



CHAPTER 6

PROMOTING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Anadel Baltazar Silva

ORCID: 0009-0001-3956-5602

Universidad Veracruzana

ABSTRACT: This article presents an Action Research study designed to enhance English speaking skills among A1-level university students through Project-Based Learning (PBL). Conducted with 32 students at Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico, the intervention took place during the critical transition from face-to-face to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed environmental issues as a thematic focus, providing a meaningful context for language use and student engagement. Through systematic implementation of PBL, the research demonstrated notable improvements in students' oral communication abilities, as well as increased learner motivation and active participation. The collaborative nature of PBL encouraged students to engage deeply with real-world problems, enhancing both their speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills. Data were collected via pre- and post-intervention speaking assessments, student reflections, and teacher observations, providing comprehensive insights into the learning process. Findings suggest that PBL is an effective pedagogical approach for developing speaking skills at the beginner level, particularly in an online or hybrid educational environment. Moreover, contextualizing language learning around authentic environmental challenges contributed significantly to student motivation and collaboration. This study offers valuable implications for ESL educators aiming to adapt methodologies to remote instruction while fostering meaningful communication and problem-solving competencies.

KEYWORDS: English, speaking skill, Project-Based Learning (PBL), Languages

RESUMEN: Este artículo presenta un estudio de Investigación-Acción diseñado para mejorar las habilidades de expresión oral en inglés entre estudiantes universitarios de nivel A1 mediante el Aprendizaje Basado en Proyectos (ABP). Realizado con 32 estudiantes de la Universidad Veracruzana, México, la intervención tuvo lugar durante la transición crítica del aprendizaje presencial al en línea debido a la pandemia de COVID-19. El estudio utilizó temas ambientales como enfoque temático, proporcionando un contexto significativo para el uso del idioma y la participación estudiantil. A través de la implementación sistemática del ABP, la investigación demostró mejoras notables en las habilidades de comunicación oral de los estudiantes, así como un aumento en la motivación y participación activa de los aprendices. La naturaleza colaborativa del ABP alentó a los estudiantes a involucrarse profundamente con problemas del mundo real, mejorando tanto su competencia en el habla como sus habilidades de pensamiento crítico. Se recopilaron datos mediante evaluaciones orales previas y posteriores a la intervención, reflexiones de los estudiantes y observaciones del profesor, proporcionando una visión comprensiva del proceso de aprendizaje. Los hallazgos sugieren que el ABP es un enfoque pedagógico efectivo para desarrollar habilidades orales en el nivel principiante, especialmente en un entorno educativo en línea o híbrido. Además, contextualizar el aprendizaje del idioma en torno a desafíos ambientales auténticos contribuyó significativamente a la motivación y colaboración de los estudiantes. Este estudio ofrece implicaciones valiosas para los educadores de ESL que buscan adaptar metodologías a la enseñanza remota mientras fomentan una comunicación significativa y competencias para la resolución de problemas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: inglés, habilidad oral, Aprendizaje Basado en Proyectos (ABP), lenguas.

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the speaking macro skill practice when learning English Language is persistent in the teaching process for most of the English learning institutions, since many of them give an evaluation percentage to the speaking skill ability. Richards & Renandya (2002) frame the speaking skill as a significant element of the language in communicating messages. However, this skill results into difficulties because it involves the ability to use language correctly in social communications. In academic context speaking performance is usually associated with self-confidence; Tuan & Mai (2015) recognize that learners' performance in speaking is affected by preparation time, enthusiasm to speak about the knowledge, teachers' evaluation in speaking activities, listening ability, and the pressure to perform well.

Students have few opportunities to express themselves in class, and when they have spoken interactions, they usually feel insecure or observed. Hence, giving students the opportunity to feel more at ease by being busy thinking about solving a problem or experiencing real life situation. Therefore, having students learn through Project-Based Learning promotes accuracy in the speaking skill practice.

PBL helps students practice accuracy while participating in oral tasks more effectively. Among the notable benefits of Project-based learning are the shift from teacher-centered memorization to student-centered investigation (Grant, 2011), the development of learners' ability to collaborate (Beckett, 2002), and the honing of academic abilities (Ducker, 2013). All these characteristics provide students with an authentic environment of practicing and producing in the language, which is the main objective of PBL in the English as a foreign language context.

The design of the project was motivated to help through Project-based learning the oral skill practice in the oral participations of the students.

The unprecedented shift from traditional classroom settings to online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic posed unique challenges for language learners worldwide. At Universidad Veracruzana in Veracruz, Mexico, a group of 32 students aged between 20 and 30 years—enrolled in an A1 level English course—experienced such a transition. Despite a generally positive attitude toward learning English, many students demonstrated a wide range of proficiency levels, with some lacking foundational knowledge of the course content.

A preliminary survey revealed a common desire among students to improve their speaking skills, with 16 out of 26 respondents prioritizing oral communication over reading, writing, or listening. This preference underscored the necessity of an instructional approach that could effectively promote speaking accuracy and confidence.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this action research was to enhance the accuracy of speaking skills in English among A1-level college students through a Project-Based Learning framework. According to Cambridge ESOL (2011), an A1 speaker is classified as a Basic User capable of understanding and using simple expressions and phrases pertinent to daily needs, able to introduce themselves, and interact in straightforward communication when interlocutors speak slowly and clearly.

This study aimed not only to elevate these competencies but also to engage students in authentic language use within problem-solving contexts, thereby encouraging both linguistic and critical thinking skills.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AND ITS RELEVANCE

Project-Based Learning is an instructional methodology that situates learners as active participants addressing real-world problems. As Cunningham (1993) notes, action research merges theory with practical problem-solving, empowering students as co-researchers rather than mere subjects. Larmer and Mergendoller (2015) emphasize that effective PBL designs integrate significant learning goals encompassing subject knowledge, critical thinking, self-regulation, and collaborative skills.

In this context, the PBL approach was aligned with English language goals and focused particularly on improving speaking accuracy through meaningful, problem-centered projects.

Principles of Project-based Learning

The following paragraphs provide a summary of the design principles of PBL to clarify the meaning of this approach and help readers identify the difference between doing projects and using project-based learning.

Driving questions

The PBL unit must have a question which motivates learning. Krajcik and Shin (2014) refer to the driving questions as the central part of the project-based science design principles. Krajcik and Mamlok-Naaman (2006) explained that a driving question is a well-planned question that students and teachers elaborate, explore, and answer during a project. High-quality driving questions should be: 1) feasible, 2) worthwhile, 3) contextualized, 4) meaningful, and 5) ethical (Krajcik and Mamlok-Naaman, 2006; Krajcik and Shin, 2014). A driving question example for project-based could be: “How do environmental problems affect my community?”

A driving question is a root guide to consult throughout the project process. Parker et al. (2011) suggested that a driving question is critical to reaching the deeper learning goals of the courses. Parker et al. (2011) also indicated that the project cycles are unified by a master question that as students move through the course, they continually reexamine this question and attempt again to answer it, reflecting on what they are learning in each new project cycle.

ACTION PLAN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The strategy was to work with students individually or in teams with a topic related to the environment by making them practice the oral skills and using Project-based learning as a tool. Hedge (1993) specifies projects as extended tasks which usually integrate language skills by means of a number of tasks, these tasks are

associate in working towards a settled goal which includes planning, the gathering of information through reading, listening, interviewing, and observing; group discussion of information; problem solving; oral and written reporting; and displaying. The data gathered from the journal notes and the recordings were useful to notice that practicing the speaking skill with PBL approach seemed to help students focus on solving problems and thinking about a creative form to conclude the projects instead of feeling pressure to express themselves orally. Furthermore, after analyzing students speaking performance in their written tasks and recordings, there was evident improvement comparing the excerpts and the interactions and tasks at the beginning of the course; likewise, the interviews showed students improvement talking about accuracy.

The project itself had students develop strategies or giving tips in order to take care of the environment, trying to give the example of measurements they can do at their houses or in their community. Students made videos, they helped themselves with slides presentations, pictograms among other digital programs they preferred to share advice or giving information about how to improve the environmental situation. Learners needed to work on things they could do in their near context and give tips about what others can do to improve the environmental problems.

The final evidence was another video, students worked on a review of their environmental actions, what they had done during the course, including: how to plant, making compost, promoting recycling, giving tips for the environment; they were free to use everything they did.

One of the most important things about using PBL is that students concentrate on solving a problem, or improving a situation; so they are busy planning how to find a solution to a particular problematic while practicing speaking but not focusing on how well they are performing but how to find a solution to a particular situation which creates a state of comfort making students feel at ease without realizing. At the same time, a sense of community and a participation in real life problems are taking part of the students' projects, having a new perspective that goes beyond the classroom.

This course includes topics such as: present simple, imperative, there is/are, modal can, prepositions of place, the use of like and prefer, interrogative questions, yes/no questions among others. Firstly, very mini-task had its own driving question which was using one of the course topics, in addition students made research of a plant, herb or vegetable by using simple present and modal can, after that students explain the process of planting with the plant, herb or vegetable they selected. Students were using the tenses and topics from the program at all times, we reviewed the contents and at the same time we were working on the project tasks.

The intervention spanned six weeks and centered on environmental issues—an area relevant to students’ everyday lives. This thematic choice facilitated engagement and motivated authentic dialogue. The PBL intervention consisted of four sequential tasks, each linked with specific linguistic competencies and real-life problem-solving:

<i>Week</i>	<i>Task</i>	<i>Driving Question</i>	<i>Learning Competency</i>
1	Organic Garden	How can I help the earth by making an organic garden?	Explain planting processes using simple present and modals
2	Habitat Description	How do environmental conditions affect local animals/plants?	Describe habitats and human impact on flora and fauna
3	Recycling and Pollution Reduction	Is recycling important for improving my lifestyle?	Discuss recycling benefits and pollution reduction actions
4	Reviewing Environmental Actions	Do I feel I am contributing to improving the environment?	Summarize environmental contributions and reflect on changes

Image 1

PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES

- Organic Garden Creation:** Students planted edible plants at home, documenting growth processes through videos narrated in English. This task was vital in practicing present simple tense, modal verbs like «can,» and building relevant environmental vocabulary.
- Habitat Observation:** Learners studied their local surroundings, focusing on flora and fauna, and completed questionnaires to articulate environmental impacts, thereby encouraging the use of descriptive language.
- Recycling Awareness:** Students researched recycling benefits and pollution mitigation strategies, sharing findings and advice on social media platforms to enhance speaking fluency and persuasive skills.
- Reflective Reporting:** Finally, learners synthesized their experiences and self-assessed progress via oral presentations, consolidating both language and critical thinking abilities.

Throughout the PBL activities, students worked collaboratively and individually, focusing on problem-solving rather than on linguistic perfection, which fostered a relaxed atmosphere conducive to natural language use.

RECORDINGS' SCREENSHOTS

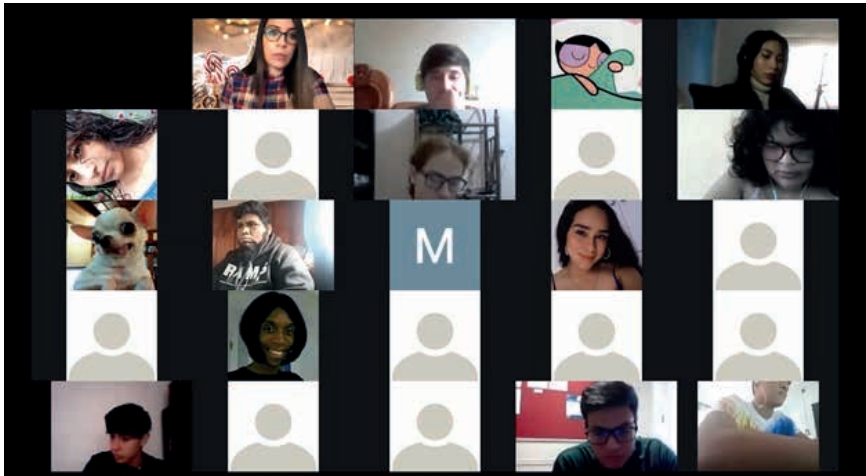


Image 2

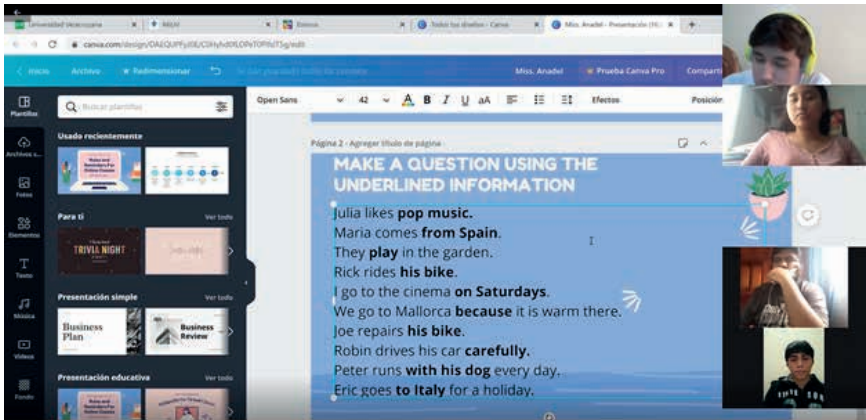


Image 3

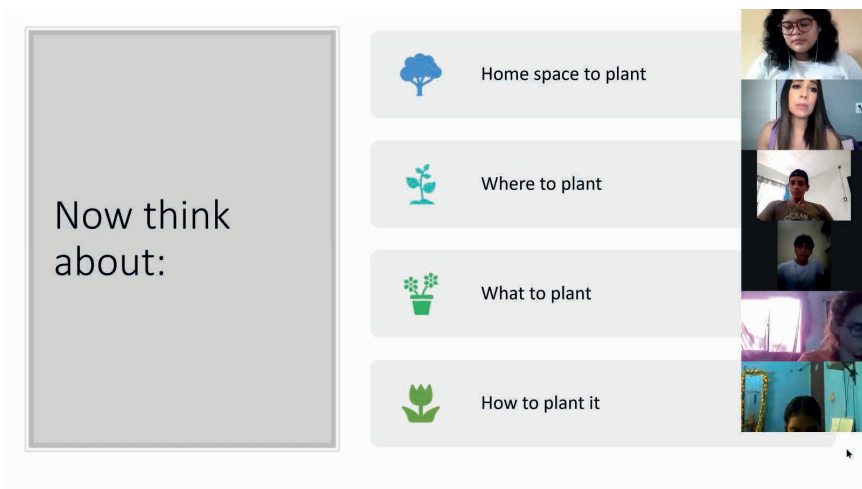


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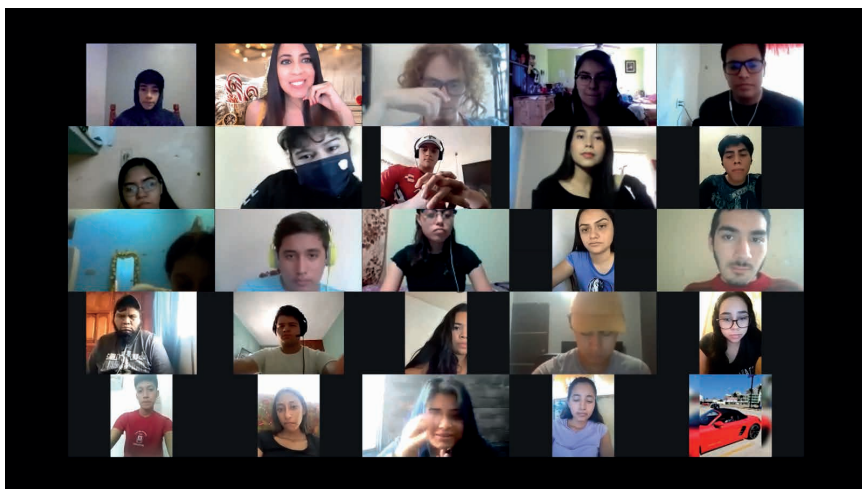


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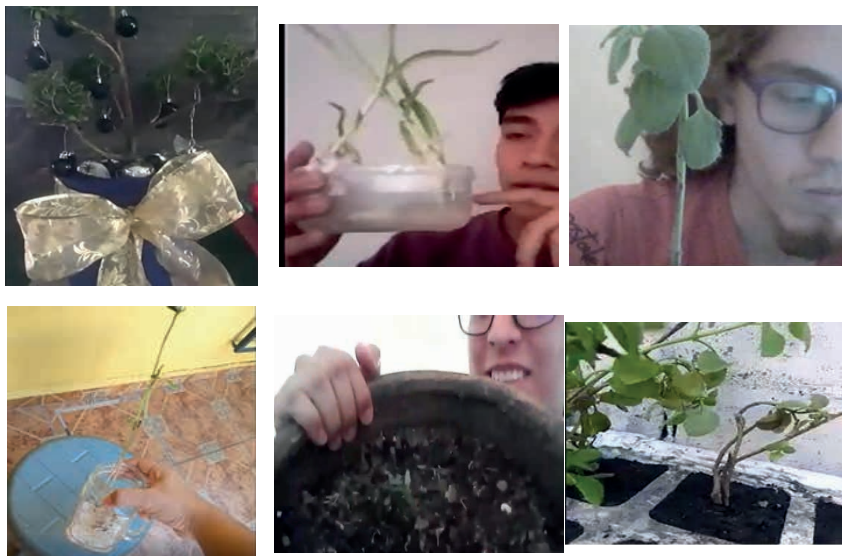


Image 6

OUTCOMES AND DISCUSSION

To accomplish this, an action plan was designed to get the participants familiar with projects. To keep track of the main objective of this investigation, different activities and tasks were elaborated within the projects. During this process, learners gradually became more accurate at speaking and incorporated new words which were presented in context. Seemingly, most of the participants benefitted from the implementation of PBL, given that they expressed enjoying working with projects. Also, they improved their speaking skills and vocabulary range which is supported by the data collection. During the survey, a student mentioned she believe projects helped improving abilities such as dialogue and writing since video and written tasks were held, videos documented the projects work and during sessions developments were reviewed, which, according to her, helped achieving the a better comprehension of the topics; another student expressed that projects are a good tool to improve vocabulary , which was not the main objective of the AR but some students had increased their vocabulary range during the implementation; the student mentioned hey could also develop their speaking skill ability in a practical fashion, he mentioned that PBL helped to be more confident when expressing themselves and to communicate. Many students mentioned over the course that PBL provided a confidence environment to learn and performed the tasks within the projects.

"I could improve my comprehension abilities, dialogue and writing in English, since writings, videos (documenting the process of the projects) were made and during sessions advances and developing of these were commented. Achieving more understanding of the topics". (s1)Dec. 2020

"I believe they are a good tool to improve and widen our vocabulary, at the same time our abilities of speaking and writing develop in a more practical manner. On the other side it helps us to get more confidence at the time of expressing and communicating ourselves". (s2)Dec. 2020

Students' survey pieces 3

During the course the program was covered first, students had their grammar sections including listening parts, mainly for vocabulary practice and at least one conversation recording, they had space to participate and give ideas related to the topic and a writing practice too.

The behavior and performance development were not completely satisfactory at the beginning, but this changed over the weeks. Recurrent words from the data collection showed the effectiveness of the tasks, some of the students' reactions were related with their confidence throughout the implementation process, for example, in one of the interviews, student 1 answers that she was embarrassed of talking before, but she changed that within time.

¿Crees que un proyecto ayudó a mejorar tu habilidad oral en inglés? *

Si
No

¿Por qué? (usa todas las palabras necesarias para explicar tu respuesta) *

Porque me daba pena y poco a poco fui cambiando eso (s2)

Figure 11. Students' project's work excerpt 1

Some others revealed the improvement they had when performing speaking skill task, fluency, vocabulary words and even confidence.

¿Crees que un proyecto ayudó a mejorar tu habilidad oral en inglés?*

Si

¿Por qué? (usa todas las palabras necesarias para explicar tu respuesta)*

Durante los proyectos se realizaron videos para documentar y explicar el proceso de estos, ayudo a ampliar el vocabulario y sobretudo se aumentó la práctica de la habilidad oral. Dando como resultado una mayor fluidez.

Explica: ¿Cómo te sientes al expresarte en inglés después de trabajar con los proyectos en clase?

Me siento con mayor seguridad.

¿Consideras que los proyectos te ayudaron a mejorar la certeza en la que te comunicabas al hablar en inglés?*

Si, claro que sí

¿Por qué? (usa todas las palabras necesarias para explicar tu respuesta)

Al realizar los videos me daba cuenta de mis errores de pronunciación. Me dió la oportunidad de corregir y mejorar esas pequeñas fallas para lograr un mejor resultado. (s3)

About the activities and students' reactions, some of them were related to the behavior presented during class; although at the beginning, most of them were not favorable, this changed over the days. During the course of the days, it was observed how students developed their social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language skills (Pruitt, 2009; Petty, 2016). With the different activities students had to do in teams, they increased their ability for sharing, they engaged in parallel play, and improved turn taking.

Comparing students' initial speaking performances with those following the six-week PBL intervention revealed marked improvements in accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and pronunciation. Students demonstrated greater fluency in explaining environmental processes and used newly acquired terminology pertinent to the tasks.

The emphasis on meaningful communication, rather than mechanical language drills, helped reduce anxiety often associated with speaking practice. Students reported feeling more comfortable speaking spontaneously, supported by continuous practice through project activities such as video presentations and peer discussions.

Furthermore, the PBL framework enhanced collaboration and critical thinking, as students negotiated roles, shared ideas, and developed solutions to environmental challenges. This holistic engagement contributed significantly to motivating learners and solidifying their language skills.

CONCLUSION

This action research confirms that Project-Based Learning can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool to enhance speaking skills among beginner-level English learners. By integrating language instruction with real-life environmental problems, students not only improved their linguistic accuracy but also developed essential 21st-century skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and digital literacy.

For educators navigating similar transitions or seeking more dynamic approaches to language teaching, this study underscores the value of combining content relevance with active learning strategies. The success observed at Universidad Veracruzana encourages the broader adoption of PBL to foster meaningful, confidence-building language acquisition experiences. It would be interesting to apply a similar research trying to use topics related to specific interests of students and not only environmental issues. It would also be stimulating to apply a similar project in a face-to-face environment.

Author's note: This study was conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the adaptability and resilience of both educators and learners in maintaining educational quality through innovation.

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