

## **Improving Iraqi Secondary Students' Speaking Performance through Problem-Based Learning Approach**

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### **Abstract**

This research had implemented PBL approach in the context of 11<sup>th</sup> grade among Iraqi secondary students in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The main purpose of this study was to improve the speaking skills of these participants since speaking as language skill reported to be one of the language difficulties that Iraqi students face in their academic life. The research approach employed in this study was quantitative–qualitative research in the form of Classroom Action research where the researcher had employed various ways of data collection (i.e. observation checklist, field notes, questionnaire sheet and test). The classroom action research used two cycles that include planning, action, observation, and reflection in each cycles. Results indicated that PBL approach in the context of this study was able to improve students' speaking ability and motivate them toward better language achievement. According to the speaking performance tests in both cycles, Iraqi students had accomplished progress in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and grammar. These results were validated according to two scores collected in this research (i.e. researcher and collaborator).

Keywords: PBL approach; Speaking Skills; Classroom Action research.

### **1. Research Background**

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving information (Brown, 1994). Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment and the purpose for speaking (Joyce, 1997). Speaking requires that learners not only know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (i.e. Linguistic competence), but also learners should understand when, why, and in which ways to produce language (i.e. sociolinguistic competence).

Speaking skills (i.e. linguistic competence, discourse competence, pragmatic competence, and fluency) are argued to be the most difficult skills to be mastered by the majority of English

learners who are still incompetent to communicate orally in English (Zhang, 2009). According to Ur (1996), there are many factors that cause difficulties in speaking namely inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and mother tongue use. Inhibition occurs when students are worried of making mistakes, fearful of criticism, or simply shy. Or they simply have nothing to say because the motivation factor is totally missing in the educational context.

Second language researchers demonstrated through various studies that progress does not occur when people make conscious effort to learn but occurs as a result of spontaneous, subconscious mechanism that are activated when learners are involved in communication with the second language (Ellis, 2003). So if these factors of motivation and availability of opportunity are not available, learners will face various difficulties in different language levels.

In fact, most Arab EFL students are argued to face various difficulties in speaking level (Rababah, 2002). They would rather use Arabic language than English language, as a medium of communication due to the traditional method in teaching English in classroom context that is considered boring and lack of motivation that makes atmosphere in classroom seems monotone. Moreover, Rababah (2005) argued that this lack of motivation to speak English stemmed from the fact that learners sometimes do not see a real need to learn or to speak English. In fact “motivation is the crucial force that determines whether a learner embarks in a task at all, how much energy he/she devotes to it, and how long he/she preserves” (Littlewood, 1984, p. 53).

Moreover, Rababah (2005) argued that teaching strategies in Arab education system also contribute to this problem as they are inadequate and they do not put emphasis on speaking that results in a meagre development of this skill. In this regard, Cameron (2001) argued that this lack of a target language environment could be considered another problem that results in lack of involvement in real-life situations.

These above mentioned problems could be also touched within Iraqi educational system. For example, Abo Gazala (2000) argued that most EFL Iraqi students are unable to produce short sentences, paragraphs, and letters to friends due to teaching techniques that most English teachers follow in their classroom. Moreover, Jasim (2012) demonstrated through empirical study that Iraqi learners of English are weak in spoken tasks and they unable to express themselves in simple English discourse. These problems are argued to be due to teaching technique that does not pay attention to motivation factor in classroom environment and many other reasons. In this regard, Dehham and Mohammed (2010) argued that English classrooms in Iraq educational system focus on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary, translation of texts and doing written exercise.

Most of these classes are taught in the native language (Iraqi Arabic) with little active use of English language.

Scholars in previous studies contended themselves with only suggesting a pedagogical remedy for such shortage without trying to investigate the problem under discussion by applying new teaching techniques. For example, Jasim (2012) suggested that a new shift for new teaching technique that could solve these problems is a must in order motivate students' ability to be active user of English language in their classrooms and develop their discourse competence. From this angel, the researcher believes that by employing new teaching strategy namely Problem Based Learning approach, EFL Iraqi students at Iraqi school in Malaysia may improve their speaking performance since they were reported to be far weak in this issue.

Barrows (1985) argued that Problem Based learning (PBL) approach represents a fundamental shift from a teachers' delivery of fixed knowledge base to the facilitation of students' activity knowledge construction through collaborative problem solving. PBL approach was first introduced in McMaster University in Canada particularly in Faculty of Health Sciences in 1960s in an attempt to prepare students for real world problems that they could encounter as physicians and to enhance students' lack of critical thinking skills in class and beyond (Barrows and Tamblyn, 1980; Boud and Feletti, 1994).

In PBL classrooms, students are brought into the spotlight by engaging them into group solving activities where they become responsible for generating their own learning issues (Barrows, 1985). In this process teachers become merely facilitators who help students to identify what they need to know and the resources they need to obtain to gain needed information. In PBL approach, problems are used as major learning instruments that are designed to engage students with collaborative effort in four major tasks namely understanding the problem, learning, solution and reflection (Barrows, 1985; Hadgraft & Pripic, 1994).

Many researchers have employed PBL approach in order to examine its effectiveness on students' learning outcomes compared with traditional lecture-based instruction (e.g. Newman, 2006; Norman & Schmidt, 1992; Vernon & Blake, 1993). These study present mixed results and evidence of the usefulness of PBL. For example, Norman and Schmidt (1992) examined several sets of experimental evidence in medical education where they concluded that there was no evidence that PBL approach resulted in any improvement in general. While other studies reported its usefulness and effectiveness on students' outcome (e.g. Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Hmelo, Gotter & Bransford, 1994). Therefore, without examining the process of how students actually act and

think in relation to learning environment, we cannot come to know how students learn or how PBL approach works or does not work under different conditions (i.e. nature of the problem or nature of environment).

## **2. Research Problem**

The researcher examines English classrooms in Iraqi school in Kuala Lumpur particularly in 11<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. It becomes apparent that the techniques utilized in teaching English as a foreign language are competitive and test driven. Iraqi students are encouraged to learn what will come in exams. The researcher noticed that learning for its own sake or sharing one's knowledge with others in the class has no place in English language classroom in Iraqi school. It has been noticed also that the majority of the students in the classroom are passive recipient of information and they rarely take initiative steps toward oral participation.

Moreover, it has been noticed also that majority of Iraqi students face several problems in speaking such as reluctance, fear of committing oral mistakes, poor speaking ability, lack of peers or social circles with whom they can express their speaking potentials, and most importantly structuring discourse coherently and cohesively. The researcher argued that these problems are mainly caused by the teaching techniques that English instructor follow which minimize the students' chance to be exposed to the target language.

Therefore, the researcher believes that a new shift is a must to help English instructors in Iraqi school to shift from traditional techniques of teaching English and to help Iraqi students as well to improve their speaking potentials and find remedy of the speaking problems they face in their academic environment. The researcher argued that this could be done by implementing PBL approach that allows Iraqi students to learn about the subject in the context of complex, multifaceted and realistic problems.

Murphy and Alexander (2000) argued that one of the major values of PBL approach is its aim to motivate students to participate in the learning process so that they would be able to improve their problem-solving skills. In other words, if PBL is to be considered as an alternative to the traditional lecture approach, then students in PBL group will improve their language due to the amount of reading carried out for each task. In this sense, the researcher argued that PBL approach is a more suitable approach for teaching speaking subject especially since it contains the motivation factor that Iraqi students at Iraqi school in Malaysia miss the most.

Moreover, many researchers argued that PBL approach has several positive effects on students' content knowledge (e.g. Boaler, 1997; Penuel & Means, 2000; Stepien, et al., 1993). For

example, Mergendoller, et al., (2006) argued through empirical research that PBL has positive effect on students with average to low verbal ability and students with little previous content knowledge in that PBL work as an effective teaching alternative that boost students engagement and motivational factors to speak more and thus be competent speakers over time. Furthermore, Bell and et al., (2006) in one study within an economic classroom argued that PPBL unit engaged the lowest and highest students as well as those students who were least interested in their classes' activities. Accordingly, the researcher argued that PPL approach could serve a good and new teaching technique that can create a motivated academic environment and engagement between Iraqi students in Iraqi school.

Moreover, it should be noted that although many studies found in literature so far had addressed the language difficulties that Iraqi students face in their academic life and suggested pedagogical remedy on how solve these language issues (e.g. Dehham & Mohammed, 2010; Jasim, 2012), none of these studies as far as the researcher is aware had implemented solutions on how to solve these difficulties in real academic life. Thus, this study is hoped to fill the gap in literature.

### **3. Research Question**

Does PBL approach improve Iraqi secondary students' speaking performance?

### **4. Methods**

Classroom Action Research (CAR) is a strategic process that helps researchers and teachers to explore and examine teaching and learning context to find out what works best in classroom so that the learning process could be improved (Latief, 2012). In this research, the researcher was engaged in the action of teaching and learning process where he collected and analysed data and made conclusion and reported the data as findings. Therefore, the results of this study are the description of process in teaching speaking to Iraqi secondary students through employing PBL approach. Accordingly, researcher has to revise the plan of action if results of this study are not satisfied and fail to deliver good results.

The main aim of this research is to find out whether PBL approach improves Iraqi secondary students' speaking skills or not. 46 Iraqi students in their 11<sup>th</sup> grade were chosen in this research based on particular criteria; most of these participants have difficulties in expressing themselves in English, these participants are inactive members in classroom, and most of them have low motivation in speaking.

In order to apply PBL approach into classroom learning context, the researcher had adapted (Dahlan, 2011) strategy that includes the following steps:

1. Teacher gives the topic or problem that suit students' academic level
2. Teacher classifies them into pair
3. Teacher gives guided questions to make the discussion run well or easier and makes students understand what must be done (i.e. how to solve problem), thereafter; students can formulate related questions to the topic
4. Discuss in pair where student A ask student B the guided questions provided by teacher (i.e. how to solve problem) based on their own way
5. Teacher gives time for each pairs to express their idea
6. If time is over, either the asker or answerer has to be changed
7. Teachers ask students to retell the results of discussion to class randomly

The research had collected the data within this process by mixed approach methods of qualitative and quantitative research (i.e. observation checklist, field notes, questionnaire sheet and test). In qualitative methods of data collection, Observation was done in this research by the researcher and collaborator when action or students' reaction took place in the classroom. Meanwhile observation checklist was also used during the learning process to evaluate the improvement of the Iraqi students during learning and teaching process. This instrument measured four components namely students' activeness, motivation, interpersonal skill, and ability to speak English. Furthermore, field notes were collected to explore the progress that Iraqi secondary students accomplish during implementing PBL approach and to record their activities or events in teaching and learning process.

While in quantitative data collection, questionnaire was employed in this research to get the participants' responses on English teaching and learning process using PBL approach. While the test in this research was employed to explore the participants' speaking ability. This test was conducted by the researcher and collaborator based on the rubric of speaking assessment and consists of four criteria that were covered during the test namely pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and grammar. So in order to increase the validity of the research results two scores were obtained where the first was from the researcher and the second was from the collaborator.

So in order to evaluate whether implementing PBL approach in the context of this study is successful 75 % of the students should be able to speak English with score of  $\geq 75$  based on the performance test. If this value never obtained, it will continue to the next cycle where the weakness in the first cycle will be improved to the next cycle until criteria of success are fulfilled.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

Results indicated that PBL approach had improved Iraqi secondary students 'speaking performance. These results were obtained from the test's results in that the mean score of the students' speaking performance improved 23.37 point based on the researchers' data and 22:94 based on collaborator's data. The mean score in the first cycle was 71.84 (based on the researcher's assessment) and 72.06 based on the collaborator assessment. While in the second cycle the mean score was 82.71 (based on the researcher's assessment) and 82.28 (based on the researcher's assessment).

The observation checklist and field notes demonstrated that Iraqi secondary students' quality learning activities in classroom were improved gradually (i.e. daily basis) where students felt motivated and confident during the learning process that follows PBL approach. Moreover, it has been noticed also that students were active to ask and answer questions from their classmates and the researcher as well.

The questionnaire data analysis showed that Iraqi secondary students were highly motivated to speak English in classroom due to the new teaching technique employed within classroom context (i.e. PBL approach). Participants in this study found PBL approach an enjoyable experience where they can improve their speaking and confidence as well. In this regard, Dahlan (201) argued that the characteristics of successful speaking activity are learners who share their thoughts aloud with high level of participation and motivation.

PBL approach was found to encourage Iraqi students to speak more particularly in problem solving events. It should be noted that the problem was constructed and chosen carefully to motivate students on the task. Moreover it should be noted that although the fact that participants in the first meeting were reluctant to speak and kind of anxious, but this feeling demolished steadily as participants continued their engagement in PBL classroom events. To conclude, from analysis above, the employment of PBL approach in the context of Iraqi secondary students English classroom not only improved participants' speaking skill but also enhance the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language in Iraqi school in Kuala Lumpur.

- **The implementation of Cycle I**

Cycle I was conducted from September 13<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015 where four meetings took place. PBL approach was conducted in the first 3 meetings while the fourth was a test. In this cycle, Iraqi secondary students' actively speak up in the teaching and learning process (13.33%), were also more confident in their conversation and discussion (15%), focused in teacher explanation (11.66

%), and enjoyed teaching and learning process (13.33 %). It should be noted that the researcher noticed based on observation checklist (i.e. total number of 63. 32 %) that Iraqi students also were more active, motivated and comfortable in each meeting.

According to field notes in this cycle, the researcher argued that Iraqi students became familiar with PBL approach strategy gradually. That is, at their first meeting, Iraqi students were afraid and unconfident to practice in pairs. While in the second meeting, they started to speak up and minimize their concern to practice English. Whereas in the last meeting, they gain more confidence and they started to speak up without any constraints.

Questionnaire data at this cycle shows that Iraqi students were motivated to speak English in their classroom since all process in PBL approach force students to speak up. This results was also confirmed in researcher's field notes as mentioned previously.

Finally, based on the results of the test, Iraqi students' speaking skill had been improved. This could be touched from the results of speaking test in cycle I where the score mean was 71.84 (based on the researcher's assessment) and 72.06 based on the collaborator assessment. Moreover, the lowest score was 45.00 (based on the researcher assessment) and 50 (based on the collaborator assessment), and then the highest score was 100.00 (based on the both researcher and collaborator assessment), while the percentage of the students who got score  $\geq 75$  was 57%. Based on the criteria of success 75% students must be able to speak English with score  $\geq 75$ . Accordingly, the researcher continued to next cycle to solve the problem occurred in the first cycle and attain better results.

- **The implementation of Cycle II**

Cycle II was conducted from October 15<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015. In this cycle, the researcher implemented different media and strategies from Cycle I in order to elevate the problems that encountered Iraqi students' speaking skills and to better improve the scores since their scores in the test were below the expected scores (i.e.  $\geq 75$ ). For example, the researcher had revised the media used in Cycle I (e.g. picture dialogue) and improves it in this cycle. Moreover, Iraqi students were gathered in heterogeneous pairs where the researcher gave closer control and guidance (i.e. feedback) to the students. This cycle consisted of three meetings where the first and second was dedicated for PBL to be employed within and the last meeting was the test.

Based on the observation checklist, in the second cycle, Iraqi students' had improved in each meeting where they actively speak up in the teaching and learning process (17.5 %), were confident when performing conversation and discussion, were not confused and anxious in speaking (12.5%), were focused on teacher's explanation (17.5 %), and they were enjoying the new teaching technique



process (20 %). Accordingly, the researcher argued that Iraqi students' activeness and confident had been improved in each meeting. These results also were touched in the field notes, where the researcher found that PBL approach had activated students' motivation in exploring their ideas and thus improve their English speaking skills.

The test results in cycle II revealed that Iraqi secondary students' speaking performance had significantly improved with the mean score 82.71 (based on the researcher's assessment) and 82.28 (based on the researcher's assessment). Moreover, the lowest score was 60 and then the highest score was 100.00 (based on the both researcher and collaborator assessment). The percentage of the students who got score  $\geq 75$  based on researcher was 87% (40 students) and 13% (6 students) failed while based on the collaborator was 80% (37 students) passed and 20% (9 students) failed from 46 students to fulfilled the minimum mastery learning standard in the criteria of success that was 75.00.

## 6. Conclusion

This research had implemented PBL approach in the context of 11<sup>th</sup> grade among Iraqi secondary students in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The main purpose of this study was to improve the speaking skills of these participants since speaking as language skill reported to be one of the language difficulties that Iraqi students face in their academic life. Results indicated that PBL approach in the context of this study was able to improve students' speaking ability and motivate them toward better language achievement. According to the speaking performance tests in both cycles, Iraqi students had accomplished progress in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and grammar. These results were validated according to two scores collected in this research (i.e. researcher and collaborator).

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