

Using Debates as Project-Based Learning to Improve Oral Expression in B1 Teenage ELLs

Uso de los debates como aprendizaje basado en proyectos para mejorar la expresión oral en adolescentes ELLs de nivel B1

Uso de debates como aprendizagem baseada em projetos para melhorar a expressão oral de adolescentes ELLs no nível B1

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Abstract

This study evaluates the impact of debate as a project-based learning strategy on the oral expression of B1-level English language learners. Conducted in a bilingual high school with 21 students aged 16–18, the research adopts a qualitative design. Data were gathered through a diagnostic speaking test, observation checklists, and student surveys. Results showed improvements in fluency, coherence, and critical thinking. The Hutchinson and Waters needs analysis guided curriculum design. The results suggest that debate not only enhances oral proficiency, but also boosts learner engagement. These outcomes underscore the value of active learning approaches in language development and position debate as an effective tool for improving speaking skills.

Keywords: debates, project-based learning, oral expression, ELLs, needs analysis

Resumen

Este estudio evalúa el impacto de los debates como estrategia de aprendizaje basado en proyectos en la expresión oral de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera con nivel B1. Realizado en una escuela secundaria bilingüe con 21 estudiantes de entre 16 y 18 años, se aplicó un enfoque cualitativo. Los instrumentos incluyeron una prueba diagnóstica oral, listas de cotejo y encuestas estudiantiles. Los resultados mostraron mejoras en fluidez, coherencia y pensamiento crítico. El análisis de necesidades de Hutchinson y Waters guió el

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diseño curricular. Se concluye que el debate promueve la competencia oral y la participación estudiantil.

Palabras Clave: debates, aprendizaje basado en proyectos, expresión oral, ELLs, análisis de necesidades

Resumo

Este estudo avalia o impacto dos debates como estratégia de aprendizagem baseada em projetos para melhorar a expressão oral de alunos adolescentes de inglês nível B1. Realizado em uma escola bilíngue com 21 alunos de 16 a 18 anos, o estudo utilizou uma abordagem qualitativa. Os instrumentos incluíram teste diagnóstico, listas de verificação e questionários. Os resultados mostraram avanços na fluência, coerência e pensamento crítico. O currículo foi orientado pela análise de necessidades de Hutchinson e Waters. A discussão destaca a importância da aprendizagem ativa e confirma o debate como recurso eficaz no desenvolvimento da oralidade.

Palavras-chave: debate, expressão oral, aprendizagem ativa, ensino bilíngue, análise de necessidades

INTRODUCTION

The development of oral communication skills is a cornerstone of effective language learning. In English Language Learners (ELLs) context, improving speaking abilities requires engaging, student-centered methodologies. This study explores the use of debates as a form of project-based learning (PBL) to enhance oral proficiency. The research focuses on high school students in their second year of Baccalaureate education, who are at a B1 level of English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) and also based on the diagnostic test where students were assessed by the teacher. Using the Hutchinson and Waters (1987) Needs Analysis model, the study identifies the specific linguistic needs of these learners and proposes a debate-focused curriculum to address them.

The research took place in the educator's classroom with the Language Arts subject, targeting second-year Baccalaureate students who are preparing for advanced academic and professional challenges. These students are expected to master oral

communication skills essential for both academic presentations and professional interactions. The school curriculum prioritizes active learning methodologies to foster critical thinking, collaboration, and communicative competence. The context includes a strong emphasis on English proficiency, as many students aim to pursue higher education or careers in international contexts. Within this framework, debates are proposed as an innovative strategy to meet institutional goals and learner needs.

The students' proficiency at the B2 level on the CEFRL scale indicates a functional command of English in everyday scenarios. They can participate in discussions on familiar topics, express opinions, and provide justifications (CEFR English Levels, 2001). However, they struggle with maintaining fluency during extended interactions, using precise vocabulary, and structuring coherent arguments. That is the reason behind using a B1 English level diagnostic test was necessary. These gaps were particularly evident in tasks that require critical thinking or formal language use, such as debates. A needs analysis is crucial to identify these challenges and design interventions that bridge the gap between their current capabilities and target outcomes.

To fulfill the purposes of the research and to improve the oral expression of teenage English language learners through the implementation of debates as a project-based learning strategy, the research states the following as guidelines to draw results and cover aspects.

When talking about oral fluency and communicative competence among teenage language learners in Ecuadorian schools, there is a significant gap because of traditional methods such as grammar translation and rote learning. Those dominate many of the classroom practices resulting in limited opportunities for students to develop authentic spoken interactions, and limited opportunities for teachers to explore different methods and teaching styles to make student-centered classrooms. Being one of the methods of project-based learning is a good start for communication purposes, thus according to Vivian & Furumura (2022), that states that PBL strategies are suitable for motivation and teamwork focusing on improving oral expression and critical thinking.

Conceptualization of Key Constructs

Research is known as a systematic development process that aims to design an evaluation to be part of the construction of knowledge in

a generalized way (Viera, 2018). This is done using strategies and methodologies structured and organized by the researcher. Following this process related to the present research topic denotes the revelation of integrated research to the variables to be investigated.

Debates are a fundamental part of the communicative development of people; integrated into the educational process can be highly relevant not only in their communicative process but also in their cognitive development in relation to students' critical thinking. In order for proper feedback and feedforward by the teacher, the use of debates should be built in stages where a review by the teacher takes place. (García Sánchez, 2020) In this way, the student is periodically evaluated, therefore, the use of debates as a project-based learning strategy is proposed as a dependent variable in this research.

Although it is known that English is a language used in many countries as a means of communication, there is a high percentage of withdrawal and lack of motivation on the part of students regarding speaking skills, which is why the use of debates seeks to improve and promote oral expression related to communicative competence in teenage English language learners. The dependent variable of this research is related to the Ecuadorian curriculum competencies related to the teaching of a foreign language where it is established that students should be the center of the teaching-learning process, in addition to fostering and improving the productive skills of the students. (Ngoc Cuong Vu, 2023)

Debates as Project-Based Learning

A debate is a structured discussion in which two opposing sides present a reasoned argument on the topic to be discussed, in this way each party and counterpart supports its position, either defending it or questioning it, using arguments based on extensive previous research that demonstrates a vast knowledge on the subject in order to convince the expectant public or a jury. (Ball, 2021)

As Macaro & Woore (2021) stated in their book “Debates in Second Language Education”, the previous mention fosters not only expression skills but also critical thinking, promoting research skills and vocabulary acquisition in relation to the target topic. That is why integrating debates in a classroom promotes individual and collaborative reflection by students. Teachers take a passive role, focused on monitoring, active listening, and providing timely feedback within the classroom. Integrating debates into foreign language teaching contexts helps to improve students' language

skills, preparing them to express themselves accurately and effectively in a foreign language.

According to MacDonald et al. (2021), in the article “Utilizing Diverse Instructional Approaches; Designing Activities That Resonate with ELLs”, conducting dissertations focused on specific learner needs through the use of debates is an active form of foreign language teaching. This is because it promotes their cognitive development, awakens their investigative side and boosts their productive skills in the target language.

The use of Project-Based learning related to education is essential when addressing pedagogical and linguistic needs of students, thus because it promotes an active role for the student, collaboration and peer feedback, engaging and immersing students into a dynamic language learning environment. Applied to language teaching, Project-Based learning, focused on debates, offers a meaningful environment to practice and improve pupils’ communication skills involving students into their construction of knowledge, taking an active role inside the classroom. (Shi & Li, 2024)

From a pedagogical perspective, project work involves a vast variety of learning styles that promote cognitive, and social development. As a result, it encourages students to express their ideas confidently, and -with appropriate feedback from the teacher’s side- coherently. On the other hand, Project-Based Learning aims to assist students in reflecting on authentic language use, this being crucial for developing fluent oral expression and interaction skills. (Almulla, 2020)

Oral Expression

As mentioned above, the use of a methodology such as project-based learning leads to students gaining confidence in their speaking skills, which is one of the productive skills of the English language. Quoting Almulla (2020) in his article “The Effectiveness of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) Approach as a Way to Engage Students in Learning”, the prevalence of project-based learning (PBL) has increased significantly. PBL emphasizes the practice of supporting teachers in using active methods in education, rather than promoting teacher-directed instruction and education.

Since it is a productive skill, speaking is considered one of the most crucial

abilities in communication; nonetheless, English as a Foreign Language learners have difficulty expressing ideas which are both communicatively and linguistically competent. On the other hand, the lack of speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language student

is a great issue that needs to be addressed by teachers, and one important way to improve oral expression is through the use of Project-Based Learning that can present an effective and engaging way to improve and encourage communication through the use of real context scenarios in learners.

Speaking skills is a unique ability that allows individuals to express their thoughts verbally. Throughout oral skills, students mentally and verbally interact with words and motivation. It involves mental interaction with words and ideas, making it an essential part of language practice. According to the Mahdi (2022), oral expression also plays a crucial role as it represents language in spoken form. However, oral expression can be challenging as it requires the ability to organize words and sentences coherently.

Following the idea, expanding vocabulary, learning to place words correctly, and engaging in debates for oral expression are essential. By moving away from traditional methods and embracing more engaging approaches, such as using various media or drawing examples from other works, teachers can motivate students to learn in a more dynamic way. These methods ensure that students not only learn but also understand the subject better.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The objective of this research is to explore how debates, as a project-based learning (PBL) strategy, improve oral expression among teenage English Language Learners (ELLs). The study's setting is Unidad Educativa Bilingue Jefferson Salinas, a bilingual school in Ecuador that focuses on 16–18-year-olds with a B1 level of English proficiency. Given the difficulties these students encounter with confidence, accuracy, and fluency when speaking orally, this study uses a mixed-methods approach.

Mixed-methods research combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies, offering a comprehensive view of the issue. Quantitative data gathered through structured surveys and pre/post-tests, evaluates measurable improvements in oral proficiency. Qualitative data, derived from observations and interviews, provides insights into students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges during debates. This dual approach ensures triangulation, enhancing the reliability and depth of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This methodology is ideal for understanding both the measurable outcomes and the nuanced, contextual factors influencing ELLs' oral expression.

Instruments

Surveys are structured tools designed to collect quantitative data from participants by posing a series of questions. They are instrumental in gathering information on participants' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. According to the Cambridge dictionary (2025), survey research involves collecting information about a group of persons by asking them interrogations and analyzing the results. A survey aimed at collecting students' self-reported data on their confidence levels, perceptions of debates, and motivation toward speaking tasks. The survey questions are aligned with the CEFR descriptors, ensuring relevance to the research objectives.

Pre-tests are assessments oversight before an intervention to establish a baseline of participants' knowledge or skills, while post-tests are given after the mediation to measure any changes. The University of Florida (2018) notes that pre- and post-testing is a method used to assess the effectiveness of educational interventions by comparing results before and after the intervention. Pre-tests and Post-tests designed to measure improvements in fluency, coherence, and accuracy of oral communication before and after the intervention. These tests focus on structured debate tasks and use rubrics based on CEFR guidelines.

Classroom observations involve systematically watching and recording behaviors and interactions within the classroom setting. Sharma (2024) states that observations are a method of collecting data by systematically watching and recording behavior. Classroom Observations to analyze interaction dynamics, engagement levels, and practical challenges during debate sessions. Observations will follow a checklist emphasizing participation, argumentation skills, and teamwork.

Interviews are qualitative data collection methods that encompass direct, frontal interaction between the researcher and the contributor to explore deeper insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. According to the University of New Georgia (2025), interviews are a method of collecting data by directly questioning participants. Semi-structured interviews with a subset of applicants provide qualitative insights into their experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of using debates for oral skills development.

Delimitation of the Population and the Sample

The research targets 21 second-year Baccalaureate students enrolled in Unidad Educativa Particular Bilingüe Jefferson Salinas. These

16–18 students represent a B1 proficiency level based on CEFRL standards. This population was selected due to its relevance to the study's focus on advanced oral skills necessary for academic and professional success.

The sample is delimited to this group to maintain focus and manage research scope effectively. Selecting participants from a single institution ensures consistency in an educational context and reduces variability in instructional practices. The small sample size aligns with the qualitative emphasis of the study, allowing for in-depth exploration while still collecting sufficient quantitative data for meaningful analysis.

Justification of the Sample

The chosen sample size of 21 students is justified based on the need for a manageable group that permits detailed observations and personalized feedback. This size is sufficient to capture a diverse range of experiences within the classroom context while ensuring that data collection remains feasible.

The purposive sampling method ensures the selection of participants directly engaged in the research context. The focus on second-year Baccalaureate students is critical, as this stage represents a transitional period where strong oral communication skills are vital for future academic and professional pursuits. Potential limitations, such as the small sample size's impact on generalizability, are mitigated by the depth of qualitative data and alignment with the study's objectives.

The linguistic level of the beneficiaries according to the CEFRL

The students' proficiency at the B2 level on the CEFRL scale indicates a functional command of English in everyday scenarios. They can participate in discussions on familiar topics, express opinions, and provide justifications (CEFR English Levels, 2001). However, they struggle with maintaining fluency during extended interactions, using precise vocabulary, and structuring coherent arguments.

That is the reason behind using the B1 English level diagnostic test is necessary. These gaps are particularly evident in tasks that require critical thinking or formal language use, such as debates. A needs analysis is crucial to identify these challenges and design interventions that bridge the gap between their current capabilities and target outcomes.

Description of the diagnostic process

The diagnostic process included multiple instruments to assess students' oral skills and identify specific areas for improvement. A speaking test was administered, involving items such as presenting arguments on familiar topics and engaging in role-play activities. Additionally, a classroom observation was conducted to evaluate immediate language use, interaction patterns, and confidence levels during discussions.

A questionnaire gathered self-reported data on students' perceptions of their oral communication challenges and their interest in debates as a learning activity. There was a lot of gamification involved thus making the process go smoothly, that way students did not feel afraid of sharing information nor participating in class discussion. These tools provided a comprehensive understanding of the learners' needs and preferences.

Description of the instrument for the diagnostic

The primary diagnostic instrument was a task-based speaking assessment aligned with CEFRL descriptors for B1 plus level, which means that students were evaluated with B2 components as well. Students were asked to participate in a structured debate on a familiar topic, which was evaluated for fluency, coherence, and language accuracy.

A rubric based on CEFRL guidelines was used to ensure objective scoring. Complementary to this, a questionnaire explored learners' confidence, perceived challenges, and attitudes towards debates. Observations during classroom activities provided additional insights into their interaction dynamics and areas requiring improvement.

RESULTS

The diagnostic test was structured to evaluate students' oral communication skills through a series of progressively challenging tasks, tailored to match their B1-B2 English proficiency levels. It was applied over the course of three 45-minute sessions to make sure students had ample time to demonstrate fluency, vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, and argumentation skills. The test began with a warm-up section where students answered simple personal questions to ease into speaking. This was trailed by a short topic presentation, which required students to organize their ideas, express opinions clearly, and use cohesive language to support their arguments. As a final point, students participated in a peer debate

simulation to demonstrate their ability to present and defend viewpoints while engaging in real-time dialogue.

The debate portion was carefully structured to include an opening statement, rebuttal, and conclusion, allowing students to develop their ideas logically while practicing turn-taking and active listening. The evaluation rubric was aligned with the CEFR descriptors, focusing on fluency, vocabulary, grammar, argument structure, and engagement. This format was focused to encourage a student-centered approach where learners interacted implicitly, making the test not only a diagnostic tool but also a chance to promote communicative competence.

After the researcher applied the diagnostic test to the students, the results revealed that most students struggled with fluency and maintaining logical coherence during extended oral tasks, being the case of 83% of the students having problems against 17% of the students who were able to maintain a conversation, but lacked the appropriate vocabulary for the topic. In a general perspective, while they could express basic opinions, pupils often lacked the vocabulary and grammatical structures necessary for formal discussions. Confidence levels varied, with some students demonstrating hesitancy to participate due to fear of making mistakes. The results from the diagnostic test, combined with class observations confirmed these findings, highlighting a need for structured, interactive activities to enhance both linguistic competence and self-assurance. The assessment process took place in the educator's classroom, during Language Arts and Literature hours, using a speaking skills test based on the CERF. Due to the individualized testing process, it took two weeks to obtain results based on the level of the 22 students enrolled in the course. The main result was three key points; shyness when speaking in another language, lack of fluency due to the students' limited vocabulary, lack of appropriate structure connecting their ideas.

At the same time, several classes were observed to corroborate the information provided by the first test, during the classroom observations, the denominator was that 75% of the participants preferred not to participate in classes because they did not know how to express their ideas in English, and when they managed to do so, they did not use correct structures, so they were frustrated and preferred that someone else participate. Therefore, constant motivation is also a key factor in this process.

With the information highlighted from the pre-observation and results of the students during the first weeks, the educator's next task

was to socialize with the students the implementation of classroom discussions as part of their evaluation grade. This was an indirect explanation of the research process. The first phase of implementation was to designate groups in which the teacher formed groups of five people in which each had a specific role, two presenters, a secretary and two researchers, the roles being rotated so that everyone had the opportunity to present their arguments.

Then came the second phase, where the topics were distributed according to the class unit, in this way the students were participating actively and immersed during the research of arguments and counter-arguments, activating their critical thinking; a fundamental part of the debates. During this stage the students made small mock presentations of how their final position would be.

As preliminary results of the use of debates as a project-based tool, students improved their fluency due to the constant practice with the teacher in the classroom. Although some groups had problems related to grammatical structures, due to the use and knowledge of technical vocabulary, this helped them to put aside their shyness and express themselves in spite of small mistakes. In addition, the students expressed feeling prepared to counterattack the other group and vice versa since their previous research was fruitful for the final presentation.

Following the application of the diagnostic test, it was concluded that debates work as a highly effective instrument within a project-based learning (PBL) approach to boost oral communication skills in language learners. The structured format of the debate encouraged students to participate in significant discourse, develop coherent arguments, and respond thoughtfully to opposing viewpoints. This setting fostered the use of academic language, improved unprompted speaking abilities, and promoted critical thinking. The diagnostic results revealed varying levels of fluency and grammatical accuracy, providing valuable understandings into individual student needs. Overall, debates not only contributed to linguistic development but also supported the acquisition of key competencies such as collaboration, reasoning, and effective communication.

The proposal to use debates as a project-based learning strategy is strongly supported by the diagnostic findings. The observed breaches in fluency, vocabulary, and confidence can be effectively addressed through this method, which combines language practice with critical thinking and collaboration. The Hutchinson and Waters (1987) Needs Analysis model ensures a systematic approach to identifying and meeting both target and learning needs. By integrating debates

into the curriculum, the proposal not only enhances oral proficiency but also adopts essential skills such as argumentation, persuasion, and teamwork.

CONCLUSIONS

Once the study variables have been analyzed, it can be concluded that using Debates as Project-based Learning to improve oral expression in teenage ELLs play a fundamental role in the formation of integral individuals prepared to face on first instance the class and overall the world. Besides, it is established that there are diverse types of methodologies and techniques for the use of debates as an activity to increase students' speaking skills, being project-based learning focused on oral expression. Project-based learning; which function is to use the target language in a schoolroom which encourages communication and input of students by making them active contributors in their teaching-learning, was essential for the study.

In turn, the significance of the use of debates lies in the fact that scholars believe that through this sort of activity they can significantly improve their abilities. Focusing on the improvement of fluency, studies sustain that it is fundamental that researching resources are used as of the first instance, as they allow students to develop their critical thinking while communicating effectively in their surroundings through sight and hearing.

Lastly, there is a need for advance studies associated to the topic, field studies where the gains are reinforced and improvements are anticipated to limit the weaknesses. As a researcher, an extensive study is suggested to develop several activities to be presented in diverse groups to analyze a bigger sample population and to be involved in commencing innovation and change for the upgrading of students' oral expression skills.

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