



## The Effect of Project Based Learning (PBL) on the Components of Speaking Ability of Iranian EFL Beginner Learners

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### Abstract

The most challenge of language learners is speaking ability. A learner is supposed to be a good speaker if he or she use proper vocabulary in the well-organized sentences and utter it in correct pronunciation and appropriate fluency. Consequently, the best teaching method is one which helps language learners to speak more comprehensibly. PBL is a communicative approach which is supposed to improve speaking ability in terms of its five components (vocabulary, grammar, fluency, pronunciation, and organization). The present research tries to examine the influence of PBL on Iranian EFL beginners of Chabahar Islamic Azad University. Forty-five participants took part in the research that lasted about 13 weeks. The instruction involved the experimental group who experienced PBL and the control group who undergone traditional teaching method. The pretest and the posttest were administered to both groups. The result of comparison through t-tests demonstrated the effectiveness of PBL to promote elementary EFL learners' speaking ability in terms of its five components.

**Keywords:** PBL, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, organization

### INTRODUCTION

When a learner decides to learn a language he or she will be encountered different skills of language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). According to experience, speaking is the most demanding skill in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Simon confirmed that the essential need and major purpose of foreign language (FL) learners was to be master of FL speaking (2014). Learners evaluated their FL learning based on their achievement of spoken language proficiency (ibid). The learners would acquire language if they can speak FL. Similarly, Maulany (2013) considered the speaking skill as the most significant skill. He called it the initial skill of language learning. The learners demanded to express their ideas, discuss about them, transfer them, and impact on the other persons (Rahman, 2010). To speak English, learners need to know vocabulary and grammar of the language. Besides, they require knowing how to make the sentence in a well-organized text. Therefore, lack of correct pronunciation and appropriate fluency

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cause speaking incomprehensibility. Learning speaking ability occurs through either explicit or implicit learning. Explicit learning is the most famous form of learning a foreign language. A lot of researchers attempted to develop a teaching method to help learners to learn speaking. Project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching method applicable to improve speaking skill. Some previous research approved the effect of PBL on the learning a language. Learning speaking ability occurs through either explicit or implicit learning. Explicit learning is the most famous form of learning a foreign language. A lot of researchers attempted to develop a teaching method to help learners to learn speaking. Project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching method applicable to improve speaking skill. Some previous research approved the effect of PBL on the learning a language. Zare-Behtash, Khoshsiman, & Sarlak (2016) demonstrated the effect of PW on speaking ability of elementary adult EFL. Balagiu, Marutelu, Patasan, and Zechia (2014) applied project work to develop their learners' poor speaking ability. They claimed that the reason of poor speaking is difficulty in emotional control. PBL increased autonomy to alleviate this problem. The findings of the research determined that PBL increased learners' speaking skill. Another research on PBL was done by De Saint Lege and Mulla (2014). De Saint Lege and Mulla studied language progress by developing the projects. They claimed tasks improved the learners' knowledge of grammar (vocabulary and syntax) as well as their speaking skill.

Another team of researchers (Griva, Semoglou, & Geladari, 2010) dealt with game as a project in English as foreign language learning in Greek. According to the pre-test, the post-test, observation, and structured interviews, this group of the researchers concluded the impacts of the project in a game-based approach. The results certified improving learners' communicative competence as well as fun in elementary schools. In 2011, Gonzalez-Alriols, Serrano, Llano-Ponte, and Labidi recognized the lack of learners' performance skills (e.g. collaborative skill, communicative competence, time management, problem solving, and autonomy). Their study proposed PBL as an effective teaching method to help the learners.

At the same year, the researchers tried to find an approach to equip employees with language skills and work place skills (e.g. responsibility, team working, organizational skills, critical thinking, communicative skills, and self-management, etc....) (Musa, Mufti, Abdul Latif, & Mohamed Amin, 2011). They recommended PBL method which meet the employers' needs (ibid). This approach engaged learners in the cooperative activities in order to increase the learners' confidence, independence, and negotiation and so on. The results illustrated that majority of learners' agree with the project work. They were able to acquire language skills as well as being familiar with their strength and weakness in workplace skills.

Shokri (2010) explored how project work had helped learners to develop their communication skill, strategies, and self-confidence. He claimed that the learners did not receive much exposure to English. To fulfill this need, Shokri recommended the language teachers using project work (2010). Shokri's survey realized that learners have positive attitude toward project. He identified that a large percentage of the

learners verified that the team project increased their communicative competence and self-confidence.

In Indonesia, Maulany (2013) conducted a survey to indicate the impacts of PBL on speaking capability in a primary school. Through these tests Maulany examined five aspects of speaking ability. Analyzing results of interview confirmed three effects: 1. increasing of learners' total score, 2. Enhancing number of the learners with high grade, and 3. Improving learners' comprehension and vocabulary.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted among 45 elementary EFL adult Iranians. The research questions dealt with the effect of PBL on the components of the speaking skill (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and organization). The researcher attempted to evaluate changes in speaking ability, dependent variables, via instruments such as pre-test and post-test after and before using PBL, the independent variable. The research context was Islamic Azad University of Chabahar (IAUC). This study was held from 4<sup>th</sup> February 2015 to 27<sup>th</sup> may 2015 in the second semester of the academic year in IAUC. The course in both groups took 13 sessions from 4<sup>th</sup> February 2015 to 27<sup>th</sup> may 2015 in the second semester of academic year in CIAU. The treatment was PBL method to teach certain topics of the course's book called *Khatesefid* (2010). The experiment included five stages named proficiency test, pre-test, introduction meeting, treatment, and post-test. The first three sessions were devoted to proficiency test, pre-test, and introduction meeting. These three stages were involved in the course session. The fourth stage of the course was the instruction which continued from the fourth to the twelfth sessions. The teacher used conventional teaching method for control group through ten sessions whereas the teacher of the experimental group employed PBL for the experimental group in similar number of time to the control group. Post-test, the last stage of instruction was held in the thirteenth session. The above mentioned instruction appears in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Course Schedule (by the researcher)

Session	Control Group	Experimental group	Module	Theme
1 <sup>st</sup>	4/2/2015	10/2/2015	Proficiency test	Longman Placement test
2 <sup>nd</sup>	11/2/2015	17/2/2015	Pre-test	Speaking test
3 <sup>rd</sup>	18/2/2015	24/2/2015	Introduction	Introduce instruction procedure
4-12 <sup>th</sup>	25/2/2015- 20/5/2015	3/3/2015- 19/5/2015	Instruction	-Traditional method in Control group -PBL method in experimental group
13 <sup>th</sup>	27/5/2015	26/5/2015	Post-test	Speaking test

The participants in control group were 20 male and female learners. The teacher followed the transitional method, GTM. GTM was selected as the conventional method because it is used widely in Iran. The teacher was the authority and active in the class, but learners were inactive. The teacher used both English (FL of learners) and Persian (First Language, or L<sub>1</sub>) in class. The learners sat in rows of chairs. The teacher was at the

front of the class. The teacher called the learners one by one to read the textbook and translate it in Persian. The teacher checked the learners' pronunciation errors. The teacher taught the syntax deductively in Persian. Learners replied and the teacher corrected immediately them if they made errors.

The experimental group was exposed to the treatment (project-based learning). The base of PBL method in the present study was that the teams of learners developed a project each week. The experimental group involved 25 learners. The group formation was based on criterion-based selection. The teacher assigned four to five members to each group. Six groups attended in the projects. The groups developed one project in each session.

A between-groups design was adopted in order to address the effect of PBL on the components of the speaking ability. Both the pre-test and the post-test were administered to the control and the experimental groups. To evaluate the homogeneity of learners' speaking ability, a speaking examination as pretest was applied in the second session. It was a two-part exam. In first part of this test, the researcher asked learners some questions to gather demographic information about subjects. The questions were simple and comprehensible for elementary learners. It provided information about participants such as their age, academic major, home town, and mother tongue. It helped the researcher to comprehend the general characteristics of participants. It assisted the researcher to be sure of homogeneity in demographic variables, too. The second section of the examination consisted of pictures which learners were expected to speak about them for five minutes. The pictures were selected according to common topics of their book. At the end of the course, another speaking test was administered.

Speaking score ranged from zero (minimum mark, if they cannot speak) to 20 (maximum mark) according to Speaking Scoring Criteria by Phillips, 2007. It examined five components of English language. Philip described each criterion concretely and practically. The speaking test was supposed to score for pronunciation, grammar (refers to syntax rules), vocabulary, fluency, and organization.

*Pronunciation:* There were four levels to mark pronunciation level including pronouncing the word correctly, with minor errors, with a number of errors, and at the lowest level pronouncing the word completely incorrect. The raters rate them from four to one respectively.

*Grammar:* rating criterion gave four for using complex syntax rules correctly; three for applying simple rules properly, two for using both complex and simple rules with a few problems, one for applying simple rules with some problems.

*Vocabulary:* mark four for using advanced words appropriately, three for applying simple words without any errors or advanced words with some errors, two for using simple words, one for applying words incorrectly that caused interrupting communication.

*Fluency:* The learner's speech is generally fluent. The learner's speech is generally fluent, with minor problems. There are problems in their speech which cause their fluency to become decreased. The learner has problems with fluency that make the responses difficult to understand.

*Organization:* The learners' response is well organized and developed. The learners' response is organized basically and is not thoroughly developed. The learners' response is clearly organized and is incomplete or contains some inaccurate points. The learners' response is not planned and is only minimally on the topic.

A check list was helpful to obtain consistent scores. It helped the current raters to evaluate the intended features of learners' speaking performance. Following the above line, the present researcher made a check list and gave it to the raters to rate learners' speaking performance (Table 2). This check list included three portions. The first section devoted to the rater's name. In the second section, it asked raters to complete demographic information of each learner. The third section involved description of the speaking criterion involving five criteria. The researcher used numbers as representative for each level. So, the evaluators should circle numbers. Of course, to save space and make small check list, the description of each scale was provided in a separate paper for raters. In addition, the researcher added a section to the checklist and asked examiners to leave their comments for each learner's performance. A section of check list involved a sub-section for those learners who did not speak. Raters assessed each examinee in a separate check list in order to eliminate the effect of assessment of other learners on the evaluation of another learner.

**Table 2.** Check list for English speaking rating (adopted by the researcher)

Rater's name:				
Learner's name: .....	Sex: .....			
Major: .....	Age: .....			
Job: .....	Language: .....			
Time duration of exam: .....	Hometown: .....			
Pronunciation	4	3	2	1
Grammar	4	3	2	1
Vocabulary	4	3	2	1
Fluency	4	3	2	1
Organization	4	3	2	1
The learner either says nothing or fails to answer the question.	0			
Comments:.....				
.....				

Then, three raters evaluated the learners' performance in pre-test and post-test. Two raters were MA student of TEFL. One of them was the present researcher who has taught English for six years. The other rater has taught EFL for four years. The third rater was an English teacher who has experienced TEFL for 8 years. All raters passed testing English courses. They knew the principles of testing four skills of English language. Before rating learners' speaking performance, the raters attended in a meeting to discuss about the form of speaking test and the criteria to estimate speaking

performance. The goal of the discussion was to evaluate the speaking performance similarly. The researcher used inter-rater reliability to examine the consistency of rating. Inter-rater reliability was calculated about 0.97.

Then, the research compared the results of the pre- and post-tests of each group separately by using paired sample t-test to find out the progress of each group through the instruction. Then, she used the independent t-test of the control group and the experimental group of the pre-test to determine their homogeneity before the instruction. Afterward, the research compared findings of the post-tests of both groups by applying the independent sample t-test to indicate differences of using PBL against the conventional teaching method on the speaking improvement. The purpose of the last computation was to demonstrate whether PBL is helpful to improve the speaking ability of the EFL learners or not.

## RESULTS

Among diverse techniques to analyze data, independent sample t-test and paired sample t-test were selected for data analysis by Statistical Package for Social Science 20<sup>th</sup> (SPSS 20<sup>th</sup>). Collectively, there were five types of data: 1) the pre-test of the control group, 2) the pre-test of the experimental group, 3) the post-test of the control group, and 4) the post-test of the control group. Then, inter-rater reliability of scores was calculated. The paired sample t-test was used for comparing two groups of data of one group of participants to establish the learners' speaking improvement. This technique compared two types of obtained data: 1) the pre- and post-test of the control group, 2) the pre- and post-test of the experimental group. On the other hand, the independent sample t-test was applied for comparing data of two different groups. There were two kinds of data which were analyzed by the independent sample t-test: 1) the pre-test of the control and experimental group, and 2) the post-test of the control and experimental groups. Through the independent t-test, the researcher tried to compare the obtained data of all components of speaking ability in the pre-test of both research groups to find out if both control and experimental groups used the components homogeneously before implementing the treatment.

Table 3 presents the results of the independent samples t-test of the pre-test scores for each speaking component.

Component 1, Fluency: Value of Sig. (2-tailed) equals 0.94 which is larger than 0.05; consequently all learners' level of fluency are nearly equal. Thus, there was no significant difference between levels of fluency of both groups at the early stage of the instruction.

Component 2, Grammar: the fourth computation compares the pre-test scores of grammar in speaking skill. The comparison indicates that Sig. (2-tailed) is 0.85 and means difference is 0.04. Consequently there was no significant difference among all learners' score of grammar in the pre-test.

Component 3, Organization: Sig. value related to the scores of organization of speaking is  $0.91 > 0.05$ . The researcher concluded that the learners of both groups organized their speech in similar manner. Low difference between means indicates low differences among pre-test scores of all participants in terms of organization.

Component 4, Pronunciation: Sig (2-tailed) equals 0.57 and mean difference equals 0.13. As a result, there is no significant difference for both groups' pronunciations in the pre-test.

Component 5, Vocabulary: value of Sig (2-tailed) and the mean differences of vocabulary scores are 0.96 and 0.01 respectively. Accordingly, it is likely to deduce the level of both groups' vocabulary knowledge before embarking into instruction is similar. The researcher concluded that all learners started the course with similar level of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and organization in their speech.

**Table 3.** Independent t-test between pre-test scores of both groups in terms of speaking components

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differe nce	Std. Error Differe nce	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
		Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
fluency	Equal variances assumed	.168	.684	.068	43	.946	.02000	.29273	-.57034 .6103
	Equal variances not assumed			.068	40.205	.946	.02000	.29389	-.57389 .61389
grammar	Equal variances assumed	.177	.676	.184	43	.854	.04000	.21682	-.39725 .47725
	Equal variances not assumed			.182	38.928	.856	.04000	.21920	-.40339 .48339
vocabulary	Equal variances assumed	.788	.380	-.043	43	.966	.01000	.23511	-.48414 .46414
	Equal variances not assumed			-.041	35.334	.967	.01000	.24175	-.50061 .48061
organization	Equal variances assumed	.532	.470	.112	43	.911	.03000	.26790	-.51027 .57027
	Equal variances not assumed			.109	35.988	.914	.03000	.27465	-.52703 .58703
pronunciation	Equal variances assumed	.784	.381	.571	43	.571	.13000	.22779	-.32937 .58937
	Equal variances not assumed			.593	42.36	.556	.13000	.21914	-.31213 .57213

Now, the research wants to assess which components are developed through instruction of both groups. Then, the researcher applied paired sample t-test to compare the components' mean score in the pre-test and the post-test of each group.

Table 4 involves paired sample t-test for each speaking component (fluency, grammar, organization, pronunciation, and vocabulary) for control group. The significance values of fluency, grammar, and vocabulary equal 0.01, 0.05, and 0.00 respectively which are less than p-value ( $=0.05$ ). Thus, the scores of fluency, grammar, and vocabulary increase significantly through the traditional instruction. The significance value of organization is 0.13 and of pronunciation is 0.09. As a result, there are no significant differences between organization and pronunciation in the pre-test and the post-test of the control group. The statistic results show that the traditional instruction has effect on fluency, grammar, and vocabulary and no effect on organization and pronunciation.

**Table 4.** Paired sample t-tests of all components of speaking for the control group

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	fluency	-.525	.81878	.183	-.9082 - .1418	-2.87	19	.010
Pair 2	grammar	-.250	.55012	.123	-.5074 .0075	-2.03	19	.056
Pair 3	vocabulary	-.675	.76563	.171	-1.033 -.317	-3.94	19	.001
Pair 4	organization	-.275	.78598	.176	-.6428 .0928	-1.56	19	.134
Pair 5	pronunciation	-.250	.63867	.143	-.5489 .0489	-1.75	19	.096

To examine the development of speaking components scores for experimental group, the researcher applied paired sample t-test. Table 5 presents the significant value of scores for each speaking component is  $0.00 < p\text{-value} < 0.05$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that scores of speaking components have increased after employing PBL in the experimental group. The mean of the components are displayed in the second column of the Table 5.

**Table 5** Paired sample t-tests of speaking components for the experimental group

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
		Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
Pair 1	fluency	-1.300	.77728	.155	-1.621	-.979	-8.36	24	.000
Pair 2	grammar	-1.020	.78369	.157	-1.343	-.696	-6.5	24	.000
Pair 3	vocabulary	-1.660	.93229	.186	-2.045	-1.27	-8.90	24	.000
Pair 4	organization	-1.100	.87797	.176	-1.462	-.738	-6.26	24	.000
Pair 5	pronunciation	-1.060	.76811	.154	-1.377	-.743	-6.900	24	.000



After computing the progress of all speaking components for the control group and the experimental group through the instruction, the researcher compared scores of the components for the post-tests of both groups by computing independent t-test. Table 6 indicates the results.

Component 1, Fluency: mean difference is 0.79 and the value of the Sig. (2-tailed) is  $0.00 < 0.05$ . Therefore, there is significant difference between the scores of the fluency of the control group and the experimental group. In other words, PBL increase fluency of speaking ability.

Component 2, Grammar: mean difference is 0.81 and the value of the Sig. (2-tailed) is  $0.00 < 0.05$ . Therefore, there is significant difference between the post-test scores of the grammar of the control group and the experimental group. In other words, PBL drastically affected on scores of grammar of speaking ability.

Component 3, Organization: mean difference is 0.85 and the value of the Sig. (2-tailed) is  $0.00 < 0.05$ . Therefore, there is significant difference between the scores of organization of the control group and the experimental group. In other words, PBL affected organization of speaking skill.

Component 4, Pronunciation: mean difference is 0.94 and the value of the Sig. (2-tailed) is  $0.00 < 0.05$ . Therefore, there is a significant difference between the scores of the components of the control group and the experimental group. In other words, PBL affected pronunciation of speaking skill.

Component 5, Vocabulary: mean difference is 0.97 and the value of the Sig. (2-tailed) is  $0.00 < 0.05$ . Therefore, there is a significant difference between the vocabulary scores of the control group and the experimental group. In other words, PBL affected vocabulary of speaking components. As a result, the control group and the experimental groups are significantly different. Based on the above lines, the findings revealed that PBL significantly improved all components of speaking ability.

**Table 6.** Independent t-tests for speaking components of the control and experimental groups' performances in the post-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differen ce	Std. Error Differen ce	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower
fluency	Equal variances assumed	.009	.926	2.7	43	.009	.79500	.29214	.206	1.3842
	Equal variances not assumed			2.7	41.7	.009	.79500	.29035	.209	1.3811

grammar	Equal variances assumed	.477	.494	3.2	43	.002	.81000	.25020	.305	1.3146
	Equal variances not assumed			3.2	37.2	.003	.81000	.25504	.293	1.3267
vocabulary	Equal variances assumed	1.169	.286	3.4	43	.002	.97500	.29020	.390	1.5602
	Equal variances not assumed			3.5	42.8	.001	.97500	.28084	.408	1.5414
organization	Equal variances assumed	1.553	.219	3.8	43	.000	.85500	.22449	.402	1.3077
	Equal variances not assumed			3.9	42.9	.000	.85500	.22014	.411	1.2990
pronunciation	Equal variances assumed	.339	.563	3.6	43	.001	.94000	.25864	.418	1.4616
	Equal variances not assumed			3.6	38.2	.001	.94000	.26248	.409	1.4713

## DISCUSSION

Speaking FL is considered as a chief factor of successful learning. Willing and need to speak English cause the teacher to be interested to apply a teaching method which enables EFL learners to speak English. A suitable teaching speaking method is one that EFL learners have opportunity to practice speaking. The teacher planned PBL implementation to provide an active interacting opportunity for all learners. Based on aforementioned merits of PBL, it can be assume as a progressive teaching method. Consequently the present research takes into account the PBL method to achieve a desired level of the speaking ability. The findings of these comparisons demonstrated differences and similarities of two research groups in order to illustrate the impact of PBL method.

Data analysis shows that the improvement of scores of speaking components for the experimental group is larger than the control groups'. PBL provides the learners to learn of their peer. On the other hand, in peer group there is no superior or inferior relation (such as relation between the teacher and student); therefore, students ask their friends without any anxiety and they practice English more than the conventional method. As a result, they correct their errors (self-correction and peer-correction), while the teacher does not correct them. Then, they make more grammatical sentences. Also, the students received feedback when they make ungrammatical structures. Then they correct themselves. In addition when their fellow students use language, the learners learn the right form of language in use. The students learn more vocabulary when they use vocabulary in the text rather than when they try to memorize them separately.

The splendid characters of PBL method such as enhancing vocabulary, grammar, fluency, pronunciation, and organization, make PBL as a useful method to develop level of the speaking ability. The result of the research supported the impact of PBL on learning speaking rather than the traditional methods. The learners noticed that they

could speak more fluently and comprehensibility. Besides they used more vocabulary in their speaking with correct grammar. This work determined that PBL leads to progress the speaking ability if the teachers diagnose the needs of learners correctly.

## CONCLUSION

Speaking FL is considered as a chief factor of successful language learning. Willing and need to speak English cause the teacher to be interested to apply a teaching method which enables EFL students to speak English.

PBL reinforced students to be more active when PBL provide students with group work. Moreover, self-assessment and peer-assessment are available in PBL. Thus, students correct their own mistake in a friendly environment. Based on aforementioned merits of PBL, it is a progressive teaching method.

A suitable teaching speaking method is one that EFL students have opportunity to practice speaking. A speaking drill is required interaction between two speakers. Then, teaching speaking should provide more chance to practice speaking through interaction among the language students. Subsequently, their speaking ability will be progressed to desired level. Observations showed that experimental group was more eager to the instruction than control group. Applying PBL suggests support to the earlier research that a cooperative method guides students to develop their oral skill.

The implication of the study entails EFL learners. PBL permits learners knowledge activation through group work activities. These kinds of activities increase students' opportunities to interact in real life situation and in a very friendly environment. In addition, group work activities provide learners feedback which causes self-evaluating. Moreover, the findings recommend to neophyte teachers to adopt this course of action into their lesson plan. Textbook writers and the researchers are next groups who receive advantage from the findings of the research to include appropriate activities and tasks as tools which promote learners' speaking abilities. Further research is required to investigate the effectiveness of PBL in English for specific purposes courses.

In the current study, the researcher made the best attempt to explore the effectiveness of PBL on speaking ability of Iranian elementary EFL learners. As the result of the study showed, PBL has significant effect on speaking ability of elementary adult EFL learners. According to the result of the study, conclusion to some further research can be suggested as follow. Future research may probe into investigation other language learning abilities such as listening, reading, and writing. Likewise, the researcher recommends other researcher to explore Iranian teachers' and students' perception of PBL. Having in mind, studying the teachers' and students' perception related to their awareness of the principles of PBL. Moreover, the mentioned method can be taken in ESP course as well. The research participants were elementary. Hence, more study may explore the impact of PBL on other levels of proficiency.

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