

UDC 373

PROJECT WORK TO ASSESS SENIOR STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN SPEAKING

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The main goal of teaching English as a second language (ESL) is the development of communicative competence, i.e. the ability to communicate in a target language for meaningful purposes. This communication can be realized both in productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading) forms. However, the lack of English academic hours set by the state syllabus poses a great number of problems for both teachers and learners to achieve this goal.

Even though there is an abundance of research around the benefits of project-based learning (PBL)¹, little is known about how this effective teaching technique can be used to evaluate students' speaking abilities. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to show how project work as a modern pedagogic technique can help teachers to evaluate students' performance in speaking.

Speaking is often considered one of the most difficult aspects of language learning. This can be explained by the fact that it involves three areas of knowledge: pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Thus, many language learners find it difficult to express themselves in spoken language. Moreover, they may be simply afraid to perform in front of the class due to their shyness or inner complexes. What can boost speaking skills and mitigate students' confusion and embarrassment?

Of all the four English skills, speaking is considered to be the most important skill required for communication. Well-developed speaking strategies usually create a number of benefits for both speakers and potential working companies. In addition, effective speaking skills result in achievements during ceremonial speaking activities, job training activities and interviews, and many other business purposes. Obviously senior students as future graduates and then employees need to enhance the development of speaking confidence, fluency, and accuracy.

Every time an audience occurs in speaking, it is considered to be more complicated than general everyday conversation and a number of other skills are therefore included in the speaking delivery process, e.g. choosing topics, organizing thoughts, tailoring the message, and adapting to listener feedback (Lucas, 2001). Consequently, students' fear and anxiety increase which may result in their failure and bad academic performance. These can be the reasons for teachers to provide more situations and activities for students to strengthen their speaking competence.

Many teachers agree that students learn speaking skills best communicating. Thus, speaking tasks should be presented as "real" situations that require collaboration between students. In addition, it is significant to provide every learner with an opportunity to participate in speaking activities in class. Project work as a problem-based and learner-centered¹ method

¹ See: Kilpatrick, W.H. The Project Method / W.H. Kilpatrick.- 1918.- p.319-335.; Lee, I. 2002. Project work made easy in the English classroom. Canadian Modern Language Review 59 (2): 282-90.; Alan, B and Stoller, F. (2005). Maximizing the Benefits of Project Work in Foreign Language Classrooms. English Teaching Forum. P. 10-21.

immerses students into difficult real-life situations and teaches them to resolve problems communicating in a group using target language.

The essence of project-based learning lies in acquiring a deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems. In the 20th century American philosophers and pedagogues John Dewey and William Hear Kilpatrick proclaimed the principle of "learning by doing", which basically means that students acquire knowledge while practicing². However, even looking at evolution we can say for sure that humankind survived because ancient men learnt by doing. This proves that regardless of the epoch you are living in the key for development and survival is knowledge gained by practice.

Project-based learning contrasts with rote memorization and teacher-centred learning because it shifts the stress from passive form of learning to active students' participation. Rhoades (2013, p.29) argues "students learn better and retain more from methods in which they are actively involved (teaching others, practicing doing, discussing) than when they are passive learners (listening to a lecture, reading, using audiovisual)". Experience proves that we learn language by using it.

Teacher's role in project work is often underestimated. Accordingly, it is necessary to highlight that finding the proper balance between teacher's guidance and student's autonomy enhances the advantages of project work in the language classroom. (Alan & Stoller, 2005). Thus, too excessive teacher control or a total absence of teacher feedback can be crucial in project work. Not to mention student's group work where they will definitely switch over to their mother tongue. In this case teacher's control is of vital importance.

The end result of project work must always be tangible. Students' outcomes can be presented in different forms (e.g. oral, written, visual, etc.). As Thomas Markham (2011, p.40) underlines: "Students learn knowledge and elements of the core curriculum, but also apply what they know to solve authentic problems and produce results that matter". In other words, not only must the result be presented in some form but it must contribute to students' experience and development.

Summing it all up, a successful project-based learning should focus on real-world subject matter that interests students; require student communication and, at the same time, some degree of student autonomy and independence; be process- and product-oriented, with an emphasis on integrated skills and final self-evaluation. (Allen 2004; Gardner 1995; Gu 2004; Ho 2003; Lee 2002; Levine 2004; Papandreou 1994; Tomei, Glick, and Holst 1999)

Project work can be successfully implemented in high school since it is in line with senior student's psychological characteristics. Most high school students are able to process a great amount of information critically which enables them to differentiate between necessary and redundant materials. Moreover, they express their willingness to co-educational activities where their leadership or communication skills can be improved.

Using the right forms of project work can maximize the learning advantages and add to students' academic success. Thus, taking into account high school students' desire for self-expression, autonomy and independence, a teacher maintaining "aloofness" and at the same time creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere in class will reach a win-win situation.

One of the tools regulating the improvement of speaking skills is assessment. In the broad sense assessment is a component of educational process that determines the level of students' skills and abilities. While in the narrow sense assessment can be defined as the lesson stage when homework and tasks are checked. It is a means to control students' academic performance.

² See: Kilpatrick, W.H. The Project Method / W.H. Kilpatrick.- 1918.- p.319-335.

The effectiveness of assessment depends on several factors. In our case speaking skills are the object of assessment. Therefore, vocabulary and grammar skills must be checked implicitly and indirectly. Moreover, mistake correction should be in line with the studying stage. Thus, a high school teacher should correct only those mistakes that influence the meaning of the utterance. Finally, a mark or a grade must produce a pedagogical impact on the learner (Luoma, 2004).

Assessment must be objective and systematic. Objectivity means that speaking results should correspond with requirements listed in the state curriculum for every age group and English teachers should mark their students according to these requirements. At the same time frequency of assessment directly influence students' academic performance and the duration of keeping the material in mind (Luoma, 2004).

Students' evaluation should be always differentiated which means that the form of assessment depends on the stage of learning and on the psychological peculiarities of learners. Similarly, the form of assessment must correspond with form speaking that is being evaluated. For example, the object of assessment of a dialogue is the ability to comprehend a partner and adequately react to his or her utterance. The object of assessment of a monologue is the ability to build up and present a coherent texts of different communicative purpose.

Needless to say, assessment will be effective and speaking skills will be improved only when English teachers and learners observe all the above-mentioned factors. For instance, one of the factors influencing the effectiveness of assessment says that an objective teacher assesses their students strictly in accordance with state curriculum requirements. Another factor, however, claims that teachers should take into account their students' psychological characteristics. Thus, observing one factor and neglecting another can cause problems equally.

Connecting together project work, speaking skills and evaluation component, there are some essential recommendations for teacher to highlight:

1. In order to improve learners' speaking productivity and the grades project work should be organized at the end of the module when students already know grammar and vocabulary content of the topic;

2. The effectiveness of speaking skills can be enhanced when students are aware of the assessment criteria. They provide learners with clear structure what must be covered in their speech, what must be highlighted, or what must be omitted at all. Consequently, the earlier the teacher works out the criteria and familiarizes learners with them, the better the outcomes of speaking performance will be;

3. The implementation of cooperative learning shows all learners' progress and involvement: the teacher can rotate speakers to ensure that all students are participating and contributing to the class, therefore every learner improves their speaking abilities and every learner is assessed (Rhoades 2013, p.33);

4. In order to mitigate students' anxiety and prepare them for public speaking activities the final result of the project should be presented in front of the class. The frequency of such speeches will strengthen confidence and competence of English speaking skills. The key factor here is to eliminate fear of making errors to make learners feel comfortable with their language use.

In conclusion, although the final goal of learning a foreign language is the ability to express oneself in a spoken language and, more importantly, effective speaking skills contribute to one's successful career, a great number of students struggle with speaking. During the research several factors hindering students' speaking performance were singled out. The most affecting ones are the limited opportunities to speak English (both in and outside class) and individual psychological reasons such as shyness, anxiety and lack of speaking confidence.

Project work can resolve the above-mentioned problems because it implies students' cooperative learning where every member of the group has an opportunity to interact with peers which makes the whole process less stressful. Being based on a real problem that requires a solution presented orally PBL prepares students for every day struggle and accordingly improves speaking skills. What is also significant is the high school students' psychological readiness to participate in project activities. Therefore, a proper-organized project work can be used for assessing senior students' performance in speaking.

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