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A project based program for developing English Conversation for primary school students

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A project based program for developing English Conversation for primary school students

Shaimaa Shaban Mahmoud Mostafa

Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating the effect of a project based program on developing EFL conversation for primary school students. Literature and related studies dealing with project based learning in EFL teaching and conversation were reviewed. A list of conversation components was prepared by the researcher as a guide for the design of the instruments. In addition, a pre/post conversation test was designed and a conversation rubric was adapted. Then, the researcher designed the proposed program taught to a third year primary class (n=30). Students' ages ranged from (9 - 10) years old. Students were submitted to a pre/ posttest and their conversation performance was evaluated by two raters in the light of the designed rubric. The study results revealed that the project based program is significantly effective in developing primary stage students' EFL conversation.

Key Words: Project based learning –EFL - Conversation – Primary stage students – Egypt

1.1- Introduction

Nowadays, English is the most spoken language in the world as it is spoken by more than 1.3 billion people (Szmigiera, 2021) and it became the international language for communication, science, technology, commerce and different aspects of life.

English language teaching and learning should result in learners' ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings. The ability to engage in conversation is an urgent target that enable students to express their thoughts and impressions, socialize, attend conferences and meetings, make arguments, deliver speeches and presentations, gain friends, and ask for information (Jeyaraj, 2017; Nall & Wilson, 2018; Törnqvist, 2008). Jeyaraj (2017); Jones (2018) and Mraoui (2020) assure that Conversation is the basic form of oral interaction and the best way for

developing interpersonal communication skills as learners enhance their communicative competence while conversing.

Consequently, acquisition of conversation should be one of the main objectives of EFL classrooms. A Lesson should be a lively, unique experience that is achieved by conversations that are not contrived but incidental. Teaching-learning processes should be conversation-driven. This can be promoted through the integration of life experience into the classroom, Students' involvement, interaction, and collaboration with peers and teachers. Language programs designed for young learners should develop students' through interesting fun activities (Jeyaraj, 2017).

This integration of life experience into the classroom, learner's individual styles and capabilities as well as student's social interaction with peers and teacher can be considered as the basics for constructivism. One of Constructivism applications inside the classroom is Project-based Learning {PBL}. In PBL context, students are actively engaged during the process while teachers guide the process, provide feedback to students and assess their performances. The powerful points about PBL are being part of real life as well as its ability to lead students to think, question, and investigate (Kimsesiz, 2017, p. 427).

1.2- Context of the Problem

Conversation is almost neglected or rarely practiced in the English language classrooms in Egypt. Teachers of English tend to focus on isolated vocabulary lists, grammar drilling, reading, or writing tasks but rarely have their students involved in conversation activities. Conversation had rarely received the due attention in Egyptian curriculums and classes. The researcher came to this conclusion through different sources of evidence:

Personal experience

As an EFL teacher for primary stage for nine years, the researcher realized that students do not make real progress with their English learning; students make many mistakes when practicing conversation in English. Many of them cannot even start a conversation in English or keep it going. They had difficulty asking and answering questions and using the right intonation. Most of them had pronunciation mistakes and vocabulary inadequacy. They couldn't express

themselves using complete correct sentences; some of them used single words while many kept silent.

Previous Studies

Previous studies, most of them, indicate that many Egyptian students have poor levels of conversation skills. GAID (2020) claims that teachers tend to neglect conversation in their classes due to time limitation, big numbers of students inside class as well as its complexity for both teachers and students.

In their study, Ibrahim & Ibrahim (2017) conclude that the traditional grammar based examinations as well as teachers' perceptions toward the objective of teaching English; form the main determinants that encourage or discourage teachers' efforts toward developing students' conversation in their classes. They claim that teachers give priority to what is being tested consequently students suffer low command of English.

Mohamed (2007) conducted a study investigating the effect of teachers' use of their first language in classrooms. She points out that; because Egyptian students do not have the chance to practice English outside classrooms in real life situations, classrooms become the only chance for them to develop their conversational interactions. She assures that teachers need to use English in instruction and encourage student/ student interactions.

1.3- Pilot Study

The researcher conducted interviews with EFL teachers and supervisors (N= 12) at Al- Taha Hussain Primary School in Bani Mazar, Al Minya Governorate. They all agreed that students have poor levels of conversation in English. They reported students' inability to communicate with each other or with their teachers. Teachers also emphasized their students' inability to express themselves appropriately and naturally. When they were asked about the reason for this problem, they asserted that this is because of the increased number of students in classrooms as well as time limitation which does not enable teachers to provide adequate time for students to talk.

The problem was revealed also through carrying on conversations with students on some topics and everyday life situations. The conversations were

carried on with one class (N= 53). The results revealed that about 95% have difficulty in communicating with others. About 80 % have problems with pronunciation. About 78% of students have grammatical errors. About 73% have problems with using appropriate vocabulary. About 90% of students have problems with talking smoothly without hesitation. However 92 % of students have problems with using language in the appropriate context. It is concluded that students have problems with conversation.

1.4- Statement of the problem

Students at the primary stage suffer from poor conversation performance. This might be due to the actual methods used by different teachers of English in the primary stage and due to time limitation. Therefore, the present research attempted to investigate the effectiveness of a project based learning program on developing primary school students' conversation.

1.5- Research Questions

To address the research problem, the study sought to find an answer to the following main question:

What is the effect of a proposed project based program on primary stage students' conversation?

To answer this main question, the following sub- questions were answered:

1- What are the conversational sub- skills necessary for third year primary stage students in light of the aims of instruction at this stage?

2- What are the features of the suggested program?

3- What is the effect of a project based program on third year primary students' conversation skills?

1.6- Hypotheses of the study

In order to investigate the research problem, the study tested the following hypothesis:

1- There would be a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study group students on the conversation pre/posttest as a whole in favor of the posttest.

2- There would be a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study group students on the pre/posttest with regard to the development of every conversation sub-skill in favor of the posttest.

1.7- Purpose of the study

The purpose of the current study was four-fold:

1- Identifying EFL conversation skills appropriate for third year primary students.

2- Identifying the EFL curriculum content appropriate for third year primary students.

3- Designing a program based on projects to develop third year primary students' conversation skills.

4- Investigating the effect of the proposed program on developing third year primary students' conversation skills.

1.8- Significance of the study:

The study might be of significance for:

Teachers

It provides teachers with the following in order to enhance their students' development in conversation:

- A conversation skill rubric for third year primary that helps them to assess their students.

- A number of projects that they can use with their students

- Raise their awareness of the importance of developing conversation skills.

Students

The study might help students enhance their conversation skill.

Curriculum developers

This study might provide curriculum developers with:

- A program for enhancing primary students' conversation skill.
- A list of conversation sub-skills

1.9- Delimitations of the study

The study is delimited to:

- Developing and measuring the following English conversation sub- skills; fluency, Accuracy, Communication, Vocabulary and Pronunciation
- Third year primary stage students who participated in the program.
- The suggested program.

1.10- Definition of key terms

Conversation is informal spontaneous spoken interaction that happens in real time between two or more people and has a largely interpersonal feature (Thornbury & Slade, 2006, p. 25).

Conversation is defined operationally in this study as the skills which require young EFL students to produce simple questions and answers in short turns through project based learning technique.

Projects; a project is defined as a long-term (several weeks) activity that involves a variety of individual or cooperative tasks such as developing a research plan and questions, and implementing the plan through empirical or document research that includes collecting, analyzing, and reporting data orally and/or in writing (Beckett, 2006, p. 20).

For the purpose of this study, **projects** are conversation tasks that arise from the linguistic aim of the project which third year students at Taha Hussain primary school were engaged in.

Project based Learning is the method that allows students to design, plan, and carry out extended projects in a way that results in a publicly exhibited output such as a product, publication, or presentation (Thuan, 2018, p. 329)

This study identifies Project based Learning as authentic tasks through which third year primary students practice conversation through discussion in groups, presenting results to the class as well as holding a whole class discussion.

2- Review of Literature

2.1- EFL Conversation

According to Asfina (2017); Brown & Brown (2011) and Nasional (2006) Conversation can be classified according to its purposes to:

Transactional Conversation: the conversation that aims at getting things done just as exchanging goods, services or information.

Interpersonal Conversation: the conversation that targets the exchange of personal and social relations.

Eggins and Slade (2005, p.228) divide conversation genres into Storytelling and Gossiping. They further divide storytelling into: *Recounts, Exemplum, Anecdotes* and *Narrative*s.

Thornbury and Slade (2006, pp.5–19) identify conversation characteristics. They assure that Conversation is:

1- mainly spoken
2- Interactive
3- fast and unpredictable
4- interpersonal
5- Informal
6- expressive of Identity

They also assure that conversation has its own lexical, grammatical and discourse characteristics.

Conversation Components

According to Cambridge ESOL, Syndicate (2001, p. 2), Conversational English is consists of the following four discrete components:

- *Grammar*: Including accuracy, appropriacy and vocabulary.
- *Pronunciation*: Including rhythm, intonation, and stress.
- *Interactive communication*: including initiating, responding, turn taking and hesitation.
- *Discourse*: Including coherence and relevance (p.2).

Furthermore, the descriptors of Interactive communication are set by Cambridge University as follow:

- Interaction is sustained and developed fully and effectively.
- Initiating and responding appropriately.
- Hesitation is minimal and does not interfere with the interaction.

2.1- Project Based Learning (PBL)

Patton (2012, p. 13) defines Project based learning as a student- centered way of teaching and learning which focuses on students' needs, interests, understanding and initiation. It organizes learning around projects. PBL is a method that allows students to plan, design, and conduct an extended project that results in a publicly exhibited product such as a publication or a presentation.

The Process of Project based Learning

Fragoulis and Tsiplakides (2009) identify five stages for learning projects as the following:

1) **Speculation:** includes the choice of the project topic.
2) **Designing the activities for the project:** includes decisions about groups, roles, methodology, sources of information, places as well as activities. Some researchers call it "the planning phase".
3) **Conducting the project activities:** includes students' implementation of all previously designed activities. **Evaluation**
   This stage includes other as well as self- evaluation

Method of the Research

Design of the Research

The present study adopted the quasi- experimental pre-post test one group design. One class was randomly selected from a governmental primary school in Bani Mazar; namely Taha Hussain primary school to participate in the experiment. The participants were exposed to a training program based on project based learning to develop their English conversation. A pre/post test was given to the study group before and after the treatment.

Study Participants

A group of thirty third year primary students in one intact class were randomly chosen from a governmental primary school in Bani-Mazar; namely Taha Hussain primary school, in the academic year 2020/2021. The students in the study group shared similar characteristics; all students' ages ranged from 8/ 9 years. They have been learning English as a foreign language for two years, starting from first year primary. Consequently, the students constituted a homogenous group in terms of their learning background and English proficiency

Instruments of the study

The present study made use of the following main instrument:

- A pre/ post conversation test to measure third year primary school students' conversation.

Before designing the pre-posttest, the researcher prepared a conversation checklist to determine the conversation sub-skills necessary for third year primary students.

Furthermore, the researcher used an evaluation rating Rubric measuring students' oral conversation performance on the pre and post conversation test. A proposed program was designed in the light of project based instruction.

The conversation checklist

The conversation checklist was designed to determine the most important conversation skills required for third year primary school students.

Sources of the checklist

The researcher reviewed:

● The literature and previous studies related to EFL conversation such as those of Eggins & Slade (2005); Jeyaraj (2017); Jones (2018); Nall & Wilson, 2018; Thornbury & Slade (2006) and Ussama (2013)

● The Teachers' guide for third year primary (connect).

● Students' book for third year primary (connect).

Content of the checklist

The conversation checklist consisted of five main conversation skills; **Accuracy, pronunciation, Fluency**, **Communication** and **Vocabulary**.

Validity of the checklist

The checklist was submitted to a panel of jury specialized in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) to determine the significance of the conversation skills and their appropriateness to third year primary students as well as the relationship of each sub- skill to its main skill. The jury specialized in EFL rated the skills according to a rating Rubric composed of three levels for each conversation skill. Each level was given an estimated value: Level (3) represented Important, level (2) represented semi important, level (1) represented not important.

The Conversation pre-post Test

Objectives of the test

A pre- post conversation test was constructed and administered to the study group by the researcher. It was used prior to the program implementation to make sure of the level of the students before implementing the program; hence the progress achieved by the study group could be attributed to the program they had been exposed to. As a post- test it was used to investigate the effectiveness of the proposed project based program in developing the conversation skills.

Total Test Reliability

Reliability of the designed conversation test was measured by calculating the following:

● **Alpha- Cronbach Formula**

Alpha- Cronbach formula of the test was computed and the value was {0.836} which refers that the test is highly reliable as an assessment tool.

● **Inter- rater reliability**

The degree of inter-rater reliability was established by computing the correlation coefficient of the scores obtained by students from rater "A" and those from rater "B" and it was 0.93 which is a high value that signifies a strong correlation as the estimated correlation coefficients were statistically significant at 0.01 level.

Scoring the Test:

Students' conversation performance was evaluated by two raters in the light of a designed rating Rubric which has detailed guidance to the raters and thus helped to ensure they paid attention to the same aspects of performance for each learner. The scoring rubric was designed by the researcher in the light of the conversation skills identified in the current study. This rubric is adapted from ((S. L. Gardner & Curenton, 2017; Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2017; Syndicate, 2001; Torky, 2006). The rating rubric helped to provide detailed feedback about the effectiveness of the program. The rubric consisted of five skills; **Pronunciation**, **vocabulary**, **communication**, **Accuracy** and **Fluency**. For each conversation skill, four levels were identified. Level {4}, represented **Mastery** performance, level {3} represented **Proficient** performance; level {2} represented **Developing** while level {1} represented **Basic** performance. By the end of the program, the researcher could place each student in one of the four levels in the rubric.

The Proposed Program

Aim of the program:

The program aimed at developing conversation skills for third primary students. The conversation skills included in the program were pronunciation, accuracy, fluency, communication, as well as vocabulary.

Content of the Program

The program was developed including five units comprising fifteen lessons. Each unit focused on a particular conversation characteristic. These particular conversation characteristics were selected because they were considered to be appropriate for third year primary students.

Duration and implementation of the program

The program consists of four units every unit has three lessons. The program was taught in three periods per week over a period of seven weeks.

Data Analysis and Discussion of the Results

The statistical analysis was made using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer software. The paired samples t-test was used to investigate the hypotheses of the study.

Testing the validity of H01

The H01 states that there is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants on the pre and post conversation test in terms of the development of the overall conversation. In order to verify this hypothesis, the paired-samples t-test was used to detect the significance of differences between pre and post-application. Table (1) shows the results.

Table 1 T-test Results for the Significance of Differences between the Mean Scores of the Participants' 'Overall Conversation' on the Pre and Posttest

Conversation Component	Mean		S.D		Sig.	t-value	Effect Size (η2)
	Pre	Post	pre	Post			
Overall Conversation	8.57	16.33	1.10	1.82	0.000	20.625	0.936

Table (1) shows that the significance level (sig) is less than (0.01). This indicates that there is a statistically significant difference at the 0.01 level between the mean scores of the study participants on the pre and post conversation test in terms of the development of the participants' "overall conversation" in favor of the posttest. This means that the H01 should be refused. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis is to be accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants on the pre and post conversation test regarding the development of the participants' "overall conversation" in favor of the posttest scores.

From table (1), it is clear that the calculated effect size, expressed by the ETA squared, equals 0.936 which is very large effect size. This indicates that the project

based approach is highly effective in developing EFL primary students' "Conversation".

Testing the validity of H02

The H02 states that there is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants on the pre and post conversation test in terms of the development of every conversation sub-skill (Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Communication, Fluency and Accuracy). In order to verify this hypothesis, the paired-samples t-test was used to detect the significance of differences between pre and post-application. Table (2) shows the results.

Table (2) T-test Results for the Significance of Differences between the Mean Scores of every conversation sub-skill on the Pre and Post Conversation Test

Conversation Component	Mean		S.D		Sig.	t-value	Effect Size (η2)
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post			
Communication	1.57	3.17	0.57	0.65	0.000	14.102	0.87
Fluency	1.70	3.23	0.47	0.57	0.000	12.324	0.839
Accuracy	1.63	3.20	0.56	0.48	0.000	10.500	0.79
Vocabulary	1.87	3.27	0.43	0.52	0.000	12.339	0.84
Pronunciation	1.80	3.47	0.61	0.57	0.000	12.042	0.83

Table (2) shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the study participants on the pre and post conversation test regarding the development of every conversation sub-skill in favor of the posttest scores.

Discussion of the Results

Overall Conversation Performance

Performing projects in groups helped pupils to practice discussion in a safe environment. It enabled weak students to benefit from proficient students and thus enhanced their conversation level. Students turned from passive receivers into active participants in order to complete the assigned projects.

Students' Performance in Pronunciation

On the pre-test, most of the study group students could not pronounce correctly. Common errors were mostly related to the use of stress patterns, intonation, and the use of vowel sounds. In the post-test, students could pronounce all sounds correctly (consonants and vowels) as the program included many leading tasks and activities in which pupils' common pronunciation errors, including those resulting from interference of the mother tongue were removed. It can be concluded that teaching through projects improved students' pronunciation. This finding was also reported by (Amalia, 2017; Rodríguez Fernández, 2017; Vaca Torres, 2016; Thuan, 2018).

Students' Performance in Vocabulary

The results indicated that the teaching through projects improved students' use of vocabulary in actual conversations. This finding was also reported by (Kimsesiz, 2017; Marisah & Robiasih, 2017; Poonpon, 2011; Reisi & Saniei, 2016; Shafaei & Rahim, 2015; Somjai & Soontornwipast, 2020; Tehrani et al., 2013; Téllez Urrea, 2019; Thuan, 2018)

Students' Performance in Accuracy:

Although students didn't receive explicit instruction concerning grammar rules, on the post-test, the results show that students' had minor accuracies and they used more correct structures.

Students' Performance in Fluency

The study group students achieved progress in their fluency after the implementation of the program. This development is supported by students' perspectives about their learning and their development in accuracy, pronunciation and grammar. It is also supported by students' performance in the post test as well as teachers' journal. Moreover, this finding was also reported by (Ali & El-Henawy, 2015; AL-Masadeh & AL-Omari, 2014; Areej & Hamzeh, n.d.; Chang, 2014; Zare-Behtash & Sarlak, 2017).

Students' Performance in Communication

The participants' communication skills obviously developed. They could respond correctly to questions and spoken instructions, take turns, maintain eye-contact and use facial expressions correctly.

Students also developed using their body language and facial expressions to express their feelings.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations in this study concerns students who did not have enough vocabulary to express their ideas and feelings.

The second limitation during this study was concerning the institutional policies. There are many authorizations were required before permitting the researcher to implement the program in a public school. These authorizations were time consuming.

The third limitation concerns the role of the researcher as a researcher and a teacher at the same time. The researcher had to collect data, take notes, plan the projects, and for the role of the researcher and to guide students during each step of the project and observe students' interactions for the teacher's role. All this was hard work and time consuming.

Recommendations

In the light of the present study results, the following recommendations are made:

For Teachers

1) Primary stage students should be given the opportunity to express their feelings as well as personal information fluently in English through authentic tasks such as projects.

2) Students should have more responsibility on their learning. They have to be trained to plan, search the internet and other resources, implement their plans, and even reflect on their own learning.

3) Supportive feedback throughout the project stages would help students to identify and strengthen their weak points. Thus, increase their motivation and engagement.

4) There should be a change in teacher's role from a dominator on the learning process to a facilitator, discussion organizer, helper, guide, and language advisor.

5) Teachers should concentrate on real-life situations which encourage learners to communicate in English freely inside the classroom.

6) Encourage students to carry out simple conversations with native speakers through the internet and record these conversations as projects.

For Textbook Writers

1) Conversation skills should be given more attention through students' presented textbooks, especially those who are in the primary stage.

2) Teaching conversation should be grounded on an adequate theory that suits the nature of conversation such as communicative language teaching.

3) Provide preparation for teachers on PBL approach and how to use it in EFL context.

4) Equip pre-service teachers with the professional development programs needed for them to lead students' projects.

Suggestions for further studies

In the light of the present study results, the following studies can be suggested:

1) Further research is needed to develop other language skills (reading, writing, and listening.) using project based learning as the present study provided support to the effectiveness of the proposed project based learning program in developing third year primary students' conversation skills.

2) Further research is needed to explore the effect of other project based learning programs in the preparatory and secondary stages.

3) Other studies are needed to investigate the effectiveness of carrying out similar program over a longer period of time on students.

4) Similar programs can also be implemented with different sets of conversation skills and with different participants.

5) More research is needed to overcome the different difficulties which face primary students in English especially in conversation.

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