

Improving Nurse Students' Spoken English Skill through Problem-Based Learning

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Abstract

The purposes of this research were to explain to what extent of PBL could improve nurse students' spoken English skill, and to find out factors involved in the improvement. The participants of this research were nurse students of 2006 registered year of Nursing Program of Medicine Faculty at Andalas University. The methodology of this research was Classroom Action Research consisting of three cycles. Each cycle involved planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Based on the research finding, after giving speaking task and speaking test during the first cycle, their spoken English skill was still fair. Therefore, the writer needed to continue the research to the second cycle. From the speaking test at the second cycle, it could be known that their spoken English skill was good, while from the speaking task, their spoken English skill has not good yet, so that the writer continued the research to the third cycle. During this third cycle, it seemed that their spoken English skill for the speaking task and the speaking test was better. In this case they have had correct accent, less mistakes in grammar, appropriate word choices, fluent speaking, and better understanding to the discussed topics. The factors known to be involved to the improvement were hidden spoken English skills, scenarios' understanding, the availability of references, preparation, remembering ability, braveness, class atmosphere, and motivation.

Key words: PBL, Action Research, and Spoken English Skill.

Introduction

At the present time and in the coming of the future, nurse students and the nurse to be should be literate in English skills especially the spoken one because the requirements for jobs will require professional nurses who are fluent in English spoken skill. Based on the researcher's experience in teaching English for the last A class of 2006 registered students that some of the students will be the participants in this research, he concludes that those students still had the low spoken English skill. The indicators were, when they spoke English during discussion and presentation, they did not speak fluently, used the inappropriate grammar, had lack of vocabularies, had difficulty in conveying the message because of lack of background knowledge, read the text instead of making a speech, mispronounced the words, got embarrassed, and hesitated because of lack of confidence.

The researcher tries to reflect to the previous class and he concludes that there were internal and external factors that could cause the low spoken English skill of the students. The internal factors were the factors that come from the students themselves, such as having low motivation in studying English, consequently they did not prepare to speak before coming to the class and had little practice of spoken English out of the class. The external factors came from the lecturer, in this case the researcher himself about the method of English teaching that he had applied to the students. The researcher at that time focused his teaching and learning to the students' presentation and discussion about aspects of English grammar in nursing example contexts. Probably that method made the class became not fun, not challenging, not explorative, not natural, and lecturer centered-learning that made the students had less enthusiastic to be active in speaking English.

Theory Background

There have been many theories about speaking skill by many scholars. Hughes (1983) divides speaking skill into five proficiencies – accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and

comprehension. Burkart (1996) says that the speaking skill requires areas of knowledge. First, mechanics (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabularies). Second, functions (transactions and interaction, and third social and cultural roles of participants). Last, according to Harmer (2001: 269) the skill to speak fluently presupposes not only a knowledge of the language features, but also the skill to process information and language on the spot.

Regarding to concepts of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Brook & Brook (1993) say that from a constructivist view, learning is the process of constructing knowledge in social environment. In addition, Brown (1989) and Lave & Wenger (1991) state that learning tasks should thus be embedded in the target context and require the kind of thinking that would be done in real life. Moreover, Cole & Engestrom (1993) and Salomon (1993) state that social partners also determine what and how someone learns. Furthermore, Spiro et al (1991) states that PBL is a learning methodology that encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning to develop their own learning and to develop a broad set of generic skills an attributs.

Method of the research

The type of this research is a classroom action research (CAR). Mc Niff, et al (1996:16) state that action research is an intervention in personal practice to bring about improvement and it has a special kind of research problem. Furthermore, Gay and Airasian (2000: 593) state that action research is a type of practitioner research used to improve the practitioner' practice; action implies doing or changing something. According to Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988), the implementation of classroom action research involves four steps. They are: 1) formulate the problem and plan the action, 2) do the action and observation monitoring, 3) reflect the result of observation, and 4) revise the planning for the next action.

The participants of this research are 12 (twelve students) of class A 2006 registered year. The researcher chooses the twelve of these students from thirty two total students in that class because of three reasons: 1) Their spoken skill was still low; 2) They had low motivation that was proved by less participation in spoken English during the previous class; 3) Their English grades from the previous class merely ranged from C to B-; and 4) The numbers of students in PBL's class is small (about 12 persons). The researcher also involves one of his friends as his collaborator who would help him to analyze and collect the data and draw conclusion about the students' skill progress and the condition of the class teaching and learning atmosphere found in each cycle.

This action research is conducted in form of cycles. For one cycle, there are three scenarios. The scenario titles for the planned three cycles are: for cycle one: *Peter Murphy with Urinary Tract Infection, Daniel with Epilepsy, Roger with Schizophrenia*; For cycle two: *A Premature Baby, Substance Abuse, Osteoporosis*; For cycle 3: *Breast Feeding, Stress, and Diarrhea*. There would be six meetings for one cycle because the implementation of PBL agenda for group meeting states the schedules are twice a week for one scenario. Every meeting is similar with two hours (2 x 45 minutes). If there is no significant improvement to the students' spoken English skill in the first cycle, so the researcher will continue the research to the next cycles (in this case, the researcher plans to have three cycles).

The PBL guiding procedure of this research is based on what Queen Mary University of London does. They can be described as follows:

Cycle 1

1. Planning
 - a. Making or finding three scenarios that are related to the nursing real practice and experience.
 - b. Designed group, the group consists often to twelve students
 - c. Determining PBL group roles, such as: the role of group leader, role of minutes-secretary, the role of scribe, the role of group member.
 - d. Setting the rule during the discussion
 - e. Preparing research instruments.

- f. Selecting a class for conducting the research.
- g. Looking for a collaborator and discussing with him what to do in the class.
- h. Asking consent to the head of Nursing Department.
- i. Making an agenda prior to each group meeting. The agenda should be followed systematically.

The agenda for the first group meeting is given below;

- Meeting commences
- Apologies for absence (only in very exceptional circumstances)
- Step 1: Explain unknown wording, statements, and concepts
- Step 2: Define the problem(s)
- Step 3: Brainstorm
- Step 4: Make a systematic inventory
- Step 5: Formulate self-study assignments
- Close the meeting

The agenda will be changed or altered depending on the progress of the case study. The following agenda is for the subsequent meetings:

- Meeting commences (assign meeting roles)
- Apologies for absence (only in very exceptional circumstances)
- Review the minutes of the last meeting to remind what should have been done
- Step 1: Report on self-study activities assigned at the last meeting
- Step 3: Brainstorm for new ideas
- Step 4: Make a systematic inventory
- Step 5: Make a final presentation as to the solution
- Close the meeting

2. Acting

The researcher acts what have been planned above with a collaborator. Prior to the starting of the case study, he checks the scheduled PBL timetable. Then he provides maintains good group briefing documents for students to read. During the case group meetings he ensures that a leader, minutes-secretary and scribe are selected, and they know their respective roles. He stimulates the conversation by asking open question (e.g. how ...? what ...? Why ...? Where ...? That will enable the group to explore the material in more depth. He supports the group learning process. He encourages less vocal members to participate. He maintains good group dynamics and resolves any significant disputes.

At the final meeting the researcher evaluates group performance. Then he reviews the PBL draft submission such as a presentation and report. At a subsequent meeting he gives feedback to students on their own contribution to the group. Last he gives spoken test evaluation to students to see whether there has been the improvement on their ability in spoken English.

3. Observing

- a) The researcher monitors the group of PBL learning activities by walking around or sitting at the back seat of the class.
- b) The collaborator observes the researcher during the process of discussion/presentation activities.
- c) The collaborator observes, takes notes, and records the students' spoken English activities during the process of learning.
- d) The researcher and the collaborator evaluate the activities by using evaluative instruments that have been prepared.

4. Reflecting

At the end of cycle one, in the process of answering the two formulations of the problem established in this research, the researcher and the collaborator analyze the

collected data from observation sheets/checklists, interviews and speaking test to make conclusion about the weakness/problems and the progress/succeeded found in the cycle one. For the weakness aspects, the researcher tries to improve them, and for the succeeded or strength aspects, the researcher keeps using them for the next cycles. In cycle two and three, the activity steps are similar to those in the cycle 1, but there is some different emphasis due to the revised plans.

The instruments relate with the data needed to be collected in this research are observation sheet, field note, interviews, and speaking test. Observation sheet is made based on the problems, the causes of the problems, and the strategy used to solve the problems. Field note records what happens in all of the research procedures. Interviews are face-to-face interactions that the researcher can have with one or more students or his/her friends to know about the causes of their success and failure. To determine the level of proficiencies, the researcher uses the speaking test rubric of Hughes (1983, 131-132). The speaking rubric involves five components, they are: 1) accent, 2) grammar, 3) vocabulary, 4) fluency, and 5) comprehension.

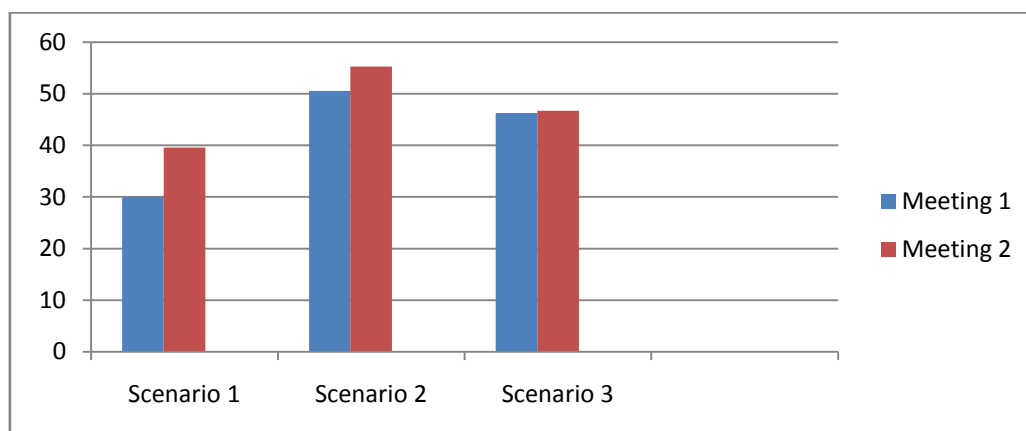
The technique of the data collection elaborates three sources. First, the data are taken from students' spoken English performance through speaking task activity for each meeting in the classroom. Second, the data are taken from students' speaking test at the end of each cycle outside the classroom. Third, the data are taken from the condition of the students, the researcher, and the class atmosphere during the process of teaching and learning.

The technique of the data analysis refers to the data that will be analyzed in this research. They are as follows: 1) the mean score of students' spoken English performance through speaking task activity in each meeting; 2) the mean score of students' speaking test at the end of each cycle; 3) the mean score of speaking elements from speaking performance at each meeting; 4) the condition of the students during the process of teaching and learning; 5) the condition of the researcher during the process of teaching and learning; and 6) the condition of the class atmosphere during the process of teaching and learning.

Findings and discussion

Based on the formulation of the problem of this research, there were three questions that must be answered: 1) what are the conditions of students' spoken English performance through speaking task in each meeting for each cycle? 2) what are the conditions of students' spoken English skill through the speaking test at the end of each cycle? and 3) how are the conditions of teaching and learning process during conducting the research for all cycles?

The mean score of the students' spoken English performance through the speaking task in each meeting in the first cycle could be seen in the graphic 1 below.



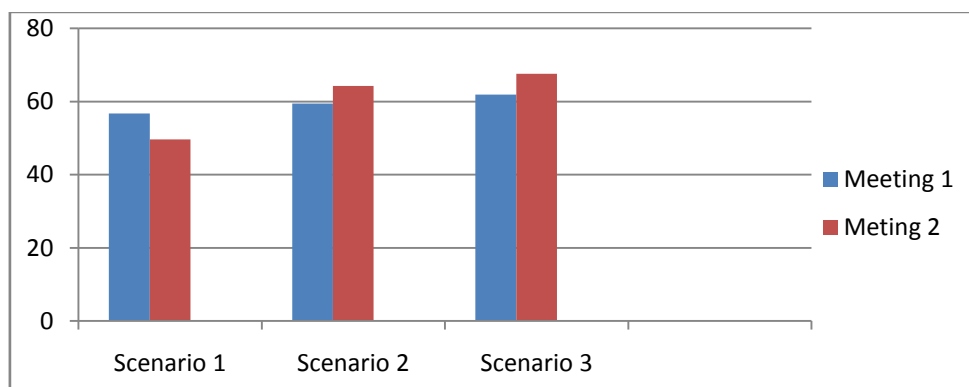
Graphic 1: Speaking task in the first cycle

Based on the graphic 1 above, it could be seen that the students' achievement of spoken English in the second scenario could be better from the first and third scenarios. At the first scenario for the first meeting, the students' speaking performance was still low because the students still got confused and could not apply the steps of PBL method. They had little comprehension about the scenario because it was just given in that morning. They had limited vocabularies to discuss the scenario problems. They did not feel relax and comfortable, and they had lack of expression and gestures. Meanwhile from the first meeting to the second meeting in the first scenario, the students' speaking performance was better because the students had known with their roles in PBL, and they had done the little inquiry about the scenario problems, but it has not been maximized yet because they only got one reference from the internet. In general, the students still read when they done the presentation. The students only focused with formulation of the problems that became their responsibilities. So, they did not give comment/opinions to their friends' presentation.

From the first scenario to the second scenario for the first meeting, the students' speaking performance was far better too because the lecturer has given the scenario one week before the class. The scenario was also not too difficult because they have ever learnt about it. The lecturer encouraged the students to find many references. Before the class started, the lecturer also gave the explanation and model about English expression in formal discussion. The lecturer reminded the students to cooperate in solving all of the problems at the end of the class. Most of the students have tried to be active, they have felt a little relaxed, and they have tried to use body language expression. From the second scenario for the second meeting to the third scenario for the first meeting, the students' speaking performance was worse because the topic for that scenario has never been studied in other nursing subjects. On the other hand, from the third scenario for the first meeting to the second meeting, the students' speaking performance was better because the students have tried to found the answer of the formulation of the problems at home through a small research.

Based on the observation of the students' spoken English performance in each meeting of the scenarios in the first cycle, it could be concluded that: 1) most of the students still read while they were explaining the problems, 2) the students' haven't been maximum in searching the reading materials, 3) the scenarios were too difficult especially about schizophrenia, 4) there haven't been many comments or arguments in the discussion, 5) the use of English expression was still monotonous, 6) face expression and body language haven't appeared yet, 7) the students just gave short explanations, especially for scenarios one and three, 8) the classes were still quite tense, 9) there were still many students who were absent during classes

In the second cycle the lecturer applied the plans based on the revised lesson plans that would aim to solve the problem found in the first cycle. Dealing to the research findings in the second cycle, the mean score of the students' spoken English performance through the speaking task in each meeting could be seen in graphic 2 below:

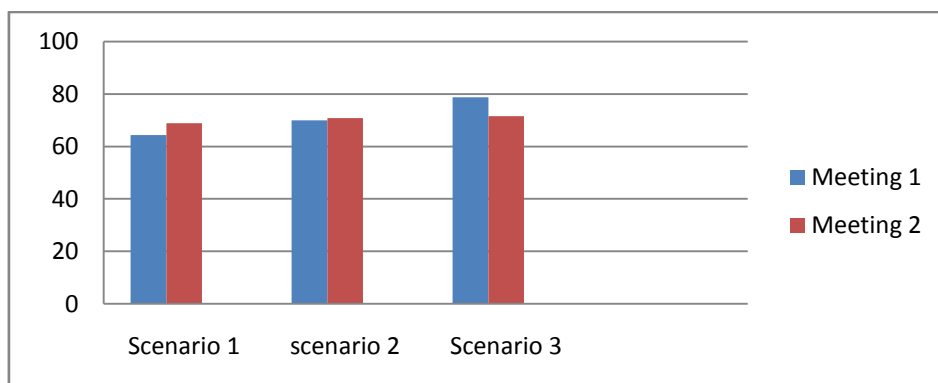


Graphic 2: Speaking task in the second cycle

Based on the graphic 2 above, it could be seen that the students' achievement of spoken English in the second scenario could be better from the first to the third scenarios. The students' speaking performance from the first to the second meeting of the first scenario became worse. It was caused of the students got influenced from another class students who said that day was holiday, so several of them were absent. The impact to that situation was most of them did not prepare themselves to study at home before the class and lost spirit for those who attended the class at that time. While from the second meeting in the first scenario to the second meeting in the second scenario, the students' speaking performance was better because the students had been given the more familiar topics of the scenarios since one week before the first meeting in the second cycle, so they had done the small inquiry about the scenario problems, but it has not been maximized yet because they still did not get enough references from the internet. Besides, during each meeting before the class started, the lecturer taught English language expression, English tenses, and common vocabulary in nursing alternately. He also always motivated the students to be more active than in the first cycle. From the second meeting in the second scenario to the first meeting in the third scenario, the students' speaking performance was worse, because the students expressed their answers only through brainstorming. Nevertheless, the students speaking performance was the highest in the second meeting in the third scenario because it was the most familiar scenario compared with the other two previous scenarios.

In general, some of the students still read, but they did not read totally. The students only read the outline and tried to express that outline using their own expression. The students also have tried to focus with the formulation of the problems that became their friends' responsibility. So, they could give comments or opinions to their friends' presentation. It meant that they have been rather active if compared with the first cycle. The students' language expressions were less various, although several of them use the same language expression every time they spoke. The class problem that the lecturer still felt during this second cycle was there were still one until three students who were absent for each meeting.

In the third cycle the lecturer applied the plans based on the revised lesson plans that would aim to solve the problem found in the second cycle. The mean scores of the students' spoken English performance through the speaking task in each meeting at the third cycle could be seen in the graphic 3 below:

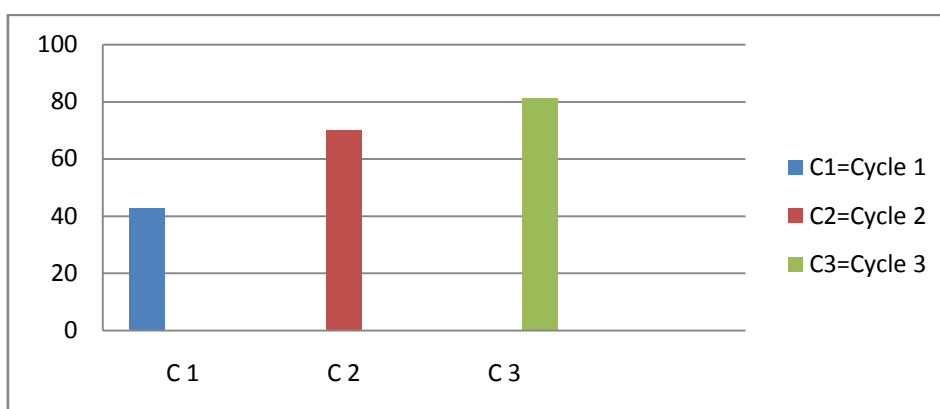


Graphic 3: Speaking task in the third cycle

Based on the condition of the students' spoken English skill in the graphic 3 above, it could be seen that the mean scores of the students' spoken English performance from the first scenario in the first meeting to the third scenario in the first meeting gradually became better, but from the third scenario in the first meeting to the third scenario in the second meeting was worse. While the mean score of the students' spoken English performance from the first scenario in the first meeting to the third scenario in the second meeting was 70,9. It means that the condition of the students' spoken English skill from the second cycle to the third cycle was

better too. It also means that the mean score of the students' spoken English skill from the second cycle to the third cycle increases 10,98 points. This improvement was caused of the scenarios were more familiar to the students. It seems that they had the background knowledge and experience about the scenario's problems. Besides that, they had enough references about the scenario's problems that they could read, practice, and made the report about them at home before the class began. During the class, they just left to memorize and produce them again. They could use their body language because all of them stood while they were explaining about the scenario's problems. Their comprehension, grammar, accent, and fluency were better and of course their confidence was also better too.

For the last discussion, the condition of the students' spoken English skill through the speaking test from the first cycle to the third cycle could be seen in the graphic 4 below:



Based on the graphic 4 above, it could be seen that the condition of the students' spoken English skill through the speaking test from the first cycle to the third cycle gradually became better. It was caused by the teaching scenarios in the first cycle were more difficult than the teaching scenarios in the second cycle. Besides that, the test was only held at the immediate time after the second meeting in the third scenario, so that the students felt shock and did not have any preparation for the test. Meanwhile the test for the second cycle was held one day after the sixth scenario of the second meeting in the morning, so that the students could prepare themselves and could memorize what would they like to talk. Similarly, the condition of the students spoken English skill in the third cycle was better than the second cycle, because the scenarios' problems were more familiar and also they have already had many references given by the lecturer and found by themselves, so that they became more maximum/optimal and could speak fluently and comprehensively.

Conclusion

Based on the observation and the analysis of the collected data, in fact, it can be concluded that the method for improving the students' spoken English skill through PBL seems to have been successful to be implemented to the students of class A, 2006 registered year of Nursing Study Program at Andalas University. It can be known by comparing the results of the third speaking test with the first speaking test. The third speaking test was far better than the first speaking test. The improvement of the students' spoken English skill involves all of the five indicators, they are accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The factors involved in the improvement of the students' spoken English are: 1) the hidden talent of English, 2) the understanding to the scenario problems, 3) the motivation of students to learn and the motivation of the lecturer to share knowledge, 4) the preparation of the students and the lecturer, 5) the ability to remember information, 6) the braveness and confidentiality to speak, 7) the relax atmosphere of the class, and 8) the interest to PBL method.

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