In The Name Of God

Payame Noor University

Faculty of Humanities

Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages

Comparison of Reading Comprehension between Students' taught by Project-based Instruction and Traditional methods.

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By: Mona poorverdi Shiraz

Advisor: Masoud Raee Sharif (PhD)

Reader: Hassan Iravani (PhD)

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Dedication:

This Master thesis is dedicated to:

- *My beloved family—my lovely parents, sister, and brother—for their generous, and unforgettable support, constant encouragement, and everlasting love.*

- *My professors for giving me knowledge, hope, and encouragement.*

- *My students for giving me inspiration, and cooperation.*

The importance of what you have done

is second to nothing else.

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the relationship between the use of project-based activities and students' reading Comprehension. The study seeks answers to the questions of whether students' reading comprehension differs after implementing project-based activities, and whether different projects lead to different degrees of reading comprehension. Eighty intermediate female students from Kish English Institute of Rasht participated in this study. After checking their homogeneity using a standard test, participants were randomly assigned to two experimental groups, receiving English language instruction in a project-based context. The first experimental group was asked to make four magazines during a period of four months while, the second experimental group was supposed to make four wall newspapers during the same period.

To compare the performances of the two groups, the numerical data obtained from the samples were analyzed using the one way ANOVA. The result indicated that at $\alpha = .05$, there is a significant positive relationship between the use of project-based activities and reading comprehension ability. The study also indicated that there is no significant difference between the reading comprehension ability of the two experimental groups. These findings provide evidence to support further implementation of PBL activities in English learning classes irrespective of the nature of the PBL activity.

CHAPTERS:

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Methodology

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The purpose of this research is mainly to investigate the relationship between doing project-based learning activities and intermediate students' reading comprehension ability in Rasht Kish English Institute. This chapter contains the background of the study followed by the statement of the problem and its related research questions and hypotheses. The next part presents significance of the study followed by the limitations of the present research. The last part of this chapter suggests operational definitions of key terms used in the study.

1.1. *Background of the study*

The benefits and importance of experiential, hands-on, student-directed learning has been confessed by many educators. John Dewey, one of the most important pioneers of experiential method of learning, reported on the benefits of various activities such as, field trips, laboratory investigations, and interdisciplinary activities over 100 years ago. Project-based approaches have often been used to satisfy the needs of those who have become frustrated with the limitations of traditional methods of education, and are seeking innovative and inspiring methods of teaching. Doing projects is considered as a long-standing tradition in education (Grant, 2002; Markham, et al. 2003). The roots of project based learning lie in this tradition.

The emergence of a method of teaching and learning called Project Based

Learning is the result of two important developments over the last 30 years. First, there has been a revolution in learning theory. It is widely believed that learning is partly a social activity; it takes place within the context of culture, community, and past experiences. Research has shown that the feedback that students provide in a learning situation is just a part of students' learning process. They also use what they already know to explore, and create their own knowledge. Therefore, researchers consider a greater role for the process of learning. In addition, thanks to the cognitive research a lot more has been revealed about the nature of problem solving. Education has truly benefited from this research, as teachers have learned how to effectively scaffold content and activities to strengthen and extend the skills and capabilities of students.

Second, the world has changed. Teachers are now well aware that industrial culture has shaped the organization and methods of teaching at schools in the 19th and 20th centuries, and they recognize that school, and students must get used to the new century. It goes without saying that students need both knowledge and skills to succeed (Merkham, et al. 2003).

According to Vygotsky (1978) learning is a social process. The satisfactory outcome is best observed when there is closer cooperation between teacher and students and among students. Project-based learning is a learner centered method, and there is considerable focus on students' understanding .The learner centered characteristics of PBL will pave the way to learners' motivation, and active engagement in their learning process. These characteristics have been considered to play critical rules in success of a PBL lesson. (Vygotsky, 1978)

Project-based learning is a teaching method that is mainly centered on the

learner. Contrary to traditional methods of teaching which use a rigid lesson plan to push students down a specific path, Project based learning equips learners with the required knowledge to allow in-depth investigation of a topic which is worth learning more about (Erdem, 2002).

According to Candlin and Murphy (1987) note, "the central purpose we are concerned with is language learning, and tasks present this in the form of a problem solving negotiation between knowledge that the learner holds and the new knowledge". The truth is that Project-based learning educational goal is explicit and clear, and its root in constructivism –a social learning theory, implies that the teacher be a learner too. (Candlin & Murphy, 1987)

1.2.   Statement of the Problem and the Purpose of the Study

Education is said to be the most important factor in improving communities. The most important factor in education is to train people that can use the gained knowledge, ability, and attitude to solve problems, and to use what they have learned to adapt to new situations in the real life. So, today's communities need to be equipped with the most valid knowledge, which enables learners to adapt to the changing world. Technology is also playing a vital role in what, and how students are learning. Therefore, the purpose of education is to teach students to reach knowledge rather than transferring it (Sert, 2006). The education environment becomes more effective when students use the knowledge by making sense of it, and experience has revealed that students can reach to the knowledge actively and

learn better when they are in the center of the education process, (Saracaloglu, Akamca & Yesildere, 2006). In this way, students are capable of using the knowledge highly efficiently and reach to comprehension, implementation, and evaluation steps.

Reading ability has been shown to have a critical impact on students' learning and performance (Leppanen, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2005), and supportive strategies for its development are essential. One way in which we can boost students reading comprehension ability, in my opinion, is by directing them to read more texts. However, students might not seem so willing, when reading is done solely for the sake of testing their reading comprehension. A simple glance at the present status of English learners in Iran English institutes clarifies that a majority of students do not go very much beyond what they are supposed to read in their course books, so the need for indirectly guiding them to read more will become tangible.

As a teacher I have always seen my students being challenged by reading tasks, and having difficulty in understanding them. Part of this problem, In my opinion, stems from lack of enough exposure to written text. Semantic knowledge, or the knowledge of words and relationships between them, plays the most important role in reading comprehension. There is no dispute among researchers that vocabulary knowledge is crucial to reading comprehension (Johnston, 1983). Coleman (1971) reports that lexical complexity of texts account for 80% of the variance in reading comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1981, p. 80), implying that the higher one's degree of lexical knowledge, the higher the degree of comprehension. (Schoonen, Hulstijn, & Bossers 1998, p. 87) bring evidence that in the case of L1, "60% of the variance in reading comprehension is related to

vocabulary knowledge", and that foreign language vocabulary is the best predictor of FL reading comprehension (ibid p. 89). Therefore, the more students read the more words they learn, the more new structures they encounter; therefore, the better they understand.

Project-based learning approach to education may positively affect students' ability in understanding a written text, as students actively explore, select, collect, analyze, and comprehend information sources (Kuhlthau, 1997). In project-based learning students will read through a vast area of reading materials, for the sources ranging over books, magazines, newspapers, articles to surfing the net. In addition, the use of computers and technology in learning activities has been shown to have a positive correlation with higher reading comprehension ability. (Chu, et al. 2011)

In Iran English is considered to be a foreign language, and is not used in formal or informal settings outside the classrooms; therefore, Iranian students face challenging learning contexts in which few opportunities are provided for learners to practice English communicatively. I believe doing projects will provide students with the opportunity of being exposed to foreign language, and practising their language while they are not in the learning environment of the class.

Another issue to be considered here is that the mostly used language teaching methods in Iran Institutes are such traditional methods as audio-lingual or grammar translation methods which do not require students' active involvement in their learning process. What they actually do is simply memorizing what instructors preach, and very few institutes try to use new methods such as communicative language learning, because applying new teaching methods will put a heavier

burden on both students' and teachers' shoulders.

As a teacher I have always been looking for methods which can make students learn not only the curricula and the concepts, but also teach them how to organize and present their thoughts, manage a complex project in a limited amount of time, and cooperate with members of a group. I have always believed that a second language learning environment must posses a lively and active atmosphere, a class where students are happy and willing to attend in, and participate. A place where they can enjoy what they are learning, and going through literature revealed a path toward project-based work in the last few decades to me.

It seems that although language instructors carry most of the blame to reduce learning problems, much of the success in language learning process rests in individual students, and their ability to take advantage of every opportunity to learn, and try to be self-directed and engaged in their learning process. These kinds of problems have caused searching for more effective approaches and methods that can enable students to achieve the mentioned purpose of the education. Communicative Language Teaching, which emphasizes interaction as opposed to grammar instruction, has been an influential approach in English education (Cross, 2005). Among various realizations of CLT, project-based language learning (PBL) seems to be capable of equipping foreign language learners with fundamental conditions for language learning. PBL is a goal-oriented teaching method effective in enhancing student motivation. It can offer English learners exposure to authentic materials, opportunities to use the target language, and motivation to learn, which are all considered to be required conditions for language learning (Willis, 1996).

Moss reported PBL helped ESL learners develop various skills because PBL creates situations where learners need to communicate to get the job done (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998).

Finally it must be considered that doing projects such as publishing a Class magazine or a wall newspaper can be an excellent way to focus on the whole class and get them working together towards a common goal. Taking some 'time out' from regular classes and doing something completely different can really help group dynamics and it can also give quieter or less able students a chance to shine. Making a class magazine or wall newspaper is a project that will appeal to most groups as it allows individuals to work on what interests them. On the other hand it is a great way to put into practice skills that have been learnt during an English course. It appears to be very productive for learning process. The learners will eventually not only obtain the knowledge and skills, but also learn to implement the skills to real practice.

Going through the literature reveals that, researchers have reported on the positive effects of Project-based activities. Machida et al, for example, reported improvement of English abilities and increased exposure to English materials among Japanese English learners after an English video production project in a Japanese university (Shimazaki, Torikai, & Watanabe, 1991).

Onoda also reported that an English news program production project enhanced students' listening ability and critical thinking (Onoda, 2000). Although these studies reported positive effects of PBL in the context of EFL, a lot more

research needs to be done in order to confirm the usefulness of PBL activities in the field of foreign language education especially in our country, Iran. Therefore, Part of this study is going to shed light on other researchers' findings, and the next part, which as far as I'm concerned, has not been done up to now is going to compare two types of projects together to see whether different projects lead to different degrees of reading comprehension.

1.3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. Is there a significant relationship between project-based learning, and reading comprehension ability?

2. Between such group projects as wall newspaper and class magazine which activity is better conducive to reading comprehension?

The following null hypotheses are formulated to investigate the questions justifiably:

Hypothesis 1: Project work does **not** lead to better reading comprehension.

Hypothesis 2: There is **no** difference between such group projects as wall newspaper and class magazine in enhancing reading comprehension.

1.4. Significance of the study

For many years English classes have been designed with old and dogmatic Strategies. The time has come for old methods and strategies to be replaced with new and innovative ones. If the null hypotheses in this study are rejected then we can claim that teachers and students are taking more benefits from new methods rather than old ones. The new method is also trying to help students become independent learners and learn how to learn, instead of always waiting for their

teachers to provide them with the right answer.

This study is therefore, set up in the hope that it can provide more insights into the constructs that may be associated with the students' achievement and language ability and also knowledge of project-based learning and reading comprehension among students. The result may increase the knowledge needed to influence the learners' outcome and provide them with a deeper understanding of the role of new methods of teaching as they go through the often challenging task of learning English.

It is also worthwhile mentioning that the findings would enable English teachers to be better able to help students facing problems in English learning. FL teachers will know the extent to which it may be necessary to incorporate new teaching methods into their programs and encourage their students to develop a positive attitude towards their language learning experience.

Finally this study may guide teachers, counselors, and administrators by suggesting a need to consider project-based learning activities in the development of appropriate material, curricula, assessment, teaching approaches, and teacher training techniques. Although this study makes no claim of generalizability, other SL/FL programs, researchers, and teachers may recognize similarities between the participants of this study and their own students and take into consideration its findings and implications.

1.5. Delimitation

This research was carried out with participants studying intermediate English at kish English Institute of Rasht city. The present study was conducted in the academic year of 1389 – 1390 (2010 – 2011, Gregorian calendar). Since it was conducted on Rasht Kish English Students, the finding and results may not necessarily generalize to other populations or

locations.

1.6.   Limitations

Certain limitations were imposed on the current research. Despite considerable potential, project-based education is not without problems. The idea that projects represent learning by action certainly is not new (Dewey, 1933). However, lessons from the past suggest that without adequate attention to ways of supporting teachers and students, these innovative educational approaches will not be widely adopted. Although students had developed a very friendly atmosphere among themselves, and were totally enjoying their new learning situation, part of students' motivation in this study, in my opinion, was coming from the financial support the institute was providing them with.

This method also requires motivated and creative teachers. Teachers holding project-based classes need to devote additional time and energy to implement this method. Unless the class is handled by a creative teacher, it will become a monotonous and boring one where students will not only become exhausted but also lose their motivation to do the project. A teacher in this method must have a clear and neat lesson plan for all the sessions, providing the class with different kinds of activities.

1.7.   Definitions of Key Terms

The main constructs used in this study are:

Communicative language Teaching: Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics defines Communicative Language Teaching as "an approach to foreign or second language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language