

Research Article

THE EFFECT OF PROJECT WORK ON THE FLUENCY AND NATURALNESS IN SPOKEN ENGLISH OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS – JOB HUNTERS TO-BE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this innovation was to examine the effect of project work on the fluency and naturalness in spoken English of Vietnamese students, job hunters to-be. The innovation was implemented in 12 weeks from 2 February to 27 April 2020 with 40 senior non – English major students in UNETI split into 2 groups as an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group was given project work to do besides their normal textbook to promote real communication in classroom through task-based activities. On the way to get the selected projects done, students had a real need for communication and an authentic communicative context to practice the target language. The innovation in the end got the expected outcome since the findings from the tests, observations and interviews indicated that project work could help students improve their fluency and naturalness in spoken English. This bottom-up innovation was based on a combination of the problem solving model and social interaction model and considered as an imminent change. After identifying the problem of students' poor competence in spoken English, the researcher cum the innovator and change agent proposed project work as a type of treatment to the perceived problem. A researcher's colleague played the role of an implementer and adopter; 20 students in the experimental group were clients and adopters.

Keywords: effect; fluency; naturalness; spoken English; job hunters to-be.

INTRODUCTION

Tell me and I'll forget;
Show me and I may remember
Involve me and I will understand

(Author unknown) from the Internet (*)

It is natural that we are likely to master things by doing them ourselves; that means we learn via practice. Learning is a process in which learners play an important role in its success or failure and therefore in language learning, learners' independence and responsibility for their own studies are essential to make them competent speakers. Learner-centered teaching method is preferred by teachers and TESOL experts throughout the world and one of its forms is known as real-life project work or interactive learning in classroom. "Exposing learners to "pieces" of outside world has a crucial function in respect of providing realistic language input, establishing a dynamic and meaningful context for learning, and increasing learners' motivation. We are therefore able to construct "an associative bridge between the classroom and the world"" (J. Heaton cited in Smith 1997) and "prepare learners for post-classroom experience." (Dickens et al. 1995) In addition, Krashen and Terrell state that the purpose of language instruction is to allow the learners to "understand language outside the classroom", so that ultimately he or she can "utilize the real world, as well as the classroom, for progress." (Krashen & Terrell 1983:1)

RATIONALE AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE INNOVATION

Teaching spoken English in Vietnam

In secondary and high schools, teaching speaking skill is totally

neglected in the curriculum. Students are well-equipped with grammar, vocabulary and translation skill to pass the school examinations which test students' knowledge of English forms, structures rather than their true ability to use English in a real context. To ensure high proportion of passing students at the end of the semesters or school years, teachers try to load their students with structures and vocabulary from the textbooks and spend all of the class time explaining and practicing "these pieces" in writing. As a result, students become skillful test-takers who know plenty of English linguistics but turn out to be tongued-tied speakers. The picture is brighter in colleges and universities where teaching speaking skill has its presence in the curriculum but still plays a minor role in the teaching program. The communication-oriented materials become more popular in class with the hope to familiarize students with authentic contexts. However, very often the materials and the teaching method are not synchronous. It is because of the large class size and the out-of-date school management system that teachers cannot always apply communicative approach to maximize the objectives of the materials and then the grammar – translation approach returns to take its land. Many Vietnamese students are not competent in speaking and often have difficulties in expressing their ideas. This makes them unwilling to communicate in the target language for the fear of being ridiculed. Testing format in high schools, colleges and universities in Vietnam has remained unchanged for more than 10 years. Former Deputy Minister of Education and Training Nguyen Vinh Hien said, "Major exams focused too much on theory and learning information by heart. They lacked practical lessons for which students can apply their knowledge." (Quoted from an article titled "Support pledged for struggling teachers" on Thanh Nien Daily dated January 7, 2009 – page 12) and thus as a wash back effect, students do not have a need to develop their speaking competence. That explains why college and university graduates have difficulties in finding jobs after graduation. Not surprisingly, this common teaching practice was also spotted at UNETI, a public university with different departments including Business Administration, Technology, Software

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Programming, Tourism, Foreign Languages, Hospital Management, Accounting and Banking. For non-English major students, English is treated as a theoretical subject with forms and structures. They learn English in a passive way by getting inputs from their teachers, copying them into their notebook, learning these notes by heart and then reproducing what they could remember in the tests.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FLUENCY AND NATURALNESS IN SPEAKING ENGLISH IN VIETNAMESE EMPLOYMENT MARKET

When spreading their business in Vietnam, most foreign companies tend to recruit candidates with good English competence reflected in the interview through 2 skills- speaking and listening. Fluency and naturalness in spoken English are a prerequisite to be accepted into these companies as well as in any big Vietnamese businesses because effective communication with foreign partners or customers is a crucial factor in building cooperation and ensuring mission completion. At workplace environment, the ability to use English in everyday life is highly required and this makes a big gap between the school training program and the real demand in the employment market.

SOLUTION

"The challenge we face as educators is how to prepare our students for the fast-paced, ever-changing expectations and environment of the workplace. With the information explosion, the rise of an international workforce and the widespread innovation in technologies, our students face demands never before anticipated. At the same time, the employment community expects that our graduates will possess the skills and abilities to adapt and manage such amazing and complex changes" (Olesen, 1995). Therefore, universities in Vietnam have to optimize the curriculum to develop students' speaking competence in English for their future employment. Then one of the good ways to build up students' confidence in using English in real world, and prepare them for social life at work is bringing project work into the curriculum. Project is defined as a piece of work involving careful study of a subject over a period of time done by a group of students to produce something new. (Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary). It is student-centered, and provides an opportunity for informal learning, which is beneficial to students as Krashen maintains that "the best kind of learning is inductive and incidental" (RELC course book: Language Acquisition, 1998:23). "It also gives students a chance to take a certain responsibility for their own learning, encouraging them to set their own objectives in terms of what they want and need to learn. The route to the end-product brings opportunities for students to develop their independence and to work together in a real world environment by collaborating on a task which they have defined for themselves." (Fried-Booth, 2002: Introduction) Project work focuses on completing a task and involves group work and group activities have been suggested as one means of promoting interaction (Long & Porter, 1985); Long and Porter propose 5 reasons why group activities promote second language acquisition (RELC course book: Language Acquisition, 1998:35):

1. The quantity of learner speech increases
2. The variety of speech acts increases
3. There are more individualization of instruction
4. Anxiety is reduced
5. Motivation is increased

In short, project work could bring students into direct contact with authentic language and learning experiences and it also creates a fertile land for speaking skill to be nurtured and grow.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

When evaluating project work, Marina Tropinskaya (school No. 1732, Moscow) examined its effect on students' motivation in learning and students' overall competence. She commented that "it involves the various linguistic skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening and other abilities such as creative thinking, artistic presentation and communicative abilities." She also pointed out that "teachers know very well that the knowledge they give to students is not easy to use in real life as a means of communication, since the way it is taught implies rather formal perception." In her observation, "recent methods of language teaching/learning focus on communicative approaches that are close to narrowing the gap and increasing the motivation for language learning. However what is still needed is a kind of work that allows the motivation to come from within the student, and not from without. This work should also have some final product which motivates the learning process and make it assessable." She asserted that "project work meets these requirements. It is helpful to fill the gap between what students wants to do and what the teacher thinks they must do." (Marina Tropinskaya, School No. 1732, Moscow, How to introduce Project Work into your classroom) Looking from another aspect of project work, Diana L. Fried-Booth in her book named "Project Work" (2002) emphasized "the benefit of bringing the real world into classroom environment." She revealed that "consciously or unconsciously, students bring the outside world into the classroom, but they may not always have the opportunity to activate what they know and use it in the outside world. Project work takes the experience of the classroom into the world and provides an opportunity for informal learning. The potential benefit for students is clear: they are working on a topic of interest to them and using English for a specific purpose, with a particular aim in mind. What has already been learnt can now put into use and what is needed can be learnt when it is needed." (Project Work, 2002, Introduction) Rosa Tripa and Isabel Changes of University of Lisbon concluded in their study that "project work enables concrete and meaningful learning in which students become the centre of their own learning." They also quoted Nias's remarks (*) that "students feel much more spontaneous, intuitive, relaxed, and happy with themselves when they have the control of their own work. When involved in the project based work students develop positive attitudes toward innovation, contributing to their self-preparation, and professional and personal realization." (Rosa Tripa & Isabel Chagas, University of Lisbon, Project work in continuous teacher education on ICT 302,303, 304, 305)

(*) Nias, J, London: Falmer Press, Teaching and the self. In Holly & McLoughlin (eds) Perspectives on teacher professional development (1989)

Even though there are a lot of studies looking into the effect of project work on student overall proficiency, its impact on speaking ability alone has just slightly touched. For this reason, last year the researcher cum the change agent carried out a research on project work at the National University with 40 senior students of non English major in 12 weeks to measure its effect on students' fluency and naturalness in speaking English. The findings from the research indicated that after 12 weeks of treatment, students in the experimental group, who were given project work to do on top of their current curriculum surpassed their own results in the pre-test (their mean moving from 6.0 in the pre-test to 7.4 in the post-test) and those in the control group in the post-test (the control group just scored the mean of 6.15 in the post test) though students in both groups got the same average score (6.0) from the start (in the pre-test). Meanwhile, the researcher got supporting clues from the observation and interview to reinforce what she learnt from the test results that project work could help students improve their speaking proficiency.

THE INNOVATION AND ITS FEATURES

The aim of the innovation

In order to further examine the effectiveness of project work on the fluency and naturalness in spoken English of Vietnamese students in another teaching context, the researcher decided to re-conduct the same research, which she previously did at the National University, in HV University where she has been working as a part-time teacher. Fluency here can be interpreted as smoothness in speech delivery including accuracy, good accent and intonation. Naturalness is defined as 1/understanding the contexts very well and actively interacting with others to get the task done smartly; 2/making a smooth connection of ideas cohesively; 3/responding appropriately to others in the required situation; and 4/employing the communicative strategies effectively.

Research Question : To what extent Project Work improve the fluency and naturalness in spoken English of Vietnamese students who are about to seek jobs after graduation?

Roles of stakeholders

Kennedy did notice that the same person may play several different social roles in practice, either consecutively or concurrently. These different roles are not mutually exclusive (Kennedy 1978). In this innovation there were two layers of change agents and adopters. The researcher initiated the innovation and was responsible for managing the change, therefore at the level of innovation implementation, she was the change agent and her colleague who volunteered to try this innovation in his class played the role of the implementer and adopter. The other two colleagues who assisted her with observation and interview could be potential adopters. 20 students in the experimental group were clients. However, at the level of classroom, the implementer also managed his own classroom and had to intervene in any changes occurring in class, thus he acted as the change agent. 20 students in his experimental group were also adopters who decided whether to accept project work or continue their traditional way of learning; among which 10 were noted as early adopters, 6 as early majority adopters; 4 as resisters at the beginning of the innovation but turning to late majority adopters after 5 weeks of treatment.

The type of social change

This innovation is defined as an imminent change or self motivated change as the change agent recognized the need for a change when she saw a big gap between the market demand on English speaking proficiency and students' low speaking competence at HV University and proposed project work as a treatment in this teaching context. Immanent change is the most frequently discussed type of change in education literature because this type of change allows teachers to act as internal change agents and promotes ownership (Nicholls 1983; Rudduck 1991; Stenhouse 1975)

Models of innovation

Problem solving and Social interaction model were used during the implementation of this innovation. "A problem solving model coupled with a normative-reductive strategy of change is theoretically the most popular approach to promote change in education" (Study guide and reader of Victoria University 2009:100-101). "Normative change will involve alteration in attitudes, values, skills and significant relationships. In other words, the implementation of changes in teachers' practices will involve changing their own theory of teaching." (Study guide and reader of Victoria University 2009:69). The change

agent after identifying her clients' weakness in fluency and naturalness in spoken English, implemented a treatment to eliminate the perceived problem. While improving the speaking proficiency of the clients, she had to change the adopters' and clients' beliefs in teaching and learning English. She also had to change their passive habit in learning, their attitudes about the teacher's role and raise their awareness about interactive learning through project work. She finally succeeded since they volunteered to change their learning concept for their own benefit of getting a good job after graduation. In regular meetings with a group of colleagues in UNETI, the change agent diffused the effect of project work on students' fluency and naturalness in speaking in the form of sharing expertise. She knew that her colleagues were facing the same difficulty of dealing with students' poor speaking ability and in response to her sharing, one colleague wanted to try this innovation in his class; two other colleagues decided to join the trial as an observer, interviewer and claimed that if they saw the real effect, they would innovate project work in their classes. This is similar to how Havelock (1971) illustrates the way the flow of knowledge from research to practice takes place via social networks, rather than through a series of logical steps. "This highlights the influence of social interactions in the transmission and adoption of innovation. Within the social network, communication and the communicator are key factors, while the role of the change agent is also significant." (Study guide and reader of Victoria University 2009:65)

METHODOLOGY

Participants

In UNETI, a non-English-major class normally consists of 80 students, however students in the same class are divided into 4 smaller sub classes when they learn the subject of English. The university management board believes that this practice could help their students learn English more effectively. The implementer was in charge of 1 class majoring in Business Administration with 80 senior students and he had to arrange this big class into 4 smaller classes of 20 students and schedule each 6 hours of English per week. From these 80 senior students, 40 including 2 sexes (aged 22) were randomly selected and divided into 2 groups of 20: One was chosen as the experimental group while the other was the control group. All of the participants had learnt English for almost 11 years – 7 years in high school, and nearly 4 years in university. The textbook they were learning was "New Interchange" book 3. To ensure homogeneity between the experimental group and the control one in terms of English proficiency in general and speaking ability in particular, each group was designed to include half-split pairs of equal competence. The selection procedures could be explained like this: Student A and student B were at the same proficiency based on their performance record of the first-semester English examination and therefore they were made an equal-level pair. Their names were written on a piece of paper without any note of the score. The teacher randomly put student A in the control group and student B in the experimental group (or vice versa). The other 19 pairs were proceeded accordingly. (Thus each group had the same amount of good, average and weak students; for example if you could find 5 good students in the experimental group, you could also find their 5 counterparts in the control group).

Materials for treatment

Projects focusing on speaking ability were carried out in the experimental group and spanned 12 weeks as a treatment of the innovation. The experimental group was then divided into 4 sub-groups (hereinafter called sub-groups) of 5 students and at the

beginning of the instructions, each sub-group chose 3 projects from the list below to work on. These listed projects were also carefully selected from a resource book for teachers named Project Work by Diana L. Fried-Booth (2002) to combine well with the topics in the students' textbook for their further practice of a range of targeted skills and language systems. The projects are listed as follows:

Project 1: Audio Guide – In this project, students produce an audiotape with an accompanying illustrated handout for tourists to use on a sightseeing tour of Hanoi City. The aim of this project is to develop and extend speaking skills even though some writing is also required. The written tape-script and the spoken recording are likely to provide further opportunities for developing accuracy and fluency.

Project 2: A brochure for new students – In this project, students produce a guide to the freshmen of their university. Overall this activity is an excellent way to encourage learners to develop their confidence and language skills. It brings variety into the classroom and students would appreciate the opportunities to make an equal contribution to their own learning program.

Project 3: Environment protection – This project draws on students' experience of their local experience and centers on producing a forum on environment issues. The end product is the formal report to the class about the current issues at some specific areas in Hanoi City and their suggested solutions based on the government policies. Students can read the information at home and bring summaries of their articles together with pictures and photographs to the lesson to work with their peers on finalizing a clear presentation to the whole class.

Project 4: Internet Exploration – This project uses the Internet as a basis for students' presentation on places or topics of their choice. This project gives much freedom for students to present what really interests them with the resources from the Internet. This project helps senior students work on collaboration and negotiation skills with a partner and also trains them to use the new technology for their future preparation.

Project 5: Food and drink labels worldwide – In this project, students collect labels from food and drink items from various countries to produce a wall map displaying links between food /drink labels and the country of origin and give a presentation based on their findings. Students could spend time outside the classroom to collect as many food and drink labels or wrappings as possible from cartons, tins, packets, jars and bottles and bring them to class for further discussion. These projects had gone through a pilot test with two groups of students at the same university with similar characteristics to ensure their practicality before being applied in this innovation.

PROCEDURES

In this innovation, the experimental group and control group were taught by an implementer, who was the researcher's colleague to increase the objectiveness of the innovation. The implementer was carefully briefed on how to carry out project work in the classroom to ensure that he had adequate information to implement the experiment. As scheduled, students of UNETI studied 6 hours of English a week. The control group continued to learn course book as normal with the unchanged teaching method while students in the experimental group studied 50% of their class time (3 hours) weekly with the current textbook and the other 3 hours was spent on project work. Before the treatment, students in the experimental group were given a clear rationale for such a change in their curriculum firstly to provide them with a good understanding of what was about to happen in the class in 12 weeks, what they were expected to do and secondly to involve them more in the innovation. As mentioned in the previous part, there were 4 sub-groups in the experimental group and each

selected 3 projects to do in 12 weeks (4 weeks for 1 project). To reinforce the project implementation, a detailed schedule for each project was made to control students' contribution and work.

PROJECT SCHEDULE RECORD

| SAMPLE | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| GROUP NO. : | | DATE : | |
| PROJECT NAME: | | | |
| Week 1 (3hrs) | Week 2 (3hrs) | Week 3 (3hrs) | Week 4 (3hrs) |
| 1. Project selection | 1. Bringing individual findings to class/ own group | 1. Detailing the project | 1. Class forum |
| 2. Grouping and teachers' explanation/guidance on procedures | 2. Working with peers | 2. Practising the presentation within the group | 2. Presenting the final product to the whole class |
| 3. Targeted language monitor sheet delivered to students | 3. Setting up the outline | 3. Group feedback | 3. Questions & Answers |
| 4. Plan making & task allocation among students | 4. Filtering the information | 4. Improving the end product | 4. Class feedback |
| 5. Attendance recorded | 5. Attendance recorded | 5. Attendance recorded | 5. Teacher's assessment |
| Note : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources : • Places visited : • Problems : | | | |

Students could read or interview in Vietnamese while searching for the information outside the class time but were required to use English as much as possible in class; any switch to Vietnamese was spotted out and reminded. The teacher walked around the class and spared equal time on each sub-group to monitor their work and offer help when needed. Oral mistakes were noted for later correction to let students focus on their work. A useful list of relevant/target structures and vocabulary for each project named as the Language Monitor Sheet was given and practiced at the very beginning of each project to equip students with adequate pieces of language in a new project topic and at the same time to increase their accuracy in speaking. Necessary devices for the projects like cassette recorders, cameras, screens and projectors were also provided for students at their convenience. This is considered as the secondary innovation.

INSTRUMENTS

Test: 2 IELTS oral tests (attached in the appendices) were chosen as the pretest and post-test. The correlation coefficient between these 2 tests was very high of 0.99 through a pilot test by another group of

students with the same characteristics and proficiency level. These two general IELTS tests were free from the project topics that were applied in the experimental group to ensure that the students in the experimental group and in the control group were totally new about what they would be tested. The tests were aimed to measure students' fluency and naturalness in speaking English.

- The Pretest was administered right after the experimental group and control group were formed, first to ensure the proficiency equivalence of the 2 groups and then to see the starting point of the students involved.
- The Post-test was carried out 3 days after the treatment had been completed (that is 12 weeks from the pretest). Its results were also analyzed and compared with the pretest results and between the two groups to see the difference between the means and the gaining score of the 2 groups.

Scoring focuses on the fluency and naturalness in spoken English. Two different examiners were invited to mark the tests: one directly supervised and marked students in the examination time while the other marked the tape-recordings after the test. A rating band (attached in the appendices) was given to both examiners to limit the subjectivity and ensure that the score truly reflects the students' abilities. The final score was agreed by both examiners and in case of any disagreement over the scoring between them, the change agent joined to finalize the score.

Interview: Interviews were done after 12 weeks of treatment with 5 randomly selected students from the experimental group for their feelings and comments towards this kind of activity. The implementer was also formally interviewed after 12 weeks for his feedback on the effect of project work and his assessment of the students' performance; however the implementer and the change agent were scheduled to meet every 4 weeks to update the class situation, to check if the implementer was on the right track and to fix problems during implementation if any. Interviews were used to cross check the test findings and the interview questions had already been piloted to check its validity before being actually used.

Class observation: The experimental group was observed twice a month (i.e. 6 times during 12 weeks) in accordance with the set observation schedule agreed with the implementer at the start of the innovation to examine how the innovation was adopted and more importantly to see the direct influence of project work on the class atmosphere and students' oral outputs. The observation was scheduled as follows:

- **The first project (4 weeks length):** the observer visited the class on the first and the second week to see if the implementer gave instructions as precisely as what the change agent had briefed before and how students started with the new activity.
- **The second project (4 weeks length):** the observer visited the class on the first and the fourth week to see how different the implementer and students were compared to the first project and also how students presented the end products.
- **The third project (4 weeks length):** the observer visited the class on the third and fourth week to see how much students had improved.

In order to reduce the change agent's bias, the interviews and class observations were done by two different colleagues of the change agent who were fully briefed and explained all the terms and meaning of the observation checklist and interview questions. The tests, the interviews and the class observations support one another by getting data from various sources to minimize the subjectivity and increase

the reliability of the innovation. Before the innovation started, there was a core meeting among the change agent and adopters (the implementer, the observer and the interviewer) to discuss the purpose of the innovation, the implementation procedures, the follow-up schedule, and the way to collect data. During the implementation stage, meetings between the change agent and the implementer were regularly held every 4 weeks and when there was a demand the observer and interviewer were also invited, to update one another about the progress of the innovation, to increase the involvement or ownership among the stakeholders and to eliminate resistance as soon as possible. At the end of the innovation there was a final meeting among the stakeholders to evaluate what was actually achieved against what had been planned for further revision or application.

FINDINGS

Test:

Table 1. Pre-test results

| Pre-test | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| | Experimental group (n=20) | Control group (n=20) |
| | 8 | 7 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 5 | 7 |
| | 6 | 7 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 4 | 6 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| Score : out of 10 | 7 | 5 |
| | 5 | 4 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| | 4 | 6 |
| | 6 | 7 |
| | 7 | 4 |
| | 6 | 5 |
| | 8 | 6 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 5 | 6 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 6 | 7 |
| Mean | 6.3 | 6.5 |
| SD | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| Mode | 7 | 7 |

Table 2. Post-test results

| Post-test | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| | Experimental group (n=20) | Control group (n=20) |
| | 9 | 7 |
| | 8 | 8 |
| | 8 | 8 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 8 | 7 |
| | 8 | 7 |
| | 6 | 7 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| Score : out of 10 | 8 | 6 |
| | 7 | 4 |
| | 8 | 8 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 8 | 4 |
| | 8 | 6 |
| | 9 | 6 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 7 | 6 |
| | 8 | 7 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| Mean | 7.6 | 6.7 |
| SD | 0.8 | 1.1 |
| Mode | 8 | 7 |

The students from the two groups were relatively equal in speaking proficiency at the start of the innovation indicated in the pre-test results. The experimental group scored the mean of 6.3 while the control group got 6.5 and both groups obtained the same mode (7) and standard deviation (1.2). However after 12 weeks, the difference between the two groups was significantly shown through their scores. The experimental group achieved a higher mean of 7.6, a mode up to 8 and a decrease in standard deviation to 0.8 while the control group slightly moved their mean up to just 6.7 and got the same mode of 7 as before.

Table 3. Experimental group's results

| | Experimental group (n=20) | |
|-------------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| | Pre-test | Post-test |
| | 8 | 9 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| | 5 | 7 |
| | 6 | 8 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| | 4 | 6 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| Score : out of 10 | 5 | 7 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| | 4 | 7 |
| | 6 | 7 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| | 6 | 8 |
| | 8 | 9 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 5 | 7 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| | 6 | 7 |
| Mean | 6.3 | 7.6 |
| SD | 1.2 | 0.8 |
| Mode | 7 | 8 |

Table 4. Control group's results

| | Control group (n=20) | |
|-------------------|----------------------|-----------|
| | Pre-test | Post-test |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 8 | 8 |
| | 7 | 8 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 6 | 7 |
| | 8 | 8 |
| Score : out of 10 | 5 | 6 |
| | 4 | 4 |
| | 8 | 8 |
| | 6 | 7 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 4 | 4 |
| | 5 | 6 |
| | 6 | 6 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 6 | 6 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| | 7 | 7 |
| Mean | 6.5 | 6.7 |
| SD | 1.2 | 1.1 |
| Mode | 7 | 7 |

In comparison within themselves before and after the innovation, students in the experimental group progressed remarkably over 12 weeks; their mean increased by 1.3 points to 7.6 and most students got score 8 instead of 7. The two weak students also became better in performance with the score of 6 and 7 in the post test. Below average students were no longer found at the end of the innovation. On the other hand, students in the control group did not improve much; their mean crawled slowly from 6.5 up to 6.7 and they

remained at the same mode of 7. The two weak students stayed at where they started 12 weeks before. The T-test with the post-test results from the 2 groups showed the $p=0.0026$, much lower than 0.05, which confirmed that the difference between the 2 groups was statistically significant. In short, the experimental group achieved higher gaining score after 12 weeks of the treatment.

Interview

Four students from the experimental group were randomly invited to an interview at the end of the innovation. They were early adopters when expressing their interest in project work and wanted to continue it in class. These students stated that this activity could reduce boredom and passiveness in their English class by bringing novelty to the old teaching method from which they were suffering. With project work, they were given a purpose to communicate in the target language to get things done and felt more motivated in learning. They thought they gained more autonomy in class and became independent, responsible for their studies. In conclusion, they confirmed that after completing the three projects, they got better fluency and naturalness in speaking English thanks to their frequent practice and their richer schema in the relevant topics. These students said they appreciated the Language Monitor Sheets with relevant structures and vocabulary that the implementer gave at the beginning of each project to enrich their linguistic and communicative competence. Pronunciation practice of these helped them improve their accuracy and confidence in speaking. The four mentioned students also shared their joy in working with their group members to search data, filter and exchange the information to produce the end products. Through the process of collaboration, they learnt to use the target language in a context and activate their cognitive abilities for self improvement. The last one of the 5 interviewed students gave a more detailed story: he said that he himself and 4 other students in his sub-group experienced difficulties in the first project. The activity was new therefore they were unsure about how and where to start. As a result, they were left behind the class schedule with confusion and disappointment, trying to figure out the procedures to work on. At this stage they formed within themselves an initial resistance to the new activity. He revealed in the interview that it was due to the whole classroom enthusiastic participation in the projects that prevented his group from giving up and encouraged them to seek supports from the implementer and friends from other groups. Things became better in the following weeks when his group could follow the project framework and know how to search information from different sources, then to exchange their findings with the rest of the group to prepare for the end products. The student continued sharing his reflection and admitted that the presentation session was also difficult for the class since they were not used to public speaking activity and thus lacked confidence and experience in presenting their ideas in front of the class. He suggested having some extra handouts on presentation skill to be better in presenting the end products to the whole class. However he concluded that after 12 weeks with 3 completed projects he and his classmates became more fluent and natural in speaking English. In the interview, the implementer said he saw a difference in students' participation, fluency and naturalness in speaking activities between the experimental group and the control group. Through project work, students in the experimental group became more active in group discussion, cooperated with one another to produce end products. In that way, project work was an effective preparation for their future job as it helped students to get closer to workplace environment that they would join after leaving the university. The implementer added that project work made students work harder not only in class but also outside the class and could create a real-life context for them to communicate in English. The implementer liked the project list and noted that students were happy

when having a right to choose the projects of their interest from the list. The implementer also pointed out that project work was new to students (in the experimental group) and required integrated skills, teamwork and efforts to carry out a task and get it done, so it took longer time than initially planned to make students learn the way to work. He suggested giving more time for the first project to get students step by step familiar with the activity by having initial modeling and demonstration. This could make the project work even more successful than reported.

Class Observation

In the first week when the implementer introduced the project work, grouped the students and let them register 3 projects for their own group, students in the experimental group showed their excitement about the new activity and felt very eager to allocate work among their group members. The implementer moved around the groups helping them to use the Language Monitor Sheets relevant to their project topic. At this stage, Vietnamese was still dominant in group discussion and good students played a leader role in assigning tasks to other group members. In the second observation, students started reporting their findings to their group in English and received comprehensible inputs in return. Weak students were still passive and reluctant to speak due to their low proficiency and their worry about making mistakes. However under the pressure from other group members, when it was their turns to report and share information, they spoke half Vietnamese and half English to make them fully understood. It was accepted since at least they could learn to speak out their ideas and got used to using English in class. The second observation did not show a big difference from the first one yet, but it reflected a start for students' participation and their need to communicate, to be understood in English. In the following weeks from the third to the fifth observations, four sub-groups followed the project schedule well and showed their growing interest and stronger commitments to their tasks. Students enthusiastically contributed to the group's end products and became active in discussion producing high quantity of oral outputs in the process of exchanging ideas and view-points. They could speak naturally with their peers about the topic of interest with less worry for errors. English then became a means of communication to get things done. It replicates an authentic context, where workers in real life often perform. In the last observation, students improved significantly compared to the first week, they presented their reports to the whole class fluently with accurate English. In addition, confidence also stayed with them throughout the presentation and questions/answers sessions. At this moment, students could speak English much better because when trying to get things done for the end products, students developed their confidence and independence to work together in a real world environment.

DISCUSSION

In general, this innovation is considered a success as the change agent has found in the end what she expected. The innovation was constructed with careful thoughts to limit subjectivity and false interpretation by using 3 instruments: test results, interviews and observations to cross check the findings. The innovation, the interviews and the observations were done by different persons to prevent the change agent's influence on the implementation or interpretation; also the projects, observation check list, interview questions were piloted in advance to ensure that the findings are reliable.

In more details, the innovation is successful because it possesses attributes that promotes its adoption:

- Firstly the innovation was relatively advantageous to both the implementer and clients, therefore they were more likely to adopt it. Lavelle (1984) notes that "the innovation is more likely to be successful when perceived as necessary by those in the school, rather than by outsiders". (Study guide and reader of Victoria University 2009:64). The implementer (in the role of an adopter) was facing difficulties in improving his students' speaking proficiency and when getting to know that project work could eliminate the problem, he himself volunteered to apply it in his class. The senior students in the experiment were ambitious to have a well-paid job after graduation and when they realized that project work could offer them opportunities to practice English in an authentic context and improve their fluency and naturalness in spoken English, they felt interested in the activity and adopted it quickly.
- Secondly, project work was compatible with group work activity, which was often applied by many teachers in UNETI therefore it was likely to be adopted; the difference was only in the way that students were requested to work more independently and actively inside and outside the class to get the end products done and then on the way to get things done they had an authentic context to communicate effectively. According to Stroller (Stroller 1992, 1994), innovations that lie within the "zone of innovation" are the most likely to be adopted.
- Thirdly, the innovation was clearly staged, easily observed and also feasible. In addition, the innovation was designed in a way that students in the experimental group could study 50% of their class time with the current textbook and the other 50% with projects; thus both the students and their teacher did not have to worry that they would fail the school examination at the end of the semester if the innovation collapsed. This enhances the innovation's trial ability and thus increases its adoption "because potential adopters prefer to try out an innovation in incremental stages" (Study guide and reader of Victoria University 2009:94).
- The innovation was quickly accepted also thanks to the explicit rationale and clear framework that the change agent communicated to the implementer and from the implementer to the students. This gave adopters "a sense of purpose and direction during the implementation of the innovation." (Markee, N 1997:173)
- "Good communication among stakeholders also plays a vital factor to the success of the innovation" (Markee, N 1997:174) and in this innovation the change agent did a good job in maintaining regular meetings with the implementer, observer and interviewer to update one another about the progress of the implementation and fix things on a consensus basis to increase the ownership of those involved and to ensure that everyone was looking at the same direction.
- Another factor that contributes to the success of the innovation is the high interconnectedness of the social system at UNETI in general and among the English teachers in particular. There are 15 teachers in the English department. They are all eager to learn, try new things and also willing to support one another for professional development.
- However, there could be some limitations and shortcomings that may arise during the implementation:
- The innovation was carried out on a small scale; the observation was just based on one class and only 5 students were interviewed. Therefore it may not generalize the population.
- The students in the experimental group were given a new activity which they had not learnt before, so it is easy to find that they became more interested in learning. They may have had the same excitement or improvement with any new type of activity, not just project work.

- The teacher, observer/interviewer might have known the change agent's enthusiasm and expectation and might not want to disappoint her, therefore giving her false but pleasing facts and figures.
- The implementer knew the observation schedule, so he could have well prepared or rehearsed for the observations and thus it could lead to falsification in the results. There should be some surprise observations (unannounced class visit) besides the planned ones to cross check the observation data.
- The teacher and students may have felt tense when being observed in their class. They may have behaved unnaturally and as a result, the findings might not be 100% true.
- Modeling session with a sample project should have been given to students before the start of the innovation to make sure that all students were ready to follow the project schedule since Markee, N (1997: 177) says "it always takes longer to effect change than originally anticipated. Adopters need to go through their own decision-making processes in evaluating a proposed innovation, and the time it takes for individuals to reach a decision inevitably varies considerably from person to person".
- Some guidelines on presentation skill should have been provided for students to build up their confidence in the presentation session.

CONCLUSION

The observations, the interviews and the test results have led to the same fact that project work did have its effect on improving the fluency and naturalness in spoken English of Vietnamese students who are about to seek jobs after graduation. Based on what was found after 12 weeks of applying project work in the experimental group, it is worth to believe what Alan Maley stated in the foreword of the Project Workbook (2002), "Project work offered a powerful methodology for involving students in an authentic learning experience with language used for genuine communication purposes." The innovation conducted the second time at UNETI produced the same findings with the first one carried out at the National university one year before. This reinforces the change agent's belief and confidence in bringing project work to all of her current classes to improve her students' speaking ability. After this innovation the change agent intended to expand the innovation scale to a few more classes with another 4 and 5 colleagues in HV university to certify that project work could be an effective tool to improve students' speaking competence. Then the change agent with those participant colleagues would propose to Dean of English department in UNETI to officially embed project work in the school curriculum with an assurance that its graduates could interact more fluently and naturally in English.

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