema.org/?p=85

Anyahong, B. (2015), Using Project-Based Approach to Enhance English Speaking Ability of Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology Students. ICLEP, 18. Retrieved June 29, 20017 from http://icsai.org/procarch/1iclep/1iclep-18.pdf

Arch For Kids LLC (2015), What is Project Based Learning? Retrieved July 1st, 2017 from https://www.noodle.com/articles/what-is-projectbased-learning

Barron, B., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2008). Teaching for meaningful learning: A review of research on inquiry-based and cooperative learning. In J. Bransford (Ed.), How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school (pp. 97-118). National Academies Press.

Bell, S. (2010), Project-based Learning for the 21th Century: Skill for the Future. The C-learning House, 83, pp. 39-43.

Blumenfeld, P., Soloway, E., Marx, R., Krajcik, J., Guzdial, M., & Palincsar, A. (1991). Motivating project-based learning: Sustaining the doing, supporting the learning. Educational Psychologist, 26(3-4), 369-398.

Dewey, J. (1916). Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education. Macmillan.

Fragoulis, I. (2009). Project-based learning in the teaching of English as a foreign language: A systematic review. Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 3(2), 99-110.

Fragoulis, L. (2009), Project-Based Learning in Teaching of English as a Foreign Language in Greek Primary School: from Theory to Practice. English Language Teaching, 2(3), pp.113-119.

Harris, J. (2016). Project-based learning for English language learners: Building language skills through authentic projects. Corwin Press.

Krajcik, J., Blumenfeld, P., Marx, R., & Soloway, E. (1994). A collaborative model for helping middle grade science teachers learn project-based instruction. The Elementary School Journal, 94(5), 483-497.

Marx, R. W., Blumenfeld, P. C., Krajcik, J. S., & Soloway, E. (1997). Enacting project-based science: Challenges for practice and policy. The Elementary School Journal, 97(4), 341-358.

Marx, R.W., Blumenfeld, P. C., Krajcik, J. S., & Soloway, E. (1997). Enacting project-based science: Challenges for practice and policy. Elementary School Journals, 97(4), pp. 341-358.

Maulany, D. B. (2013), The Use of ProjectBased Learning in Improving the Students' peaking Skills, Journal of English and Education, 1(1), pp. 30 – 42. Smith, B. & Dodds, R. (1997), Developing Managers through Project-based Learning.Aldershot/ Vermont: Gower.

Thomas, M. (2012). Project-based learning and English language learners. National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA).

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press.

Walker, A., & Leary, H. (2009). A problem based learning meta analysis: Differences across problem types, implementation types, disciplines, and assessment levels. Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning, 3(1), 12-43