What do the Lecturers Think? EPIC Lecturers' Perceptions of Implementing PBLL to Teach the Speaking Skills

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Abstract

The increasing necessity for authentic communication in English among college and university graduates has generated an emphasis on communicative instruction in academic English courses. Teaching speaking skills via the Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL) method is an example of this approach. While literature has mainly studied learner attitudes in pre-tertiary education, the current research attempts to explore the perceptions of lecturers who implemented PBLL regarding its effect on speaking. Eight lecturers at the exit level in an Israeli college were interviewed following the implementation of a PBLL session. Most of the accomplishments and the challenges mentioned in the interviews corresponded with the literature. The achievements included improving language skills and enhancing motivation and self-confidence, while being time-consuming was reported as a major challenge. Nevertheless, two outstanding results were revealed. First, students were able to give a public presentation in their target language. Second, lecturers' perceptions of their role varied, ranging from mediation to minimal involvement, with the latter perception diverging from the PBLL theory. The insights from this research may serve as an incentive for both EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers and EPIC (English for Purposes of International Communication) lecturers to integrate speaking-focused PBLL into their curricula.

Keywords: Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL), Speaking Skills, Lecturers' Perceptions, English for Purposes of Interpersonal Communication (EPIC)

One of the most desirable outcomes of foreign language instruction is to enable learners to communicate in their target language. Amongst communication skills, oral skills are especially important for university students' academic pursuits and their future employment. However, this is considered the most challenging skill to master because of the limited opportunities for practice outside the classroom and the need to allocate

time to versatile language skills in class (e.g., Vaca Torres & Gomez Rodriguez, 2017). This is exacerbated by affective factors such as low confidence and anxiety that may inhibit speaking (e.g., Yanagi & Baker, 2015). This discrepancy between the need for communication skills and the deficiency in their acquisition generated the emphasis on communicative language teaching in foreign language instruction in the last two decades (Kim, 2008; Richards, 2006; Saputra, 2015; Savignon, 2005; Spada, 2007).

Along with the growing emphasis on interaction in a foreign language class, there has been a recognition of the necessity to alter teaching methods. Project-Based Language Learning is one of the alternative pedagogical practices that emphasizes the learning process and learner abilities instead of focusing on the product and the student's knowledge (e.g., Kokotsaki et al., 2016). PBLL is an inquiry-oriented pedagogical method in which learners research an authentic question in teams implementing critical thinking skills (e.g., Ke, 2010). It is ideally geared toward teaching speaking skills as it simulates authentic interaction. Learners communicate in a target language while working on their project and presenting a final public product (e.g., Wahyudin, 2017).

Teachers have a central role in facilitating the projects and providing guidance, scaffolding, and feedback (Benson, 2013; Rodriguez & Yoshikawa; 2015). Teachers' beliefs and perceptions determine their decisions and classroom behavior (Ertmer, 2005; Kim et al., 2013; Richardson, 1996; Valcke et al., 2010; Voet & De Wever, 2016). It is, therefore, essential to understand their perceptions of PBLL in teaching speaking to optimize the effectiveness of this method.

To the best of my knowledge, while several studies have researched learners' attitudes towards project-based language learning, research focusing on teacher perceptions is scarce. The current study has, therefore, conducted a detailed exploration of perspectives and opinions on the administration of PBLL in speaking through the eyes of EPIC lecturers.

Literature Review

Designers of educational curricula have come to understand the importance of acquiring authentic oral skills (Dos Santos, 2020; Littlewood, 2007), and thus more communicative approaches have begun to be highly evaluated. PBLL is one such communicative approach to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching as it emphasizes real-life interaction (e.g., Dornyei, 2013; Mali, 2016). Beckett (1999) has summarized the cooperative essence of PBLL, "[…] one of the goals of project-based instruction is to develop in students the ability to cooperate with others, […] to learn from each other and to learn by having to explain their thinking to others." (p. 29). Students have to engage in spontaneous conversations with their peers and a teacher in L2 to work towards an actual goal in a target language and to construct a meaningful product.

The Challenges in the Transition to Speaking Skills Instruction

Arguably, while speaking is one of the most essential skills for foreign language learners, it is also one of the most complex and challenging skills to master. First, its productive and spontaneous nature contradicts the traditional learning procedures of passive and rote learning (Butler & Iino, 2005; Sawir, 2005; Shabani, 2013). Moreover,

opportunities for communicating in the target language are scarce. In many places in the world, English language classroom is the only place where school children can experience interaction in the target language (e.g., Eguchi & Eguchi, 2006). However, class sizes exceeding the ideal for practicing communication further reduce such opportunities (e.g., Bruner et al., 2015). Furthermore, lesson time is divided between multiple English skills, and thus the time allotted to acquire oral skills is inadequate (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Urrutia & Vega, 2010; Vaca Torres & Gomez Rodriguez, 2017). Besides the rare opportunities to speak English in the classroom, learners are further discouraged from communicating orally as the emphasis in many classes is on the accuracy of the utterances produced rather than on the communicative messages (e.g., Zhang, 2015).

In light of these obstacles to acquiring speaking skills, learners develop a range of psychological barriers that hinder improvement in oral performance. Learners who don't feel confident enough to communicate in a foreign language are afraid to make mistakes (Juhana, 2012; Khan, 2010; Muyan & Tunaz, 2017; Savaşçı, 2014; Yanagi & Baker, 2015) and might even experience speaking anxiety (Öztürk & Gürbü, 2014).

Benefits of PBLL in Teaching Speaking

The multiple challenges of speaking skills acquisition may be addressed by implementing the PBLL methodology. In PBLL, students accomplish a project in their target language while simultaneously enhancing their foreign language proficiency, fostering higher-order thinking skills, and learning content knowledge (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Stoller, 2002). Teachers using PBLL in the English class have mentioned the practicality and authenticity of this method, referring to the bridge between learning English in class and applying this knowledge in a meaningful real-life context (Beckett, 2002; Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009; Petersen, 2008; Poonpon, 2017). In addition, both teachers and learners report improvement in students' general language proficiency (Baş & Beyhan, 2010; Kavlu, 2017; Loi & Hang, 2021; Petersen & Nassagi, 2016; Simpson, 2011; Srikrai; 2008; Stripling et al., 2009) and language learning strategies (Mali, 2016; Poonpon, 2017). PBLL is an excellent way to prepare students for speaking in authentic situations as interacting in the process of working on the project as well as presenting it in front of the classmates and the teacher mimics real-life communication (Foss et al., 2008; Kobayashi, 2006; Morgan, 2012; Oradee, 2012; Thornbury, 2005; Wahyudin, 2017).

In addition to the achievements in language learning, PBLL has been reported to positively impact students' affective and psychological states and attitudes to learning a foreign language. Students are said to feel excited while working on the project and proud of their impressive product at the end of this learning route (Foss et al., 2008; Izzah, 2021). By the same token, the collaborative nature of the project (Andriyani & Anam, 2022; Boardman et al., 2020; Tims, 2009; Zaafour & Salaberri-Ramiro, 2022) and students' assuming an active role (Loi & Hang, 2021; Simpson, 2011) is said to reduce their foreign language anxiety (Duxbury & Tsai, 2010) and enhance motivation (Baş, 2011; Huffman, 2010; Kim, 2015; Pennycook, 2010).

In addition to PBLL's impact on students' speaking proficiency and enhancement of general language skills, implementing PBLL in oral language instruction is also

proposed to benefit learner interest, motivation, engagement, and confidence. While conversing in a foreign language is known to be a stressful experience, PBLL eases the stress and reduces learner anxiety towards using English in speech (Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010; Allison et al., 2015; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Vaca Torres & Gomez Rodriguez, 2017; Yang, 2016). Gurbuz & Cabaroglu (2021) report that "[t]he participants who had priorly felt alienated, lost, and unconfident reported having gradually overcome these problems after the oral presentations…[and] revealed a decrease in stage fright, nervousness, anxiety, and discomfort when speaking." (p. 610). Dewi (2015) claims that students' participation in speaking classes increases and they become more confident in their speaking capabilities.

Several studies address learners' positive attitude to the application of PBLL in speaking (Anuyahong, 2015; Gurbuz & Cabaroglu, 2021; Kassem, 2018; Rochmahwati, 2016; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Yang, 2016). In this regard, the implementation of PBLL in speaking enhances learner motivation to communicate in a foreign language as well as improves the perception of learning English in general (Brooks & Wilson, 2014; Girard et al., 2011; Kassem, 2018; Zhang, 2015). PBLL properties mentioned as contributing to a favorable opinion of PBLL are the enjoyable learning atmosphere of cooperation and shared responsibility (Dewi, 2015; Yang, 2016), learning enrichment beyond the textbooks, and incorporating versatile pedagogical methods (Zhang, 2015).

The PBLL method has also been effective in teaching speaking, specifically. PBLL improves the learners' overall oral proficiency (Anuyahong, 2015; Worawong et al., 2019; Dewi, 2016; Dooly & Masats, 2010; Fauzi, 2016; Rochmahwati, 2016; Sirisrimangkorn, 2018, 2021; Spring, 2020a, 2021; Worawong et al., 2019) as well as contributes to various specific oral skills such as accuracy, pronunciation (e.g., Spring, 2020b; Wahyudin, 2017) and fluency (e.g., Spring, 2021; Wahyudin, 2017). Yang (2016) maintains that students who learn speaking using PBLL improve their speaking abilities in "[…] accuracy and range, size and discourse management, flexibility and appropriacy" (p. 101). Even learners with low proficiency enhance oral skills following a PBLL experience (e.g., Al-Tamimi & Attamimi, 2014).

Students' engagement in PBLL for speaking purposes has also been suggested to contribute to listening, writing, and reading skills (Al-Issa & Al- Qubtan, 2010; Brooks & Wilson, 2014; Girard et al., 2011; Motaei, 2014; Zhang, 2015) as well as grammar (Wahyudin, 2017) and vocabulary (Alsamani & Daif-Allah, 2016; Vaca Torres & Gomez Rodriguez, 2017; Wahyudin, 2017).

Challenges of PBLL in Teaching Speaking

Along with the contribution of using projects in the English language classroom and the benefits of the PBLL method to promote oral skills, this learner-centered approach poses several challenges. First, it is reported to be time -consuming and effort -demanding by both students and teachers (Al- Nouh et al., 2015; Kavlu, 2017; Meng & Wang, 2011; Zhang, 2015). Secondly, some students find it difficult to adapt to the teacher being a facilitator rather than a sole provider of knowledge and to adjust to the idea of having choice rather than being assigned with a rigid framework (Beckett, 2005; Beckett & Slater, 2005; Kim, 2015; Zhang, 2015). Likewise, some teachers are

reluctant to abandon traditional textbooks in favor of alternative resources that promote PBLL (Doherty & Eyring, 2006; Petersen & Nassaji, 2016). At the other extreme, teachers do not always realize that even though learners are meant to be more autonomous, they still need to be available to provide guidance and scaffolding at every stage (Brook & Wilson, 2014; Zhang, 2015). Kavlu (2017) also mentions that teachers sometimes neglect to pre-plan the project procedures due to insufficient training in PBLL implementation.

Collaborative group work is also mentioned in the literature as a challenge for both the learners and the teachers. Some students find it difficult to collaborate and negotiate with their team members and feel that the disproportionate division of labor within a group is unfair. (Zhang, 2015). Thus, the requirement for teamwork often increases stress level (Charttrakul, 2009; Kim, 2015). Collaboration is also challenging for teachers as they may not always completely understand the group dynamics. Teachers may not be aware of disagreements and the levels of contribution of each teammate. Discrepancies in the project participants' input might lead to unrealistic and misguided assessments (Grossman et al., 2019; Kavlu, 2017; Spring, 2021).

Further obstacles to the effective implementation of PBLL are the use of the mother tongue rather than the target language for group interaction and constricting L2 solely for the construction of the final product (Eguchi & Eguchi, 2006; Miller & Hafner, 2015; Zhang, 2015); inadequate or insufficient feedback from the teacher or the peers (Chuang, 2011); misunderstanding or disregard of the project instructions (Leichsenring, 2010); big class sizes (Kim, 2015; Simpson, 2011) and a high rate of student absenteeism and plagiarism (Kim, 2015).

Teachers' role

Teachers hold a major role in project-based learning implementation.They need to find a fine balance between being involved in their students' work and transferring the responsibility for the learning process and outcomes to the learners. Teachers play the role of project managers planning and organizing the course with effective learning activities, creating a work schedule and structure, using the collaborative learning approach and dealing with team members, helping to collate sources, and managing project changes (Murphy & Mahoney 2005; Kirschner et al., 2006; Pan et al., 2019; Pollard, 2012; Turner & Muller, 2003). They also control and monitor their students' efforts by providing scaffolding, which can take the form of pre-designed and pre-planned pedagogical activities or acute intervention (Saye & Brush, 2002; Shin & Song, 2016). Teachers deconstruct complex tasks to make them more manageable, model cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, and divide the project into phases (Ertmer & Glazewski, 2019; Van de Pol et al., 2010). In addition, they are engaged in a continuous dialogue with the students probing their comprehension of the learning experiences (Prince & Felder, 2007) and intervening in supportive ways (Murphy & Mahoney, 2005; Kirschner et al., 2006).

On the other hand, while teachers function as content experts and manage classroom procedures, they must leave room for self-directed learning. Teachers serve as facilitators (Clapper, 2010; Ertmer & Simons, 2006) and motivators, encouraging their students to engage in learning activities (e.g., Harun et al., 2012). They grant their

learners responsibility for their learning experiences. They provide for learner autonomy, allowing students to make choices, explore learning opportunities and select learning strategies (Belland, 2011; Dole et al., 2017; Ertmer & Glazewski, 2019; Van de Pol et al., 2010).

Regardless of how difficult it may be, it is crucial that teachers keep the fine line between managing the project and allowing students the latitude to construct their own learning experiences. This is underscored by Spring (2020b; 2021), who has shown that students who aren't properly engaged in the project work or who fail to complete proper scaffolding show less improvement than their peers that do. However, PBLL instructors don't always understand their role in implementing this method, leading to confusion in teaching and ineffectiveness in learning (Bradley-Levine et al., 2010; Shpeizer, 2019). Furthermore, even when teachers have a firm comprehension of the role they need to play in PBLL, they often don't manage to rise to the challenge. Bradley-Levine et al. (2010) found that teachers struggled to redefine their role in the classroom and sometimes resorted to the traditional teacher-centered model. Additionally, constraints of time and schedule were often mentioned as an inhibition to optimal execution of their role (Al-Nouh et al., 2015; Bradley-Levine et al., 2010; Kavlu, 2017; Meng & Wang, 2011; Zhang, 2015).

Teachers' beliefs and perceptions determine their decisions and classroom behavior (Kim et al., 2013; Richardson, 1996; Rico & Ertmer, 2015; Valcke et al., 2010; Voet & De Wever, 2016). Therefore, teachers' perception of their role in PBLL is critical for its success. While research mainly addressed learners' attitudes to the PBLL method, teachers' opinions of this pedagogical tool have been largely neglected. Therefore, the study introduced here will focus on lecturers' perception of PBLL in teaching speaking. The main research question of this study is: What are EPIC lecturers' perceptions of implementing PBLL to teach speaking skills? More specifically, how do EPIC lecturers perceive their role in the process of PBLL application, and does that correspond with the role outlined in PBLL literature? How do they experience the results and challenges of this pedagogic approach? What are the lecturers' views of the future use of PBLL to foster speaking skills?

Method

Field

The research was carried out in the spring term of the 2021/2022 academic year at Ashkelon Academic College, an academic institution in Israel's southern periphery. The general English proficiency level of the students in the region is weak, and their conversational skills are relatively poor and limited. Upon enrollment, the students are required to take a placement test in English and most of them enter the lowest level courses (A1 level aligned with Common European Framework of Reference levels). In elementary and intermediate (A1, A2, and B1) level courses, students engage in speaking activities, but these do not assume the form of PBLL. The average class size is 25-30 students.

The transition to using the PBLL method to teach speaking skills at the highest level (B2) occurred in the spring term of the 2021-2022 academic year. The speaking project took the form of a debate in which pairs of students discussed a controversial issue in

front of their classmates. The debate was chosen as a form of PBLL as it is essential that college graduates are equipped with tools for authentic dialogue regarding their opinion on various issues. The debate format for this course conforms to the core principles of PBLL. First, it is collaborative in nature as students work in pairs. Secondly, it allows choice since the students choose their topic, sources, arguments, and partners. Additionally, it promotes the use of higher-order thinking skills when students plan the course of their work, structure their debate, research relevant sources and design a PPT. Furthermore, the role of teachers is to provide scaffolding, guide and monitor the learners' work and deliver ongoing feedback. Finally, the process of working on a project culminates in an exclusive final product that the pairs exhibit in front of their classmates.

In preparation, the lecturers learned about the PBLL principles and application in a series of practical workshops and were provided with specific guidelines and scaffolding materials that they were to deliver to their students. Lecturers were introduced to the major principles of PBLL: scaffolding, learner choice and autonomy, teacher mediation and facilitation, ongoing and final feedback delivery, collaboration, and authentic communication. Following the workshops, the lecturers were introduced to the stages of PBLL implementation adopted from Stoller's ten-step model for developing project work (2002). Moreover, possible scaffolding activities aimed at facilitating learners' comprehension of the debate project were outlined, and the instructors were equipped with all the necessary materials for project execution.

A semester at the institution consists of thirteen four-hour meetings. The lecturers were instructed to introduce debate in the second lesson by showing videos of debates, providing a debate outline, asking some students to present impromptu debates, and delivering corrective feedback in real-time. Students also received debate-oriented vocabulary with useful phrases and transition words and a file with detailed instructions for the debate project. By the third lesson, students had to be divided into pairs, and each pair needed to fill out a digital mind map with their topic (they were provided with a list of twenty negotiable issues, but could choose a different one) and three intuitive arguments and counterarguments. By the fourth lesson, the pairs had to read, watch or listen to three to five academic sources on the controversial issue they have chosen and update their arguments and counterarguments in the mind map. The lecturers were instructed to provide feedback on the students' efforts evaluating their sources and arguments.

At this stage, students were handed self-check questionnaires corresponding to the grading rubrics. The questionnaire referred to the structure of the debate, the use of debate terminology, clarity and relevance of the arguments, the concept of responding to the partner's arguments prior to introducing a counter-argument, proper grammar, proper and varied vocabulary, fluency, and body language. Students were also requested to create a Power Point presentation to accompany their oral product. For the following four weeks, the pairs collaborated and worked on their presentations in and outside of class. In class, the teachers were asked to guide and mentor students' efforts throughout the process of their work on the projects and provide feedback. The last four lessons were devoted to presentations of the projects. Learners were assessed both on

the process (introduction of the two mind maps, the sources, and their work on the debate in class) and the final product.

The English courses at the B2 level are structured in units, each revolving around a theme. Each unit practices the four skills as well as strategies, grammar, and vocabulary. The speaking component of each unit was a debate allowing the students further practice of this format.

Participants

Eight EPIC lecturers teaching B2-level courses were approached and agreed to participate in the research. All participants had been teaching at the college between 10 and 25 years and thus had experienced the transition to a more interactive pedagogy. It was the respondents' first experience implementing the PBLL method.

The participants were interviewed at the end of the semester after they had implemented the PBLL approach to teach speaking skills. The subjects are referred to by pseudonyms in the findings and the discussion sections: Nora, Beth, Daphnie, John, Richard, Anna, Jane, and Fiona.

Ethics

I approached the respondents in the middle of the semester and informed them that the interviews would be conducted at the end of the semester after the students presented their products. I briefly described the research and introduced the research question. The subjects were informed that their responses might be published, but their identities would not be disclosed as the researcher would use pseudonyms when referring to their reports. They were asked to sign a consent form and be granted permission to record the interviews. The respondents were notified that the interviews might take up to an hour and a half and would be conducted face-to-face. Consent from the college ethics committee was received prior to the interviews, and the interviewees were made aware of this.

It was evident that the respondents perceived the interviews as another opportunity to refine the pedagogical procedures and thus outlined numerous suggestions for revisions in the future implementation of PBLL, as described in the findings chapter. In addition, the subjects were informed that the intervention would not affect their employment. Furthermore, in the English department, we endeavor to create an atmosphere of collaboration, openness, and acceptance of novel pedagogical ideas for optimal teaching and learning. Therefore, even though I am the superior of the respondents, the department's culture of acceptance suggests that the subjects' responses were frank and likely trustworthy.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collecting methodology for this research since this instrument enables examining experiences and perceptions (Patton, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013). First, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to obtain optimal information from the respondents. Second, this method allows a considerable degree of flexibility because researchers may refer to the interviewees' responses and ask for further clarification and elaboration.

Most interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, with the longest continuing for an hour and forty minutes. In addition to audio-recording the interviews, the researcher took notes while the participants responded to the questions to refer to their answers as the interview unfolded. Data transcriptions were done immediately after each interview to help the researcher in data recording. Prior to the beginning of the interviews, the researcher performed a trial interview with a non-participating lecturer to examine the quality of the questions and further revise them based on the insights gained from this experience. In addition, as each interview was conducted on a separate day, I reflected on each interview, and interview techniques were refined for the following session. For example, one question that two respondents poorly understood was rephrased to make it more comprehensible, and I went back and got this information properly from previously interviewed participants.

This research endeavors to understand lecturer perceptions of the PBLL approach to teaching speaking in higher education. Thus, the interview questions addressed the PBLL procedures employed by the lecturers, the respondents' view of their role in PBLL application, their perception of the results and challenges of implementing this method, and their perspective on its potential future use.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was employed to create thematic coding of the information, following Charmaz (2017), Gay et al. (2012), Corbin & Strauss (2014), and Mason (2017). First, I thoroughly reviewed the transcripts to and familiarized myself with the data. During the next stage, I examined each transcribed interview and labeled the main themes and ideas. I further compared the data of the respondents, identified the differences and similarities, and labeled them with codes. Some codes were compatible with the literature (e.g., lecturers' report of the effect of PBLL on students' language skills) and others were unexpected (e.g., lecturers' self-criticism). Subsequently, similar codes were grouped into categories. The researcher used the codes and categories to outline the findings. At the final interpreting stage, the researcher compared the findings of the current research with previous relevant literature and interpreted the unique results of this study.

Findings

The findings revealed that lecturers favorably perceived the transition to teaching speaking skill using PBLL. Their responses demonstrated their opinions of the results and challenges of implementing the PBLL approach. The lecturers unanimously mentioned the students' ability to present in front of an audience in English as the most outstanding achievement. This accomplishment corresponded with enhancing social-emotional competencies such as self-confidence, sense of pride, attitude, engagement, and motivation. Among other contributions of the PBLL, respondents referred to the refinement of speaking skills (even though minimal) and language skills. The obstacles reported by the respondents included the difficulty in eliciting speech from students, the extensive amount of time required for proper preparation for project execution as well as the time deficit in monitoring the process of students' work. Additionally, they referred to students' struggle with understanding various project components, the delicate aspects of student collaboration, and the faults in the evaluation system.

Lecturers' perceptions of their role in the project ranged from minimal involvement to considerable intervention.

Transition to PBLL

The general approach to teaching students' speaking using the PBLL method was encouraging. All the subjects thought it should be implemented in the future. For example, Anna said, "**Absolutely yes!** […] **they are managing**; they're struggling but **they're doing it**!" And Daphnie's response was equally enthusiastic, "**It is wonderful! It is here to stay**, in my opinion. I think **it is good** what we are doing."

Perceived Results and Challenges

      Results. Along with the overall positive responses to PBLL in speaking, lecturers outlined the results and the challenges of the project. All the lecturers agreed that the most prominent achievement of the presentation was the very fact that the students spoke in English in front of their classmates and the lecturer. Nora's account clearly summarized this shared opinion: "We are mostly **interested in** them **opening their mouth and speaking**. We are just **thrilled if they speak English** […] I am **not looking for accuracy or improving their level of speaking**. I am just **happy that they speak**." And Anna's words supplement this ultimate accomplishment with the students' point of view. "The most significant result is that **they speak!** […] When they finish, I tell them, '**You did it**! It's OK; **you managed**, **you spoke in English** […] They said: '**We managed to do it**!'" This achievement is particularly significant as the students in the institution are mostly low-level learners for whom speaking poses a real challenge. Thus, engaging in a debate in a foreign language is a genuine accomplishment for these learners.

This major attainment celebrated by the lecturers is tightly associated with another result of the PBLL in speaking enhancement of social-emotional competencies. In this regard, lecturers discussed the effect of the project on students' attitudes, level of engagement, and motivation, as well as their confidence in speaking in a foreign language and a sense of pride and accomplishment associated with the final product. Lecturers reported that students' attitudes to the project grew more positive over time. Initially, most students felt scared to present in front of an audience, but as the semester progressed, they gained more confidence.

Another positive quality in the lecturers' reports was the students' sense of pride and accomplishment resulting from their products. John explicitly addressed this notion in the following response, "The idea that they weren't aware of what they can do [..]It is **this awareness that they can achieve something**." The same impression is obtained from the lecturers' unanimous praise of the students' final products. They referred to the fact that the students precisely followed the structure and the core principles of the debate, practiced extensively, designed visually appealing presentations, and introduced interesting and relevant arguments. Nora related, "**It's very positive**. I was quite doubtful, and **a lot of students have surprised me. Some of the results are amazing! I have had some amazing debates even by weaker students […] I have been surprised by the level of speaking**."

The gradual improvement in attitude and the boost in students' self-confidence seem to have corresponded with higher levels of engagement and motivation on the learners' part. This is well expressed in Jane's response, "It's funny that all the protesters at the beginning of the semester are the ones who are now **fighting to get their voice in there** […] Look how far we have come!"

While lecturers were unanimous in applauding students' public presentations, few lecturers reported improvement in speaking, and most expressed reservation as for the learners' enhancement of concrete oral skills. Daphnie, for example, said, "I think they **can speak better**. They **improve their speaking ability**…I am **not sure** they work so much as to **improve specific skills**." Only two subjects felt that students did improve particular speaking skills due to the project. John mentioned that the more motivated students improved their pronunciation and fluency, and Jane mentioned that students learned to vary their intonation.

Lecturers also referred to refining of other language skills due to the project. Some mentioned that the project contributed to learners' proficiency in reading, writing, and listening. Others related to better mastery of grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary. Moreover, respondents addressed the development of academic skills and study habits such as presentation skills, the capability to introduce an argumentative opinion, research skills, strategies of disagreeing in "a British way," and planning skills.

Challenges. Along with the overall positive results of the speaking projects, lecturers have outlined several challenges they encountered in the process of PBLL implementation. The most remarkable achievement of the project, i.e., the students' capability to speak in front of an audience, was also mentioned as the most prominent challenge of the PBLL implementation. In their responses, lecturers repeatedly referred to eliciting speech from students as the major difficulty. Respondents admitted that learners felt shy and uncomfortable speaking in a foreign language; they were anxious and had stage fright. Since students were obligated to speak, they sometimes resorted to reading from the page or learning by heart, which Beth referred to as "reading from one's mind," both contradict the desired goal of authentic use of speech.

A lack of time was also mentioned as a constraint of the project. Lecturers contended that preparation for performing the projects in class required extensive planning and organization. Additionally, introducing the project was said to be time-consuming. As Beth put it, "It's very **time -consuming** in class because I dedicated **two whole lessons** to it." Moreover, several lecturers felt that the actual presentations required long class hours and often came at the expense of other skills. Another time-related issue addressed by Nora and Fiona pertained to the need to monitor students' processes and progress. Fiona summarized the discrepancy between the theory of PBLL and its implementation, "According to the idea of PBLL, students should show the teacher their product ahead of time for the teacher to do some editing. **There should be time for working with the students**, **sitting with them, and correcting their mistakes**." Lack of time was also mentioned by these two teachers as responsible for limited practice opportunities.

Another difficulty John, Fiona and Nora addressed was students' struggle to encompass the meaning of various components of the project. John reported, for example, that his students found it complex to grasp the notion of grading rubrics. Fiona related,

> *In the beginning, I showed them an explanation video, and I showed them a model of a debate presentation and a mind map. **I thought it was enough, but it wasn't. It was new for them. There were a lot of misunderstandings, a lot of confusion**.*

Fiona discussed the complete novelty of the collaborative nature of the project as yet another hurdle. Other problematic aspects of working in pairs were also mentioned. Anna said that two students who had no partner had to pair up even though there was no connection between them, and Fiona admitted that sometimes the discrepancy in the level of the partners discriminated against the more competent student as he did most of the work. In addition, she said that the students' overall impression was often less favorable in such a case. Furthermore, Richard and Nora referred to the fact that pairing was more difficult when there was an uneven number of students in the course.

Nora also raised the grading method as a burdensome issue. She said,

> ***You have to simultaneously look at your students and write***. *In the grading sheet I put the ticks, but I also write their arguments, because when I go home, and I want to grade it I need to remember. It takes me **20 minutes to grade every pair***.

She mentioned that she aspired to be very clear about her grading to be able to explain it to the students. Additionally, she referred to a lack of uniformity in grading. "The other thing is I am still **very unsure about an appropriate grade. We don't do it with precision**…Even though we have rubrics, **we don't have uniformity**."

Lecturers' perception of their role

Lecturers' views of their role referred to two major PBLL principles: scaffolding and feedback delivery. Lecturers varied in their perception of their role in PBLL implementation and could be broadly divided into two lecturer profiles. The first category consists of five lecturers who recounted extensive involvement in their students' projects, reflected in continuous scaffolding and elaborate accentuation of structure. These respondents also reported that they had put much emphasis on the ongoing and final feedback delivery. The other three subjects, on the other hand, described their role as minimal, with little scaffolding and reduced emphasis on structure. In addition, they mostly focused on summative rather than formative feedback.

The lecturers who reported more involvement perceived their role as facilitators granting a well-organized framework for the project as well as gradual guidance. They provided their students with a very structured model of working on the project. Beth explained, "I think the fact that it's **structured** is the most important thing because it helps them focus and do it correctly."

These subjects reported their persistent and systematic use of mind maps to support students' work with structure and organization. Nora made special accommodations to make the materials more accessible for her students. "I **did record my explanations**.

And I **created a grid on Moodle** that said- everything you need to know about the debate." By the same token, when asked about his role in the project, John immediately answered, "Facilitator!" and clarified, "It's more a **managerial and organizational** thing. You need to **focus**. You need to **manage the people so they can get to where you want them,** and you need to be **very structured**."

This group of lecturers also felt they had a major responsibility in creating scaffolded instruction. Beth's words reflect the prominence of scaffolding in the learning process. "I always think that I should **teach them how to learn,** and this is the main course thing because when you give them **scaffolding**, you **teach them how to learn** […] So, the teacher is a mediator." In response to the question about her role in the project, Nora voiced a similar view, "So, a **facilitator, an explainer, a mediator** to some degree. My major role **in the beginning- was building the process**. So, my role is also the **role of materials we provide to scaffold**." Jane also defined her role as a facilitator, but her involvement in the project was more elaborate than that of other lecturers. She decided that the students would work on their projects in class time while she closely monitored their progress, corrected errors, assisted with devising the arguments, and even probed students for suitable choice of a debatable topic.

The five lecturers also emphasized the need for continuous feedback. They practiced debates in class on a regular basis and corrected their students' errors in real time. They all asked a couple of stronger students to present first and used this meaningful learning opportunity to correct mistakes. They drew the learners' attention to structure and content-related errors, and Jane also addressed vocabulary variation (the need to use synonyms), intonation, eye contact, and body language. Moreover, they mentioned the utility of a self-check questionnaire as another opportunity for feedback in designing the debate. Jane's response illustrates the significance of continual feedback.

"I think **twice** throughout the process. I asked them to show me what they have been doing. I put my nose in **a few times**. I also offer them to come to my office hours and **practice,** and I give them **feedback** on improving their debates."

Unlike the five lecturers mentioned above, the other three lecturers perceived their role in the process of PBLL as minor and provided less structure and scaffolding for the learners. Richard's description of the process implies minimal scaffolding. After the students have chosen their topics

> *We do **two or three lessons** emphasizing the OREO [Opinion, Reason, Explanation/Example, Opinion] structure. Reason-effect, cause-effect. However…reason-effect. Do it in a very structured way. Now you do it. Ideally, if I had time to check it, I would do one more stage- after the writing with connectors, I would ask them to submit it […] They **didn't use the mind map**.*

Even though the respondent referred to "structure," these two or three lessons seem to be the only scaffolding he provided, leaving the students to work on their own, as indicated by the following, "There are students who **didn't talk to me** at all, they **did their own presentations**."

In the same vein, Daphnie's response to the question regarding her role in PBLL demonstrates her minimal involvement in the process of the students' work.

> *They are advanced. They **should be independent**. Only the weak ones needed more help, and **even those who are very weak managed, mostly by themselves. Most of them didn't need me. I didn't work closely with all of them**. […] **They are grown up people who know what they want**.*

And Fiona explicitly admitted that she perceived her role as "minor," granting students almost complete autonomy.

> *My role was **minor**. I just gave them the instructions, told them what to do and **that's it**. They chose the topic by themselves. I **didn't interfere** in the process of choosing the topic. Of course, I helped them a little with the debate mind map and the presentations. Butactually, **everything was on the shoulders of the students**, and it was supposed to be like that because it should be an individual product.*

These lecturers provided no formative feedback and mentioned the notion of correcting mistakes only marginally. In addition, they failed to refer their students to the self-check questionnaire.

An association was found between the participants' views of their role and their perception of the PBLL results. The first group of the "involved" lecturers regarded the PBLL as contributing to skills beyond the English class, while the other three respondents focused on the immediate gains of the project. Thus, lecturers in the first category asserted that they had influenced their students' perspectives and life skills. In this regard, in his attempt to ease students' anxiety about presenting in front of an audience, John introduced the concept of a growth mindset so that the students regard the PBLL experience as a take-away for life. He tried to convince the learners that overcoming an obstacle will contribute to their personal growth.

> *Some of them said they don't want to speak in front of the class, that they have this stage fright. My approach was to come and tell them […] 'sometimes it is a matter of **going out of your comfort zone and doing something that you are going to remember and that is going to give you such a good feeling and when you go for the next step, it will give you self-esteem and courage for the next time you will have to speak in front of people**. And maybe **next time when you need to overcome some obstacle you will remember** that you said you couldn't and now you could […] Think if you want **this experience which might be very good for you**.'*

By the same token, Beth stated the PBLL is an opportunity to teach students study skills and habits.

> *I always think that I should **teach them how to learn,** and this is the main course thing because when you give them **scaffolding**, when you **teach them how to learn**, how they should understand things, how to extract knowledge from it how to integrate the material you have accomplished **your role as a teacher**.*

And Jane referred to a toolkit students acquire due to the PBLL.

> *They now have **tools they continue on with**, whether it is the confidence, the ability to build a persuasive argument [...] this debate project has long lasting effects for them as students both in English and in Hebrew [...] Some students said to me it gave them confidence to speak in Hebrew in front of an audience. [...] I really think that it's **the most practical thing that they will take with them**.*

Suggestion for future implementation of PBLL

Broadly, the suggestions the teachers provided may be categorized into teacher-oriented and learner-oriented. Teacher-oriented recommendations referred to the need to continue obtaining knowledge regarding PBLL. Beth, Nora and Jane expressed the necessity to gain a better understanding of various aspects of PBLL. Beth felt that as the most significant challenge of the project is the eliciting speech from students, lecturers should have a workshop to better understand students' psychology and to learn methods that would encourage them to speak. Nora, on the other hand, suggested that formal learning regarding grading would benefit the lecturers. And Jane expressed willingness to teach other lecturers regarding the effective adaptations she had performed.

Learner-oriented suggestions were four-fold. First, several lecturers proposed refining the strategies for delivering project explanations to the students. Jane proposed adding a PowerPoint Presentation as a sample of the final product expected of the students. Nora maintained there was a need to add "more clarity in explaining the process and practicing the whole process." And Fiona stressed the potential contribution of introducing communicative activities at earlier levels as a preparation for the debate project at the exit level. She also proposed several ideas for introducing a debate, such as showing YouTube videos with authentic debates or exposing the learners to debates by other non-native speaking students.

Furthermore, lecturers proposed several directions aimed at optimizing and authenticating students' engagement with the debate project. Fiona suggested,

> *We should give them much more time to practice in class and maybe ask them to set Zoom meetings at home to practice with each other first without the audience [...] In addition, maybe we should **adopt a real-debate framework with more students participating** [...], And the audience could give them feedback. It's a real game.*

Moreover, several subjects suggested that the project should lead to a more elaborate acquisition of language skills. In this regard, Fiona and Nora referred to further enhancing listening comprehension skills. Nora maintained that the listeners should take notes during the debates and answer the lecturer's questions. Fiona contended that students should be asked to write an opinion paragraph on a presentation of their choice. Richard proposed increasing the number of sources that students are required to read to enhance their vocabulary. He also thought that if learners were required to add an infographic and explain it, it would lead to further enrichment of their lexicon.

Finally, respondents expressed versatile ideas for future improvement of feedback delivery. John suggested involving students in formulating the criteria for their work evaluation. Nora proposed that students should be asked to share the self-check questionnaire with the lecturer prior to the presentation. Richard felt that the rubrics were too generic and lecturers needed to emphasize the individual work and effort of the learner in their evaluation. In addition, Nora articulated the idea of giving the learners "some positive verbal feedback".

Discussion

The findings presented here show that lecturers favorably perceived the PBLL method of teaching speaking. Similar to previous studies, this research suggests that among the positive results of the PBLL implementation is students' improvement of language skills, such as vocabulary, grammar, writing, reading, and listening (Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010; Alsamani & Daif-Allah, 2016; Brooks & Wilson, 2014; Girard et al., 2011; Motaei, 2014; Vaca Torres & Gomez Rodriguez, 2017; Wahyudin, 2017; Zhang, 2015). Additionally, the beneficial effect of PBLL on students' affective properties such as attitude, motivation, and confidence reported in earlier studies is confirmed (Anuyahong, 2015; Brooks & Wilson, 2014; Dewi, 2015; Girard et al., 2011; Gurbuz & Cabaroglu, 2021; Kassem, 2018; Rochmahwati, 2016; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Yang, 2016; Zhang, 2015).

The perceived challenges of PBLL, as reflected in this study, also conform to the literature. These include the time-consuming nature of the project in both the organization and execution stages (Al- Nouh et al., 2015; Kavlu, 2017; Meng & Wang, 2011; Zhang, 2015), students' difficulty in properly understanding the project requirements (Leichsenring, 2010) and complexities of student collaboration (Charttrakul, 2009; Kavlu, 2017; Kim, 2015; Zhang, 2015).

However, contrary to many other studies that mention enhancement in speaking as one of the achievements of the speaking project (Anuyahong, 2015; Dewi, 2016; Dooly & Masats, 2010; Fauzi, 2016; Rochmahwati, 2016; Sirisrimangkorn, 2018, 2021; Worawong et al., 2019), this research suggests that the PBLL method did not necessarily improve students' speaking skills (even though the results are only speculative as there was no formal measurement of the speaking skills). Instead, respondents were unanimous in their enthusiastic view of the very act of students presenting in front of their classmates as the most remarkable result of this pedagogical novelty.

The students' overcoming the initial fear and anxiety and publicly presenting their products implies that enormous energies and effort were invested in this process. It is, therefore, apparent that as immense resources were channeled to delivering a speech in a foreign language, learners had less cognitive capacity to refine speaking skills. This possible explanation is in line with Cognitive Load theory, according to which memory retrieval may be impaired if the brain is required to perform several cognitive tasks simultaneously (Fischer et al., 2007; Sisakhti et al., 2021). Thus, a foreign language learner may experience cognitive overload when faced with the need to perform several language-related functions simultaneously (Abdulaal et al., 2022; Hornay, 2021; Lin & Chen, 2006; Sweller et al., 2007).

Alternately, reports of the lecturers' insufficient expertise due to the novelty of the project may also explain the inadequate speech enhancement of the students. It is, therefore, possible that as the learners gain more confidence in speaking and the lecturers grow more proficient in planning and executing the project, the development of oral skills will be more accentuated. To this end, faculty development meetings, where department members share ideas, could benefit the curriculum-wide implementation of PBLL.

Another divergence from the PBLL theory pertains to the subjects' perception of their role in the project. While five lecturers' views conformed to the role outlined in the literature, the perception of the other three differed from the research. In line with the literature (e.g., Dole et al., 2017; Ertmer & Glazewski, 2019; Pan et al., 2019; Shin & Song, 2016), the lecturers in the first category served as both project managers and facilitators providing students with scaffolding, monitoring their progress, channeling their efforts towards the desired outcome and providing structure and feedback while maintaining student autonomy. These lecturers reported takeaways transcending linguistic and affective attainments. However, the view of the other group of respondents regarding their role deviated from the role outlined in the PBLL research. These lecturers provided minimal scaffolding and limited guidance and feedback. They accentuated learner independence, disregarding their role as mediators and facilitators. Even though they regarded the PBLL favorably and praised students' performance, they reported no further gain from the debate projects.

This could be attributed to the deficient nature of the minimal guidance approach, which places a disproportional emphasis on learner autonomy belittling teacher mediation (Kirschner et al., 2006; Martella et al., 2020; Mayer, 2004). Without proper scaffolding, learners cannot retrieve previously learned information from long-term memory; thus, their learning is ineffective and inefficient. Spring (2020b), for example, found that students who did not properly undergo out-of-class scaffolding showed far fewer gains in speaking proficiency than their peers. Sweller et al. (2007) assert that in project-based learning, there is "a need for the major instructional emphasis to be on direct, explicit instruction […] Weak guidance forces learners to rely on weak problem-solving strategies [which] have been known to impose a heavy, extraneous cognitive load" (p. 119).

Additionally, the gap between a teacher's role, as mentioned in the PBLL literature, and the latter lecturers' perception of their role could be explained by the Diffusion of Innovation theory, according to which some individuals in a system adopt a new idea more readily than others (Rogers, 2003). While it is evident that these lecturers were at least partially familiar with PBLL principles, they failed to put this knowledge into practice.

Note, for example, the discrepancy between Fiona's theoretical understanding of the idea of PBLL and her faulty perception of her role as "minor," as mentioned above.

> *The idea of project-based approach is to make **students creatively process** the information they find online, **apply and use it and produce something of their own** […] The most important principle is **independent, creative learning**. There should be some **scaffolding** on*

*the part of the teacher, but the focus is on independence and creativity [...] According to the idea of PBL students should show the teacher their product ahead of time for the **teacher to do some editing**. There should be time for **working with the students, sitting with them and correcting their mistakes**.*

Unfortunately, Fiona's familiarity with the fine line between involvement and leaving room for self-directed learning did not translate into a compatible implementation of this method. The three lecturers in the second category placed too much weight on the students' autonomy. This gap particularly stands out when contrasted with the tireless efforts by the "involved" lecturers to keep to the principles of PBLL and to get back on track when diverging from these principles.

Nora's description clearly indicates her continuous self-reflection. She admitted that she had followed the guidelines "**not in a way that was strict enough. I wasn't overseeing it well enough** that the students really got the idea of what it was they were supposed to do […] **it really wasn't working so I had to backtrack.**"

When asked about her role, she responded, "So, a facilitator, an explainer, a **mediator-not enough**, **I know of this role**. I think it does take a huge leap on their part to figure it out. Not just for them, but for me as well […] **Mediator to some degree**." It is clear she made every effort to conform to the PBLL instructor's role as introduced prior to the implementation of the project.

The findings of this research indicate that for some lecturers, the initial PBLL training was insufficient for optimal implementation of the project. It is, therefore, recommended to schedule ongoing teamwork and share ideas regarding PBLL implementation. Faculty meetings, in which members discuss their pedagogical insights regarding PBLL as well as introduce the challenges and think of methods to refine the project procedures, may be highly beneficial for curriculum-wide implementation of PBLL. At these department meetings, lecturers may decide on department-wide tools, such as scaffolding strategies (Spring, 2020a; Sweller et al., 2007) or alternative evaluation methods such as the peer-based participation scores (Britton et al., 2017; Spring, 2021).

Conclusions

The utmost accomplishment of the speaking project, as reported by the respondents, was the fact that initially reluctant students overcame the emotional hurdles and performed speech in front of an audience. However, most lecturers felt that students did not improve their speaking skills. It is possible that instructors might feel differently if they gain more competence in the PBLL methodology and assume a more active role in the explicit teaching of speaking skills once the students develop increased confidence in speech.

This study was carried out only during one academic semester. In addition, the sample size was quite small as it comprised only of highly experienced lecturers. Moreover, the research was conducted in a sole academic institution in a specific region of Israel.

Future research should focus on a larger and more versatile population of lecturers, possibly in several institutions from different regions in Israel and overseas, to obtain a

more comprehensive overview of the lecturers' perceptions of PBLL to teach and evaluate the speaking skills. In addition, researchers may consider incorporating a quantitative element to measure students' progress in speaking. Finally, action research may best meet the goal of following the process of PBLL implementation over several academic semesters. It would be intriguing to examine whether lecturers' gaining more competence in the PBLL methodology affected their perception of their role as more active and contributed to explicit instruction of speaking skills. In addition, it would be interesting to explore whether gaining increased confidence in speech impacted the speaking skills of the students.

This study provides some insights for the future implementation of PBLL in enhancing speaking in schools and higher education. The elaborate account of the lecturers' responses along with data analysis and interpretation, may serve as a practical framework for curriculum designers and educational policymakers. The inspirational results of this research may stimulate both EFL teachers and EPIC courses lecturers to integrate PBLL in speaking into their curricula. Since the Israeli CHE (2019) emphasizes communication as a major goal of English language teaching, the educational and affective attainments of the model outlined here may encourage other English departments to adopt it. If this pedagogical system is effective, it may serve as a cornerstone and a model for further implementation in additional academic institutions.

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