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The Impact of a Project-Based Blended Learning Program on Improving EFL Secondary Stage Al-Azhar Students' Productive Language Skills

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Abstract

This research aimed at studying the impact of a project-based blended learning (PBBL) program on improving EFL secondary stage Al-Azhar students' productive language skills. The participants of this research were (58) second year Al-Azhar secondary stage students at Fisha Banah and Meet Masoud Secondary Institutes, Aga, Dakahlia, Egypt. The research adopted the quasi-experimental design using two groups: an experimental group (n= 28) and a control one (n= 30). To collect data, the researcher used four instruments: an EFL listening skills test, an EFL speaking skills scoring rubric; an EFL writing skills test, and an EFL writing skills scoring rubric. The researcher taught both groups: the experimental group was taught through the PBBL program, while the control group was taught through the regular method of teaching. Research results revealed that there were statistically significant differences between the mean score of the experimental group and the control group in the EFL speaking and writing skills tests in favor of the experimental group. Moreover, the effect size of the PBBL program was found to be high. Thus, this research recommended using PBBL program as a useful strategy in teaching the four skills of the English language at different educational stages.

Key words: *Project-based blended learning, Productive language skills, EFL*

Introduction

Learning English is one of the most important requirements nowadays. The ability to express ideas during speaking and writing is a necessity for students, especially secondary stage students. However, most students find a difficulty in practicing speaking and writing activities. Therefore, there is always a need to find various teaching strategies, techniques and approaches to help students effectively engage in speaking and writing tasks. Project-based learning is one of the strategies that can

increase students' active participation in the learning process, through engaging in meaningful speaking and writing activities.

Speaking and writing are referred to as productive skills, or active skills. They, are necessary for effective communication, especially speaking which is regarded by some researchers as the most important skill for communication (Zaremba, 2006). However, students rarely have opportunities to speak English outside the classroom; and few opportunities inside the classroom (Zhang, 2009).

Although speaking is an important skill, Zhang (2009) argued that it remains the most difficult skill to produce for the majority of English learners. EFL courses include many speaking activities, however, students are still incompetent in communicating orally in English. There are many factors that cause difficulty in speaking; (1) Inhibition: Students are worried about making mistakes, afraid of criticism, or simply shy; (2) Nothing to say: Students have no motive to express themselves; (3) Low or uneven participation: Only one participant can talk at a time because of large classes and the tendency of some learners to dominate classroom activities. Most learners speak very little or do not speak at all; and (4) Mother-tongue use: Learners who share the same mother tongue tend to use it in their communication because it is easier. Also, they feel less tensed if they are speaking their mother tongue.

Similarly, students face many difficulties while writing in English. Gomaa (2010) stated that learners' first language affects learning the target language. That is why they make certain mistakes and repeat them. Some of these common mistakes are: (1) Run on sentences: In Arabic language, run on sentences are accepted. There are endless sentences with no punctuation marks in Arabic, but that is not accepted when writing English; (2) Arabish: When the students translate Arabic into English they sometimes use words causing misunderstanding and confusion; (3) Punctuation: Many ELLs with Arabic background find English punctuation difficult; since Arabic has few limitations in the use of commas and periods than English; (4) Writing Organization: The circular structure in the English essay (with the topic sentence of the same idea in the conclusion) is strange to Arabic essay where the conclusion has to bring something new.

In the field of EFL, researchers have come up with different strategies, approaches, techniques and models to teach the four language skills, especially the productive ones. Project-based learning is one of them. The term project refers to complex tasks, based on challenging questions or

problems that engage students in designing, problem solving, decision-making, or investigative activities. Projects give students the chance to work relatively independently over an extended period and result in realistic products or presentations (Jones, Rasmussen, & Moffitt, 1997; Thomas, Mergendoller, & Michaelson, 1999).

Project-based learning (BBL) offers wide benefits to students and teachers, as well. Academic research supports the use of PBL in schools in order to engage more students in the learning process; promote cooperative learning skills and improve academic success. In PBL, students investigate to find answers to questions, which cannot be answered easily using the traditional methods of teaching. Students need to think deeply, investigate, collect appropriate data, and analyze these data, interpret the results and evaluate them, and finally find solutions for the problem (Baghn, Ali, Abdualal, & Daud, 2013). The integration of project-based learning and technology, or what is called blended learning, may enhance the students' productive language skills; and consequently increase their psychological flow level.

Due to the development of modern technology, it became a necessity to integrate technology with the processes of teaching and learning. Besides, students are greatly interested in using computers and the internet. Thus, teachers can make use of this in incorporating technology in teaching. The merge of face-to face learning and online learning can result in what is called blended learning. This type of learning can facilitate the students' acquisition of English skills in a collaborative and an interesting way (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010).

Therefore, this research adopted the project-based blended learning to improve students' productive language skills.

Review of Literature and Related Studies

Productive Skills

While learning a foreign language, learners are surely exposed to both categories of language skills; productive and receptive. Productive skills/ active skills mean transmitting the information that a language user produces in either a spoken or a written form. However, productive skills would not exist without the support of receptive ones. This means that both classifications of skills are indivisible and one cannot exist without the other. In EFL learning, receptive skills are usually taught first, and then comes the practical application of productive ones. If a learning process

lacks one of them, the final outcome will be incomplete (Golkovaa & Hubackovab, 2014).

In productive skills, learners have to produce language rather than receive information. In English classrooms, through speaking and writing activities, students get the chance to deal with the target language. They try to express meaning by giving suitable oral or written products (Spratt, Pulverness, & Williams, 2005). Speaking and writing are similar in the notion that they involve the activity of producing language in communication. That is why they are commonly categorized as productive skills (Harmer, 2007).

Teaching the productive skills is important for language learners. On one hand, teaching speaking is necessary unless the person is learning English just for academic reasons not for communicating in English, which is quite rare. Besides, having good command of speaking skills develops a real sense of progress among learners and promotes their confidence. On the other hand, teaching writing is important because students need written communication, as they may need to take notes, fill in certain forms, and write letters, reports, or short stories and so on. Both speaking and writing skills are discussed below in detail.

Nature of Speaking

Speaking skill has been investigated by many researchers. It is regarded as the interactive productive process which involves receiving, constructing and conveying meaning within a spoken context. A speaker needs to use the language effectively and properly to communicate his/her message to the listener (Fulcher, 2003). According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (p. 31), language is "a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks having understood meanings". An English phonetician and language scholar called Henry Sweet stated that language is "the expression of ideas by means of speech –sounds combined into words, words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of "ideas into thoughts" (Allwood, 2012, pp. 340-342).

Speaking is considered the most important active skill in foreign language learning (Khamkhien, 2010). Rodriques (2000) regarded speaking as producing utterances to communicate messages. Similarly, Noll (2006) discussed it as an interactive process as it relies on the engagement of another person; unlike listening, reading or writing. Besides, it is not just

producing the utterances, but it is the whole process of creating meanings, producing utterances and receiving and processing information.

Importance of Speaking

Speaking skill is a basic skill, necessary for learners' success in life. Learners often assess their success in language learning on the basis of how well they feel they have enhanced in their spoken language proficiency. Generally, students who can put their opinions and ideas into words are usually more successful in school. However, students who lack good speaking skills may suffer from consequences on the long run. Besides, the ability to speak fluent English plays an important role in developing other language skills, such as reading and writing skills (Wilson, 1997).

Importance of speaking can be summarized as follows:

a) Speaking is a communication tool whose main aims are at transforming ideas, expressing feelings, explaining about discoveries or inventions, researching results and discussions, and responding to what others say (Bar-On, 2004, p. 246).

b) Mastering speaking skills helps the speaker to be an efficient communicator who is proficient in the four language skills. Such ability provides the speaker with many merits which let them enjoy sharing ideas with others and be able to understand and respect their own selves (Ranson, 2000).

c) Mastering speaking skills allows the speaker to get the attention of the audience from the beginning and till his/her message is complete.

d) Speaking skills are important to succeed in one's career: speaking improves one's personal life by giving opportunities for travel, promotion, and scholarships; attending conferences and international meetings; or representing institutions in international events.

e) Speakers of a foreign language develop a variety of skills, strategies and behaviors which help them deal with difficult situations efficiently.

f) Speaking to the public gives speakers the power to persuade people and guide their decisions (Griffin, 2008, p. 19).

Speaking Genres

The term genre is used to refer to what "represents groupings of texts that are similar in terms of their discourse patterns" (Hyland, 2004, p. 28). The speaking genre theory supposes that various speech events result in various kinds of texts. These texts are varied in their overall structure and the grammatical rules related to them (Hughes, 2002).

In 1997, Wilson classified speaking excerpts, based on their genres, into:

- *Narrative*: It is a chain of everyday tales narrated with active listener involvement.
- *Identifying*: It refers to speaking activities where people introduce themselves to others, or talking about their living places, jobs, and favorite hobbies.
- *Language-in-action*: It refers to information that has been recorded while persons are engaging in performing their daily activities such as cooking, cleaning up, changing the place of furniture at home, and any similar activities.
- *Comment-elaboration*: It refers to people expressing their points of view and comments on things, other individuals, and various events.
- *Debate and argument*: It represents data, where people take up certain positions, take part in debates and express their beliefs and points of view.
- *Decision-making and negotiating results*: They refer to identifying the ways that show how people work to reach decisions or agreement, or negotiate to find solutions for some problems.

Functions and Purposes of Speaking

Speaking has three main functions in the human speech. Brown and Yale (1983) classified them into: transactional function, which is related to the exchange of information; and interactional function, which builds and keeps social relationships among speakers. Later, Richards (2006) added a third function that is performance function, which refers to public talk.

In 2008, Richards discussed the functions of speaking which he classified into three main categories. These categories are quite different regarding the form and function and require different teaching approaches. These are talk as interaction, talk as transaction, and talk as performance. They are discussed in detail as follows:

Talk as interaction: It refers to what is usually meant by "conversation" and describes interaction that mainly serves a social function. People speak so that they look friendly and to create a comfortable zone of interaction with others. In this category, the focus is on the speakers and how they wish to introduce themselves to each other more than on the message itself. Some example activities of speaking as interaction include group activities, information gap, simulations and role play.

Talk as transaction: It refers to situations in which the main concern is on what is said or done. The message and making speakers clearly understand it is the central focus, rather than the participants and how they socially interact with each other. Some example activities of speaking as transaction are establishing and maintaining social relations, and expressing reactions.

Talk as performance: It refers to public talk which transmits information in front of an audience. This includes classroom presentations, public announcements, and speeches. This type is mostly in the form of monologue rather than dialogue. In fact, it is closer to written language than conversational language. Besides, it is often assessed according to its effectiveness or influence on the listener which is different from talk as interaction or transaction. Debates, welcoming speeches, giving lectures, and presentations are examples of talk as performance.

Speaking Challenges

Pollard (2008, p. 34) stated that speaking is a difficult skill for students to master due to lack of enough exposure to English; infrequent English speaking practice in daily life; and feeling shy or lazy to speak English. Similarly, Brown (2000) mentioned some challenges that make speaking difficult when holding a conversation. However, some of them are meant to facilitate understanding of spoken utterances. They are discussed as follows:

- **Clustering**: Fluent speaking is phrasal, not word by word. Thus, clustering letters or words together may be difficult for the learners to master.
- **Redundancy**: Although repeating words are meant to make the message clear, it is sometimes difficult for the speaker to repeat the same idea.
- **Reduced Forms**: Speakers need to know reduced words, elisions, and contractions to make their speaking goes smoothly.
- **Performances Variables**: These include when to make pauses and when to hesitate. These variables are necessary for good speaking to give the speaker time to think about what to say.
- **Colloquial Language**: There are words, phrases and idioms that are colloquial, and speakers need to be familiar with.
- **Rate of Delivery**: Speakers should use the suitable speaking speed in order to be understood by the listener.

- **Stress, Rhythm and Intonation**: These are important characteristics of English pronunciation. Thus, speakers need to master them to speak fluently.
- **Interaction**: Speakers should know how to negotiate meaning. In other words, there should be a sort of interaction between the speakers, especially in conversations.

In the Egyptian context, speaking is difficult because students do not get enough speaking activities. The lack of a target language environment can be considered another problem, which of course results in a lack of involvement in real-life situations (Cameron, 2001). Besides, students study grammar rules for the sake of exam only; they already know the rules, but they do not know how to use it in speaking activities or real life communication (Abdelatif, 2012). Students have a limited repertoire of vocabulary, as well. Other reasons could be their fear of making mistakes, and being laughed at from their peers' side, what Salem (2017) called "fear face loss". Furthermore, all the other subjects are in Arabic, and English is seen as an academic subject only, which means that students' exposure to the English language is insufficient.

Nature of Writing

Writing is an important basic language skill that students should master in their language learning effort. It is a vehicle of communication that represents language through the inscription of signs and symbols. It is, also, a complex process that implies mastery on almost all language levels; morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and discourse. Unlike speaking, writing includes more elaborated linguistic systems, complex clauses, different syntax and vocabularies (Romadhoni, 2014).

Ruddell (2008) and Paivi et al. (2004) focused on writing as the opportunity given to students to work through ideas, to formulate their thinking by writing, and to purify their thoughts in a written structure. They mentioned that developing writing is the result of learning activities that do not only focus on reproductive learning, but also moves towards reflective and metacognitive writing.

Importance of Writing

Writing is important to know about the students' achievement in learning a language. Archibald (2004) stated that the students' writing proficiency is related to their overall language proficiency. Competent writing is a skill that anyone can learn through practice. It is a nuts-and-bolts process consisting of a number of principles and techniques that can be

learned and mastered. Besides, a good piece of writing consists basically of introducing a certain point and then providing evidence to support or develop it.

Indeed, second/foreign language learners look for useful ways to improve their writing skill in order to meet their real-life needs and demands (Sadiku, 2015). Researchers believe that writing plays an important role in language, as it contributes to language maintenance and development. In addition, writing helps in transmitting language from one generation to another, and from one community to another. Tan (2011) declared that writing skill is of great importance to students' academic success as it is the most common kind of assessment for teachers to evaluate students' progress. Therefore, students' inability to write properly may considerably hinder their academic success.

Types of Writing

Genre means the norms of different types of writing. Harmer (2007) stated that, when teachers focus on genre writing, they ought to tell students to study texts in that genre which will be appropriate for the learners' level and useful to them. For example, if students have to write a newspaper article, teachers should provide them with real samples of articles to find real facts about construction and specific language used in a newspaper.

Similarly, Meer (2016) identified the same four types of writing styles: expository, descriptive, persuasive and narrative. They are discussed in detail as follows:

1- **Expository**: The main purpose of expository writing is to explain. It is a subject-oriented writing style, in which the author focuses on telling readers about a given topic or subject without voicing their personal opinions. Examples of this type are textbook writings and recipes.

2- **Descriptive**: Descriptive writing mainly aims to describe. It is a style of writing that focuses on describing a character, an event, or a place in detail. It can be poetic when the author takes the time to be very specific in his or her descriptions. Poetry and nature writings are examples of descriptive writings.

3- **Persuasive**: Persuasive writing's main purpose is to convince. Unlike expository writing, persuasive writing includes the opinions and biases of the author. To convince others means to agree with the author's point of view, persuasive writing contains justifications and

reasons. Examples of persuasive writings are letters of complaint, advertisements or commercials.

4- **Narrative**: The main purpose of narrative writing is to tell a story. The author creates different characters and tells the reader what happens to them (sometimes the author writes from one of the characters' views—this is known as first person narration). Novels and short stories are good examples of narrative writings.

Stages of Writing

Harmer (2004) agreed that students should learn writing because it cannot be naturally acquired like speaking. Richards and Rodgers (2001) stated that the process of teaching writing includes four main stages; planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Each stage includes a variety of learning activities:

a- **Planning or pre-writing**: This writing activity encourages and stimulates students to write. So, the writing activities must be prepared to provide learners with learning experiences of writing, such as brainstorming.

b- **Drafting**: At this stage, students need to focus on the fluency of writing more than focusing on the accuracy of their works. During the process of writing, students must also focus on the content and the meaning of the writing. Besides, students should bear in mind that they would deliver their messages to different audience, such as peers, and other classmates.

c- **Revising**: When revising a piece of writing, students check and revise the text to see if they have effectively communicated their ideas to the reader. Revision is not only a matter of checking language errors, but it is also done to improve the content and organization of the ideas so the writer's purpose is clear for the reader.

d- **Editing**: At this stage, students focus on neatening their work as they prepare the final draft to be checked and corrected by the teacher. They check mistakes of grammar, spelling, word order and punctuation.

Aspects of Writing

Writing is not just a matter of finding suitable ideas and joining them together. But, it is also a matter of how to compose the elements or aspects of writing well. The writer should be able to process the ideas to form something meaningful and logical for the reader to read. Aspects of writing

are important for any writer to know in order to write a well-organized piece of writing. These aspects include:

Handwriting & Spelling:

Handwriting is problematic for those students whose native-language orthography is completely different from English script. Maybe, it is a personal problem. However, students should be given much practice to overcome their handwriting problems (Harmer, 2007). Grahem and Harris (2000, cited in Maki, Vauras & Vainio, 2002, p.190) stated that, "Skilled writers tend to master transcription processes (spelling and writing) better than less skilled ones, while individual differences in transcription skills seems to predict writing achievement".

Correct spelling is necessary for a good piece of writing. Harmer (2007) argued that although wrong spelling does not always hinder understanding a written message, it can negatively affect the reader's opinion and judgment. Sometimes incorrect spelling is considered as a lack of education or carelessness. Therefore, and in order to help students improve their spelling, teachers should motivate them to read a lot to gain a repertoire of correct vocabulary

Layout & Punctuation:

Punctuation includes commas, full stops, question marks, quotation marks, and capitalization of proper nouns, names, and months. Harmer (2001) stated that, as there are well-established rules for punctuation, incorrect use of this makes a piece of writing looks embarrassing. He also added that different genres of writing have different layouts. So, learners should be taught these layouts before start writing.

Sentence construction & Text cohesion:

Gower, Phillips, and Walters (1995) asserted the importance of a sentence construction that is grammatically correct, using the correct word order. Learners should practice using the appropriate linking words and phrases so that the organization of their texts is clear and understandable to the readers.

Writing Challenges and Difficulties

There are several challenges that affect students' English writing ability. These challenges include:

English competence

Regarding writing, English competence is a broad term which might include learners' grammatical competence, vocabulary mastery, and how to

organize a good Piece of writing in English (Brown, 2004, p. 233). Lacking both grammar competence and vocabulary makes it difficult for learners to produce a paragraph, or even a sentence. In fact, learners engaging in a productive task can become very frustrated when they just do not have the suitable words or do not know which grammar rules to use in order to express themselves (Harmer, 2001).

Native language interference

Learners' native language is related to their English competence regarding their influence to learning to write English. Native language, therefore, is also seen as "a very influential factor towards the success of a learner's writing in EFL" (Harmer, 2001, p. 250). In this context, the learners' native language is Arabic. In writing, Arabic interferences towards writing English are concerning morphology, semantics and syntax.

Motivation and reading habits

Some learners are not interested in engaging in writing activities, while others are. In other words, they have no or little intrinsic motivation. Therefore, the teacher should try to raise learners' motivation. The problem is that motivation is not an easy matter. It involves some factors that energize the behavior and give it direction (Atkinson, 2002; & Myles, 2002). Reading habit which is known to be much related to someone's writing ability also needs attention.

Studies Related to Developing the Productive Skills

Many researchers investigated the importance of developing the students' speaking and writing skills. Some studies investigated each skill separately, while others combined them together. Some of these studies are discussed below.

Dodo (2018) investigated the effectiveness of a proposed program based on digital tasks in developing EFL productive skills for secondary school students. Participants of the study were fifty 1st year secondary students divided into an experimental and a control groups. The researcher designed pre-post speaking and writing performance tests. Findings of the study revealed that the proposed program was effective in improving the students' overall speaking and writing skills, as well as their sub-skills.

Salem's study (2017) aimed at finding out the effect of a Webquest-Based Program (WQBP) on developing the EFL listening and speaking skills of general secondary school students and their self-regulation (SR). Participants were forty, 2nd year general secondary school students at Temay

Al-Amdid Secondary School, Dakahliya Governorate. The study instruments included: a listening sub-skills checklist, a speaking sub-skills checklist, a computer and internet skills survey to choose the participants, two pre posttests of listening and speaking, a speaking assessment rubric, self-regulation questionnaire (SRQ), and a reflective log. Study results showed that there were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group in the listening and speaking skills tests, in addition to self-regulation in favor of the experimental group.

El-Nagar (2016) examined the impact of using habits of mind-based strategies (HOMSs) on improving preparatory stage pupils' writing skills and their self-efficacy. Participants were sixty, 2nd year preparatory stage pupils at "Al Nasr Language School" in Tanta city. Instruments designed and used in the study were a writing test and a self-efficacy scale. Results showed some differences between the experimental and control groups on both the EFL writing test and self-efficacy scale in favor of the experimental group.

Nagy (2016) explored the effect of a program based on standards in developing EFL secondary stage speaking and writing skills. The participants of the present study were seventy-two 1st year secondary stage students who were assigned into an experimental and a control groups. Instruments of the study were speaking and writing tests, speaking and writing scoring rubrics, a students' self-assessment questionnaire, and a post students' satisfaction questionnaire. Study results showed that the program had a positive impact on improving the experimental group students' speaking, writing and self-assessment skills.

Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Learning in the 21st century has changed a lot due to the use of technology. Therefore, educationists call for the need that students acquire the 21st century skills which are called the 4 Cs (Critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity), in addition to using technology. This call can be achieved through using various teaching strategies and approaches; and project-based learning is one of them.

Project-Based Learning Features and Criteria

PBL has some features that determine the roles of the teacher and the students. Bell (2010) and Klimova, Simonova, and Poulova (2017) elaborated the features of PBL by describing it as a "student-driven", and a "teacher-facilitated" approach to learning. Learners go after knowledge by

asking questions aroused by their natural curiosity. Thompson and Beak (2007) defined project- based learning as a hands-on approach, and a type of learning by doing that increases students' involvement and requires more active participation in constructing knowledge. Also, it is a student-driven investigation of complex and real life issues.

In Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Report, Railsback (2002) gathered research on the common features of PBL and concluded the following:

- It is student centered, student directed.
- Students are effectively involved in the decision-making process.
- It has a definite beginning, middle and end.
- The content is meaningful to students; directly observable in their environment.
- Students deal with real-world questions or problems.
- It is a first-hand investigation.
- It includes specific goals related to curriculum and school, district, or state standards.
- It results in a tangible product that can be shared with the intended audience.
- It provides an opportunity for critical and reflective thinking and student self- assessment.
- It depends on using authentic assessments (portfolios, journals, etc.).

Importance of Project-Based Learning

Hallerman, Larmer, and Mergendoller (2011, p. 8) emphasized the importance of project-based learning and summarized it in three points:

- It is an effective way to learn content knowledge skills.
- It makes the school curriculum more engaging and meaningful.
- It gets students ready for 21st century skills, in particular, and life, in general. Larmer (2016) summed the results up with a student being, "A responsible, resourceful, persistent critical thinker who knows how to learn, works well with others, is a problem solver, communicates well, and manages time and work effectively" (p. 66).

Nature of Blended Learning

The term 'blended learning' often refers to a course methodology or learning activity that combines online and traditional face to face instruction (de Leng, Dolmans, Donkers, Muijtjens, & van der Vleuten, 2010). Online learning is integrated with traditional face to face instruction to create a more effective and realistic experience for both the instructor and students.

So and Brush (2008) argued that blended learning is effective in facilitating online collaborative learning. Liao (2006) added that cooperative learning involves carefully structured activities for group members that allow students to reflect on and evaluate their work in the group, while providing suggestions for improvement.

Project-Based Blended Learning

The goal of using technology in classrooms is to provide students with new ways to learn. When technology is used appropriately, it can bring about many advantages to teachers and learners. It is a resource that can be used by learners because it helps them solve their learning problems and find methods to use what they have learnt in effective and meaningful ways.

Technological development and globalization have altered societies to be knowledge-based. Thus, and according to today's knowledge-based society, learners need broader knowledge, self-regulated skills, and communication skills to solve real-life problems. Therefore, they need new abilities to deal with this modern world. These new abilities are defined as key competencies that are necessary for learners to learn in the modern age of technology. To conclude, learners need to: (a) use tools interactively; (b) interact in heterogeneous groups; and (c) act autonomously (Soparat, Arnold, & Klaysom, 2015).

Studies Related to Using PBL and Blended Learning in Enhancing English Language Skills

Many studies investigated the effectiveness of PBL in improving different aspects of English language, and psychological and affective variables.

Carreon (2018) explored the impact of using Facebook as an integrated blended learning tool in teaching Technology and Livelihood Education (TLE) Grade 7 and its effect on students' learning outcomes. The study participants were 15 students. The experimental group were exposed to a contextualized blended learning approach and the control group were taught in a regular classroom setting. The research instrument was a thirty-item test. The study results revealed that the experimental group students have significantly improved their learning outcomes.

Astawa, Artini and Nitiasih (2017) researched the effect of project-based learning on students' English productive skills and how the activities influence teaching and learning process in a public junior high school in Bali-Indonesia. The sample of the study consisted of 28 students. Study instruments included speaking and writing tests, an interview guide, an

observation checklist, an open-ended questionnaire, and a field note. The results of the statistical analysis showed a significant effect of PBL on students' English productive skills. It, also, improved the students' enthusiasm, confidence, creativity, self-directed learning and collaborative learning skills. In addition, it promoted the teacher's teaching motivation and satisfaction.

Mahmoud (2017) investigated the effect of project-based learning on developing communication skills in English for the first year preparatory/governmental language school students. Participants of the study consisted of 64 students; divided equally into an experimental and a control groups. The researcher designed three instruments; a communication skills checklist, a pre-post communication skills test, and a pre-post observation sheet. Findings of the study revealed significant differences between the experimental and control groups in favor of the experimental group due to the proposed instruction.

Simeonov (2017) conducted a case study to find the effect of project-based learning and blended learning on developing the students' 21st century skills. Participants of this case study were a class of 26 students (aged 13 to 14) in the 8th grade of the Secondary School 'Sava Savov' in Pirdop, Bulgaria. The class studied English and ICT. He used the ethnographic method of observation to collect data. Study results showed that blended project-based learning enhanced the students' learning and motivation.

It is clear that all the previously mentioned studies have investigated the effectiveness of PBL in improving English language skills, and students' learning, in general. Studies also showed that the integration of technology and English language teaching has a positive impact on students' progress. This integration resulting in different types of blended learning can improve students' motivation, enthusiasm and attitudes towards learning English.

Pilot Study

In order to provide evidence for the problem of the study, the researcher conducted a pilot study to determine second year secondary stage Al-Azhar students' level at EFL speaking and writing skills. Twenty 2nd year Al-Azhar students participated in this pilot study. The following tables show the results.

Table (1): Results of the EFL speaking skills pilot study test

Speaking sub-skills	Sub-skill score	Min. score	Max. score	Students' score	Mean	SD	%
Pronunciation	4	1	3	20	1.1	.46	27.8%
Vocabulary	4	1	3	24	1.3	.59	33.3%
Grammar	4	1	3	21	1.2	.5	29.2%
Fluency	4	1	2	19	1	.24	26.4%
Total	16	4	11	84	4.7	7.73	29.2%

Results in table (1) show that the students' mean score in each speaking sub-skill is low. This indicates that the students' EFL speaking ability is low and needs improvement; as the mean (Mean= 4.7) and the total percentage of the skills (%= 29.2%).

Table (2): Results of the EFL writing skills pilot study test

Writing sub-skills	Sub-skill score	Min. score	Max. score	Students' score	Mean	SD	%
Vocabulary	4	1	2	21	1.2	.38	29.2%
Grammar	4	1	2	20	1.1	.32	27.8%
Organization	4	1	2	21	1.2	.38	29.2%
Cohesion	4	1	2	19	1	.24	26.4%
Coherence	4	1	2	20	1.1	.32	27.8%
Total	20	5	10	101	5.6	7.70	28%

Table (2) shows the statistical results of the students' EFL writing skills test. The results reveal the students' poor level in writing. Their mean score (Mean= 5.6) and their level was (28%).

Statement of the Problem

Based on the review of literature and the results of the pilot study, the research problem was stated as follows: "Second year secondary stage Al-Azhar students have difficulties expressing their ideas in a meaningful and coherent way while speaking and writing." Therefore, the researcher suggested using a project-based blended learning program as a means of improving the students' productive language skills and their psychological flow level.

Research Questions

This research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What is the effectiveness of a project-based blended learning program in improving EFL speaking skills of second year secondary stage Al-Azhar students?

2. What is the effectiveness of a project-based blended learning program in improving writing EFL skills of second year secondary stage Al-Azhar students?

Hypotheses

This research attempted to verify the following hypotheses:

1. There is a statistically significant difference at the ≤ 0.05 level between the mean score of the experimental group and that of the control group on the post administration of the EFL speaking skills test in favor of the experimental group.

2. There is a statistically significant difference at the ≤ 0.05 level between the mean score of the experimental group on the pre and post administration of the EFL speaking skills test in favor of the post administration.

3. There is a statistically significant difference at the ≤ 0.05 level between the mean score of the experimental group and that of the control group on the post administration of the EFL writing skills test in favor of the experimental group.

4. There is a statistically significant difference at the ≤ 0.05 level between the mean score of the experimental group on the pre and post administration of the EFL writing skills test in favor of the post administration.

Purpose

The present research aimed at:

1. Determining the effectiveness of the project-based blended learning program in improving EFL speaking skills of second year secondary stage Al-Azhar students.

2. Determining the effectiveness of the project-based blended learning program in improving EFL writing skills of second year secondary stage Al-Azhar students.

Significance

It was hoped that the present research would contribute to:

1- Enriching literature concerning using project-based blended learning in enhancing second year secondary stage students' EFL speaking skills and EFL writing skills.

2- Providing EFL teachers with a teacher guide on how to teach speaking and writing skills through using project-based blended learning.

3- Paving the way for other researchers to do more studies on the effectiveness of using project-based blended learning in improving the English language skills.

Delimitations

This research was delimited to:

1- The participants of the study: Second year secondary stage Al-Azhar students (58 female students at Fisha Banah and Meet Masoud Secondary Institutes, Aga, Dakahlia Governorate).

2- Some EFL speaking skills identified through the content of "New Hello! English for Secondary Schools" represented in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehensibility.

3- Some EFL writing skills identified through the content of "New Hello! English for Secondary Schools" represented in organization, development, sentence structure, word choice, grammar usage, and mechanics of writing

4- Eight units of the Student's Book, New Hello! English for Secondary Schools, in the first term of the academic year 2019/2020.

Methodology:

Participants

The participants of the current research were second year secondary stage Al-Azhar students. Fifty-eight students were selected from Fisha Bana Secondary Institute for Girls and Meet Masoud Secondary Institute for Girls in Aga Administration, Dakahlia Governorate. The participants were chosen according to the feasibility, as each institute had only one second year secondary class enrolled in the literary section during the academic year 2019/2020. The participants were divided into two groups; experimental and control.

Design

The current research adopted the quasi-experimental design to apply the PBBL Program. The participants were divided into two groups: experimental and control. The experimental group was taught through using

the proposed PBBL program to improve their speaking and writing skills. At the same time, the control group continued to study according to the prescribed method in the Teacher's Guide of the Ministry of Education. The pre-post EFL speaking and writing tests were administered to both groups before and after the program. The results of the pre-post EFL speaking and writing tests were analyzed by using a *t*- test for independent samples.

Instruments:

The present research made use of the following instruments, which were developed by the researcher and validated by the jury members:

1- An EFL speaking skills test to measure students' speaking skills,
2- An EFL speaking skills scoring rubric to assess students' speaking skills on the pre and post EFL speaking skills test
3- An EFL writing skills test to measure students' writing skills
4- An EFL writing skills scoring rubric to assess students' writing skills on the pre and post EFL writing skills test.

Definition of Terms:

Project-Based Blended Learning (PBBL)

For the purpose of this research, project-based blended learning (PBBL) was defined as a strategy that includes a number of activities, including planning, data collection, problem –solving and evaluation, done by students who work in groups inside and outside the classroom, via the internet. The main target is to work collaboratively in order to speak fluently and write properly.

Productive Skills:

For this research, productive skills were defined as the students' ability to convey correct and clear ideas, attitudes, and opinions to others; in either an oral mode or a written mode.

Speaking Skill

The researcher defined speaking as the students' ability to speak in a fluent, accurate and comprehensible way as much as possible using proper vocabulary, correct grammar and clear pronunciation.

Writing Skill

For this research, the researcher defined writing as the students' ability to put their ideas on paper in a clear and organized way, using correct sentence structure, grammar, word choice, and mechanics of writing.

Results and Discussion

The results of the research are statistically analyzed in terms of its hypotheses and they are discussed in the light of the theoretical background and related studies. Research results were reported as follows:

Verifying Speaking Skills Hypotheses

The first hypothesis stated that "**There is a statistically significant difference at the ≤ 0.05 level between the mean score of the experimental group and that of the control group on the post administration of the EFL speaking skills test in favor of the experimental group".**

To verify this hypothesis, the *t-* test was used to compare the mean score of the two groups. Results are presented in table (3):

Table (3) Comparing the performance of the control and experimental groups on the post-administration of the EFL speaking skills test

Skills	Group	N	Mean	S. D.	*t*	Df	Sig.
Vocabulary	Exp.	28	13.22	1.34	13.9		
Vocabulary	Ctrl.	30	7.67	1.67			
Grammar	Exp.	28	12.9	1.43	13.4		
Grammar	Ctrl.	30	7.50	1.66			
Pronunciation	Exp.	28	12.5	1.64	12.7	56	0.05
Pronunciation	Ctrl.	30	7.03	1.61			
Fluency	Exp.	28	12.9	1.28	15.6		
Fluency	Ctrl.	30	7.17	1.51			
Comprehension	Exp.	28	14.1	1.45	14.4		
Comprehension	Ctrl.	30	7.97	1.77			
Total	Exp.	28	65.5	6.59	14.9		
Total	Ctrl	30	37.2	7.78			

Table (3) reports that the *t-* values were (13.9, 13.4, 12.72, 15.6, 14.4 respectively) and that all of them were statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This means that there were significant differences between the

experimental and the control groups in the post- administration of the EFL speaking skills test. These differences could be ascribed to the implementation of the PBBL program. Therefore, the First hypothesis of the research was verified and accepted.

The second hypothesis stated that "**There is a statistically significant difference at the ≤ 0.05 level between the mean score of the experimental group on the pre and post administration of the EFL speaking skills test in favor of the post administration**."

The *t*-test for dependent samples was used to compare the difference between the mean score of the experimental group students in the EFL speaking skills test before and after implementing the PBBL program. Results are as shown in table (4):

Table (4): Comparing the speaking performance of the experimental group on the pre –post administration of the EFL speaking skills test

Skills	Test	Mean	N	S. D.	*t*	df	Sig.
Vocabulary	Pre	7.32		2.45	17.4		
	Post	13.2		1.34			
Grammar	Pre	7.04		2.32	21.8		
	Post	12.9		1.43			
Pronunciation	Pre	6.61		1.75	22.9		
	Post	12.5	28	1.64		27	0.05
Fluency	Pre	6.75		1.88	22.3		
	Post	12.9		1.27			
Comprehension	Pre	7.25		2.27	24.1		
	Post	14.1		1.45			
Total	Pre	35.0		10.3	24.5		
	Post	65.5		6.59			

Results in table (4) reveal that the mean score in the post-administration of the speaking skills test was greater than that of the pre-administration in all EFL speaking skills. The *t*-test value was significant at the 0.01 level for all the speaking skills (Vocabulary, Grammar, Pronunciation, Fluency, and Comprehensibility) and the total use of all speaking skills (17.4, 21.8, 22.9, 22.3, 24.1, and 24.5 respectively). In addition, all differences were in favor of the post-administration of the EFL speaking skills test.

Verifying Writing Skills Hypotheses

The third hypothesis stated that **"There is a statistically significant difference at the ≤ 0.05 level between the mean score of the experimental group and that of the control group on the post**

administration of the EFL writing skills test in favor of the experimental group."

To verify this hypothesis, the *t*- test was used to compare the mean score of the two groups. The results are presented in table (5):

Table (5) Comparing the performance of the control and experimental groups on the post-administration of the EFL writing skills test

Skills	Groups	N	Mean	S. D.	*t*	df	Sig.
Organization	Exp.	28	11.6	2.11	8.51		
	Ctrl.	30	6.93	2.07			
Development	Exp.	28	11.5	2.05	8.57		
	Ctrl.	30	6.90	2.04			
Sentence Structure	Exp.	28	11.6	2.08	8.63		
	Ctrl.	30	6.90	2.04			
Word Order	Exp.	28	11.8	1.95	9.21	56	0.05
	Ctrl.	30	7.03	2.01			
Grammar Usage	Exp.	28	11.9	1.91	8.94		
	Ctrl.	30	7.17	2.10			
Mechanics of Writing	Exp.	28	12.1	2.18	8.51		
	Ctrl.	30	7.33	2.09			
Total	Exp.	28	70.5	11.9	8.84		
	Ctrl.	30	42.3	12.4			

Results in table (5) indicate that the *t*- values for the writing skills were (8.51, 8.57, 8.63, 9.21, 8.94, and 8.51 respectively) and that all of them were statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This means that there were significant differences between the experimental and control groups in the post- administration of the EFL writing skills test. This also signifies that the implementation of PBBL program had contributed to the improvement of the EFL writing skills and the total score, which was 8.84. Therefore, the third hypothesis of the research was verified and accepted.

The fourth hypothesis stated that "**There is a statistically significant difference at the ≤ 0.05 level between the mean score of the experimental group on the pre and post administration of the EFL writing skills test in favor of the post administration."**

To test this hypothesis, the *t*- test for dependent samples was used to compare the difference between the mean score of the experimental group students in the EFL writing skills test before and after implementing the PBBL program. The results are as shown in table (6):

Table (6): Comparing the writing performance of the experimental group on the pre –post administration of the EFL writing skills test

Skills	Test	Mean	N	S. D.	t	df	Sig.
Organization	Pre	5.75		2.58	20.6		
Organization	Post	11.6		2.11			
Development	Pre	5.71		2.54	20.1		
Development	Post	11.5		2.05			
Sentence Structure	Pre	5.71		2.54	19.9		
Sentence Structure	Post	11.6	28	2.08		27	0.05
Word Order	Pre	5.71		2.54	19.4		
Word Order	Post	11.8		1.94			
Grammar Usage	Pre	5.71		2.54	19.2		
Grammar Usage	Post	11.9		1.91			
Mechanics of Writing	Pre	5.75		2.58	18.8		
Mechanics of Writing	Post	12.1		2.18			
Total	Pre	34.4		15.3	20.7		
Total	Post	70.5		11.9			

Results in table (6) illustrate that, the *t*- test value was (20.7) and it was significant at the 0.01 level, and difference was in favor of the post-administration of the PBBL program.

A closer look at table (6) reveals that the mean score in the post-administration of the EFL writing skills test was greater than that of the pre-administration in all writing skills. The *t*-test value was significant at the 0.01 level for all the writing skills (Organization, Development, Sentence Structure, Word Order, Grammar Usage and Mechanics of Writing), and the total use of all writing skills (20.6, 20.1, 19.9, 19.4, 19.2, 18.8 and 20.7,

respectively). In addition, all differences were in favor of the post-administration of the EFL writing skills test.

Conclusion

Based on the statistical analysis of the speaking and writing skills hypotheses, it was clear that the experimental group students outperformed the control group students in all the speaking and writing skills, and the *t*-values were highly significant at 0.01 level. Besides, the experimental group's post test results were much better than the pretest results. These findings indicate that the project-based blended learning proved to be more effective in developing the participants' ability to speak better and enhance their speaking skills. In addition, the program was effective in improving the students' writing skills.

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