

## Using Hybrid Problem-based Learning (HPBL) Approach to Enhance Libyan EFL Students' Engagement with English Language

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how the Hybrid Problem-Based Learning (HPBL) approach can improve the Libyan EFL learners' performance in English language speaking. The paper employed the case study research design in which qualitative data through observation and interview were collected and analysed thematically. The participants involved in the study were 30 first-year undergraduate students in one of the Libyan public universities. The study was conducted in the period of 9 weeks. The course was conducted alternatingly between traditional and PBL lessons. The PBL lessons were based on 7 steps of Schmidt, Dauphinee and Patel (1989). At the end of each PBL lesson, students presented their possible solutions for the problem presented in a form of oral presentation (OP). It was found that after undergoing the HPBL process, the speaking ability of the learners improved in fluency, grammar, comprehension, vocabulary, confidence level, intonation skills and pronunciation. It is, thus, concluded the HPBL approach is a worthwhile alternative for English lecturers for the transformation of the stagnant approach to the teaching of English language in the Libyan EFL context.

**Key words:** Hybrid Problem-based Learning, Libyan EFL Learners, Speaking Achievement

### INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the essential skills for learning any language. Speaking skill is one of the indicators of success in career and family life (Nunan, 2002). Effective speaking skill is one of the most important language skills required not only for academic purposes but also for coping with the current global challenges in everyday life. However, in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), students face difficulties in acquiring the skill. As is the case with Libyan EFL learners, speaking English is seen as the most difficult achievement to attain; the students in Libyan schools cannot apply the speaking skill successfully in their daily communicative encounters. They are reluctant to speak the English language in their classrooms (Savaşçı, 2014).

Various factors have been identified as responsible for the students' difficulties in acquiring the desired proficiency in speaking in English. These include the lack of ideal environment where students can freely speak English as in natural settings (Chang & Goswami, 2011). Other factors include over reliance on their mother tongue, inadequate time allocated for English lessons, negative attitudes of students toward speaking English, lack of motivation, and inadequate reading materials (Tokoz-Goktepe, 2014).

For many years, the predicaments highlighted above have been a great challenge for EFL teachers, parents and the Libyan government, as there have always been complaints

about students' poor speaking ability in Libyan EFL settings. Considering the importance of speaking to students, particularly that of English language in the world, it is necessary to help the students to improve their speaking abilities. Researchers in language acquisition provide valuable information about how second/foreign languages are learned and what are the factors that influence the learning process itself. Cook (2000) states that learners do not acquire language in the same ways, thus, he identifies three main factors that influence learning process, namely age, personality, and teaching methods.

PBL is one of the recent methods of impacting skills and knowledge in educational pedagogy. Duch, Groh and Allen (2001) define PBL by giving more emphasis on the skills students could acquire while going through the PBL processes. They describe it as an instructional method used to develop students' abilities to think critically, analyze and solve complex real-world problems, evaluate and use appropriate learning resources. It also enables students to work cooperatively to demonstrate effective communication skills and to use content knowledge and intellectual skills to become life-long learners. Sage and Torp (2002) described PBL as a focused and experiential learning approach organized around investigation and resolution of confused real-world problems, where students are engaged as problem-solvers seeking to identify the root of the problem and the conditions needed for a good solution, and in turn, they become self-directed

learners. Studies that have shown how ill-structured problems using PBL approach could facilitate success in language classrooms, some of which include, Mohd-Ali et al. (2017a), and Mohd-Ali (2017b) and Mohd-Ali et al. (2016).

Hmelo-Silver (2004) provides more description of how the PBL process is conducted. PBL is an instructional method in which students learn through facilitated problem-solving that centers on complex problems, which do not have a single correct solution. Students work in collaborative groups to identify what they need to learn in order to solve the problem. They also engage in self-directed learning, apply their new knowledge to the problem, and reflect on what they learned and the effectiveness of the strategies employed. During the processes, teachers facilitate the learning process instead of providing knowledge. In the same vein, Hung, Jonassen, and Liu (2008) offered a definition of PBL as an instructional method that initiates students' learning by creating a need to solve an authentic problem. During the problem-solving process, students construct content knowledge and develop problem-solving skills as well as self-directed learning skills, while working towards a solution to the problem.

Recently scholars have addressed the effectiveness of PBL approach in enhancing speaking skills in EFL classroom context (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005; Hartatik, 2016; Kassem, 2018, Rohim, 2014; Rosalina, 2013; Wang, Tai, Huang, Bian, Shang, Wang, & Song, 2008). Findings of these studies have indicated that the implementation of problem-based learning improved students' speaking skill in different aspects of language proficiency such as grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary development, which in turn helped students to develop speaking ability. The PBL model has been tested in other countries and found to be effective for developing students' potential abilities in language. As for the Libyan context, there has been no study conducted to investigate the effect of PBL on improving the performance of students. Therefore, hybrid PBL model which is a combination of PBL and traditional method was adopted, and implemented in speaking classroom of English foundation program in a university in Libya in order to explore its effect on the Libyan EFL learners in achieving fluency in English language. This approach was used because the main goal of PS PBL is to develop domain specific skills. Thus, it suites the objective of the current paper where English speaking is argued to be far weak among Libyan EFL learners, and their academic achievement in speaking is below expectations. Moreover, PS PBL is argued to be a suitable model in the context of this research, since students are not motivated in learning to speak English.

Hybrid PBL which involves mixing the PBL approach into the curriculum of the traditional teacher-based approach has been found to be effective in stimulating and accelerating students' achievement in numerous studies. Empirical studies strengthening the effect of HPBL approach include Doody (2015), Larramona, Baños, and Pérez (2011), and Lian and Yu(2013). The findings reported in these studies supported earlier findings that hybrid-PBL is superior to traditional based learning since it is beneficial not only for

students' basic knowledge level but also their problem-solving skills. Therefore, it sounds logical to assume that engaging Libyan EFL learners who are struggling to master speaking skill in English in hybrid-PBL can help them achieve their goals.

Specifically, this study integrates Schmidt et al. (1989) model of PBL (Seven Jump Steps) into the speaking classroom of Libyan EFL learners. According to Schmidt et al. (1989), learners in PBL approach progress through a series of steps and these steps include; clarifying unknown terms and concepts in the problem description, defining the problem, analyzing the problem, formulating learning issues for self-directed learning, filling-in gaps in knowledge through self-directed learning, and finally sharing findings with one group.

This approach is believed to be suitable for Libyan EFL learners contexts since the students in Libya were found to be performing below expectation in speaking (Orafi & Borg, 2009). In this approach, Libyan EFL students will work together to solve complicated and authentic problems, so they will be immersed in several tasks where they can try to practice discussing in English language to find solutions for their problems. This in turn is believed to help the students toward the learning process and thus improve their language achievement in the speaking classroom.

Additionally, Libyan students are not used to any student-centered learning approach. Most of the Libyan higher institutions adopt traditional method of teaching where teachers dominate the classrooms. Adopting this type of PBL allows teachers to explain every step of the approach to students in a lecture way, which the students are more familiar with. In this regard, White (1996) argued that in PBL, students take charge of their education while emphasizing critical thinking skills, understanding, learning how to learn, and working collaboratively. In this sense, the researcher argued that such approach is very suitable to the case of Libyan EFL students in English speaking classrooms at the university, who rely too much on being fed information by lecturers rather than being self-directed in their learning process.

It is argued that Libyan EFL learners are less motivated to learning English (e.g. Mohamed, 2014). That is, lecturers in EFL classrooms in Libya, only prepare students for examination following Lecture-Based Learning (LBL) approach. This in turn makes the educational purpose in Libya a matter of test-driven rather than cognitive one. Lecturers usually do not think of switching their teaching approach to other available approaches such as PBL approach that can take the teaching process to different path and different outcomes as argued by many researchers (e.g., Albanese & Mitchell, 1993).

Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, and Alzwari (2012) investigated quantitatively the Libyan EFL learners' attitudes toward learning English in terms of behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects. Students of the study were purposely chosen to include 180 EFL learners in one of the universities in the division of Elmergib, Ziltan in west of Libya. Results revealed that the students have a somewhat negative attitude toward learning English. In addition, the mean scores of the

three aspects of attitudes toward English among the respondents differed in that the mean score of Behavioral Aspect of Attitude (BAA) was lower than that of the Cognitive Aspect of Attitude and the Emotional Aspect of Attitude (EAA).

Moreover, Al-Zahrani (2008) examined the attitude of EFL learners toward learning English in another university. Data were collected through mixed methods research including questionnaire survey that was distributed to 120 EFL learners and semi-structured interview. Findings from the questionnaire survey revealed that most of the students had a negative attitude toward learning English. Interview data analysis revealed that the reason of such a negative attitude was simply a reaction toward the instructional and traditional techniques employed by English language lecturers in EFL classrooms in Libya.

Moreover, it is believed that such an approach is very suitable for Libyan EFL learners. This is because it involves discussions and collecting data to propose suitable solutions to problems. Learners in their speaking classrooms were required to conduct group problem solving discussion, huge amount of reading from every possible resource, and presenting their findings in form of oral presentation. This is in line with Evensen and Hmelo's (2000) argument that PBL approach organizes learners in group work where they involve in various processes to collect data to solve the problem presented, and therefore they will be exposed to huge amount of reading, arguing and finally presenting their solutions in the form of report and presentation. This vast exposure to knowledge and source of data is believed to enhance students' speaking achievements in English course. In this regard, Tan (2003) argued that, the availability of data nowadays makes the application of PBL approach far possible especially since we live in computing technology era where students can find different information from different resources. Tan (2003) further argued that such exposure to different sources of data would inevitably enhance students' language skills at different levels.

### **Hybrid PBL (HPBL)**

After the first introduction of the PBL from medical school, many universities have adopted the PBL approach. As a result, various models of PBL emerged based on the schools' and the staff's preferences, students' perceptions and local constraints (Lim, 2012). This has led to the categorization of PBL into two types, namely, Pure and Hybrid PBL (Masek, 2012; Savin-Baden, 2007). The pure PBL model refers to the model that is implemented in a fully problem-based methodology, based on the McMaster medical school PBL model. The implementation is generally without any lectures or tutorial sessions and students typically worked in small groups (Masek, 2012).

On the other hand, the term 'hybrid PBL (HPBL)' originates from Harvard's New Pathway curriculum and refers to the kind of PBL that effectively incorporates lectures, laboratory sessions, and other instructional activities into the active PBL discussions (Armstrong, 1997). HPBL, according to Lim (2012), is any curriculum which incorporates PBL-style tutorials. Due to the widespread and different

models of PBL evolved, some scholars like Kwan and Tam (2009), in their review regarding HPBL, have suggested that a 'pure' form of PBL is now practically non-existent as other instructional processes such as lectures are included. Kwan and Tam, therefore, made their own classification of PBL. They classified PBL into four sub-types. In the first type, only two to three problems are given to students per academic year. The problems are integrated into the conventional curriculum driven by teaching via didactic lectures. In the second type of PBL, problems are used to enhance students' understanding of the lecture content materials. In this type, PBL tutorials focus on the acquisition of knowledge content or factual materials. Thus, lecturers and content experts as tutors complement it. In the third type, lectures are used to enhance PBL performance among students. Teachers in this type, therefore, need to teach students the 'basics' prior to doing PBL. The fourth type uses PBL as the main learning platform. Hence, some "unconventional lectures" are added to enrich and to motivate the students' self-directed learning (Lim, 2012, p. 2). Many other scholars have advocated that lectures and other instructional activities are essential in PBL. They refer to these as instructional scaffolding (Lim, 2012).

Specifically, this study integrates Schmidt et al. (1989) model of PBL (Seven Jump Steps) in to the speaking classroom. According to Schmidt et al. (1989), learners in PBL approach progress through a series of steps and these steps include; clarifying unknown terms and concepts in the problem description, defining the problem, analyzing the problem, formulating learning issues for self-directed learning, filling-in gaps in one's knowledge through self-directed learning, and finally sharing findings with group members. This approach is believed to be suitable for this research context since Libyan EFL learners were found to be not motivated to English, and their language achievement in speaking course is below expectation (Orafi & Borg, 2009). In this approach, Libyan EFL students will work together to solve complicated and authentic problems, so they will be immersed in several tasks where they can try to practice discussing in English language to find solutions for such problems. This in turn is believed to motivate the students toward the learning process and thus improve their language achievement in the speaking course as offered by English Foundation Program at this research setting.

Additionally, Libyan students are not used to any student-centered learning approach. Most of the Libyan higher institutions adopt traditional method of teaching where teachers dominate the classrooms. Adopting the HPBL allows teachers to explain every step of the approach to students in a lecture way, which the students are more familiar with. In this regard, White (1996) argued that in PBL, students take charge of their education, while emphasizing critical thinking skills, understanding, learning how to learn, and working collaboratively. In this sense, the researcher argued that such approach is very suitable to the case of Libyan EFL students in English speaking classrooms at the university, who rely too much on being fed information by lecturers rather than being self-directed in their learning process.

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### Speaking Skills and the PBL Approach

Scholars addressed the effectiveness of PBL approach in enhancing speaking skills in EFL classroom context (Rosalina, 2013; Wang et al., 2008). For example, Rosalina (2013) implemented the PBL approach in the English classroom of seventh grade in one of the universities in Indonesia to find out whether the use of PBL can improve students' speaking skill and to describe the classroom situation when problem-based learning is applied to teach speaking in the English classroom. Results found that the implementation of problem-based learning had improved students' speaking skill in different aspects namely grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary aspects.

Moreover, Rohim (2014) implemented PBL approach to improve the speaking skill of tenth year students of MA Al-Ma'arif Singosari Malang that have difficulties to respond to questions which are given by the teacher. The research was a quantitative-qualitative research in the form of classroom action research. The classroom action research used two cycles that include planning, action, observation, and reflection in each cycle. The samples of the study were tenth year students of MA Al-Ma'arif Singosari Malang i.e. 46 students of 20 male and 26 female students. The researcher applied four instruments to assess the students: observation checklist, field note, questionnaire, and test. The test was taken by two scorers (researcher and collaborator) to increase better validity of the data. The findings showed that the speaking skill improved 23.37 (based on researcher's assessment) and 22.94 (based on collaborator assessment).

Furthermore, Permatasari (2013) finds out how PBL approach could improve the speaking skill of second graders of SMPN 1 Kawedanan, Magetan. Data collection was done using questionnaire, interview guide, field notes or observation sheets and students' worksheets. Findings revealed that group discussions helped students to improve their speaking skill because the discussions encouraged them to interact with their friends in small groups before they began to speak in a big group. Results of the study concluded that PBL approach is a successful approach in improving the speaking skills of the students.

Ahlfeldt et al. (2005) examined the use of PBL approach in public speaking course in one of the public universities

in America and compared it with traditional based learning approach. Results of the study showed that PBL is an effective method of instruction in the public speaking fundamentals course. Students in PBL were found to do better in speaking than those students in pure traditional classrooms. Moreover, students in PBL were engaged more in the course material and experience decrease in speaking anxiety than students in traditional classrooms.

Although this path of literature continues, and as far as the researcher is aware, none of the studies found in literature implemented the HPBL model (being the broad framework of all the variants of PBL) in the context of Libyan EFL classroom. Therefore, this study will be conducted by implementing the HPBL model in a speaking course at a Libyan university to examine how far the HPBL model can improve Libyan EFL learners' achievement in a speaking course.

## METHOD

### Research Setting

This study was conducted in one of the government universities in Libya. In the university, there are various faculties and departments such as Department of English, Faculty of Information System, Faculty of Engineering and others. Before being enrolled in EFL program at that university, students were required to enroll in English Foundation Program (EFP) for 12 weeks that is designed to teach students the four basic language skills i.e. writing, reading, speaking and listening following a British-based curriculum of the school. All the skills are taught simultaneously during the period but in different classes and hours. The speaking skill is the focus of this study. The program was carefully designed by the Department of English in the public university in order to prepare the students for the degree programmes in the university.

### Study Design

This study employed the case study design. Observation, semi-structured interview, and students' interactions during the HPBL process was used as the means of data elicitation. This research design (case study) allows the researcher to explore the use of HPBL in a speaking classroom and answer the research questions. Adopting the case study design helps the researcher in the attainment of in-depth understanding of the research topic. This can be achieved through a combination of such methods of data collection as observation, in-depth interviewing and video recording to investigate the bounded case of how the HPBL can motivate the learners. Similarly, it also helps in validating the findings, thus making the findings more reliable and applicable. This can be seen in how the different methods are expected to corroborate the findings of one another further strengthening both the validity and reliability of the results. It also helps in triangulating the collected data and allows the researcher to handle unexpected contradictions and divergences in the data (Creswell, 2012), as explained above.

## **Research Participants**

The participants of the study included lecturers and students. The following sections describe the participants in detail.

### **Lecturer Participants**

Two lecturers who have more than ten years' experience of teaching English to EFL learners were selected to facilitate the students' learning in the HPBL process. Selecting the two lecturers would give them a better opportunity to go around and facilitate the students during the HPBL process. One of the lecturers was the one teaching the course using the traditional lecture-method. The second lecturer was selected to assist the former to guide the students during the group discussion because the students were grouped into smaller groups. The lecturer who was their teacher is a male having 6 years teaching experience and The second lecturer who was supporting is a female, also having 6 years teaching experience. The male lecturer had the experience of PBL before by participating in it during his masters' degree, while the female lecturer never participated in it, but only read about it.

### **Student Participants**

The study involved a complete class of 30 first-year undergraduate students in a public university in Libya. This is in line with homogenous sampling strategy as proposed by Creswell (2012), to avoid researcher bias. This type of sampling is done in research to select respondents with the same or similar traits or estimated abilities, educational characteristics like a class, a school set the same age group or tribe of interest to the researcher. Selecting a homogeneous sample also helps to avoid influence on the students' performance due to their different levels. The students were of mixed-gender and their ages range from 19 to 20 years old. They have been learning English for twelve years and their proficiency in English is basic. The students were engaged in interactions and discussions among themselves in order to provide possible solutions to problems following the HPBL steps.

The student participants of the study were 30 first-year students in a speaking classroom in a public university in Libya. The students consisted of males and females between the ages of 19 and 20 years old. They were grouped into smaller groups; five students in each group and there were six groups.

### **Sampling Technique**

Sufficient sample size is the inherent characteristic of quantitative study; however, smaller sample sizes are generally used in qualitative studies (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbin, 2015). The technique used in arriving at sufficient sample sized in this research is homogeneous sample, which is the process of selecting a small homogeneous group of participants or unit of analysis for examination and its goal is to understand and describe a particular group in-depth. e.g. a

small sample of people who share the same age, location, or a certain characteristic like being English students as in the case of this study. It is one of the types of purposive sampling which is a selective or subjective sampling that is not based on probability technique but based on the fact that the sample has a particular characteristic of interest to the researcher (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). In this respect, this research adopted the homogenous sampling techniques because the central interest is to make an in-depth case study of an exploration of the implementation of HPBL in the Libyan EFL classroom. The 15 students who participated in the interview were selected based on the recommendation of their lecturer on their ability to express their views. They were picked one after another until data saturation point was reached. The students were interviewed until no new codes emerged from them.

### **Research Procedures**

The study was conducted for the period of 9 weeks. Using the HPBL approach, the course was conducted alternatingly with traditional and PBL lessons. The first week was an introductory week (i.e. course overview, PBL introduction, Library orientation, and group formation). In the second week, the lesson was taught using traditional approach followed by the third week of PBL lesson and the rest of the weeks followed with the same alternation. The PBL lesson plans were divided into 7 stages of in-classroom and out classroom activities based on Schmidt et al.'s (1989) steps "The Seven Jump". At the end of each PBL lesson, students presented their possible solutions for the problem presented in a form of oral presentation (OP). It is revealed that the HPBL improved the speaking ability of the students by enhancing fluency, grammar, comprehension, vocabulary, confidence level, intonation skills and pronunciation.

### **Research Instrument**

There were two instruments used in this research, these instruments are: semi structured interviews and observations. In the semi-structured interviews, data from the participants were elicited, this method was used because data collected in this process are more reliable because they came from the students themselves. Observation was used as the second method of data collection. This method was used because is also one of the effective means of deciphering how things happens.

Achievement in fluency, grammar, comprehension, vocabulary, confidence level, intonation skills and pronunciation were measured through evaluating the audio and video recordings conducted during throughout the course. The recordings helped the researcher to explore the language use of the students and to triangulate the data collected by other methods. It also helped the researcher to examine the students' speaking performance. It also allowed the researcher to replay the recording repeatedly for verification while transcribing the data, and to observe improvements in speaking performance. These have been supported by many studies of PBL that used audio/video recording in data collection

and found it to be a useful tool (Tan, 2004). Tan (2004) underscored the audio/video recording of data as evidence; a resource that can be referred to and observed closely for in-depth analysis. Audio/video recording of the students' group discussions is part of the data collection procedures.

At the end of the whole HPBL process, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 student participants and 2 lecturer participants. The interview was conducted to elicit the students' prior knowledge of HPBL and their current experiences of the approach. In addition, the interview comprised of open-ended questions designed to elicit information regarding how the HPBL model motivated the students to speak English, developed from Norzaini Azman and Shin (2012), Tan (2004) and Aliyu, Yong, Mardziah, Abdullah, and Tan (2016). For instance, items 1, 2 and 3 of the interview questions were used to answer research question one of the study. Items 4 and 5 were used for the second research question. Finally, items 6, 7, 11 and 12 were used to answer the third research question of the study. The aspects dealt with in the interview questions of the studies were considered relevant for this study because it covered all the range of issues addressed by this study in terms of PBL implementation, students' motivation and achievement in speaking performance. The interviews were mostly conducted in Arabic since it is the students' first language and was subsequently translated to English. The interviews lasted for about 15-25 minutes for each student. This allowed the students to best voice their experiences and views unconstrained by any language problems. The interviews also allowed the researcher to obtain rich data from the students. The interview responses were translated to English by the researcher. To achieve credibility, the translations were validated by two other experienced EFL lecturers who are familiar with both Arabic and English. Apart from that, the translated copy was given to another Arabic-to-English translation expert to translate it backward to Arabic. The final backward translation was similar to the original manuscript. Thus, the English translation was validated.

### Data Analysis

The data collected through semi-structured interviews and observation were analyzed qualitatively in themes. Various methods of data analysis were employed in order to answer the research questions posed in this study. To answer the research question on how the HPBL was implemented in the speaking course, data were collected through observation and interview responses of the lecturers and the students. The data were transcribed, coded and themes were identified. The themes were formed, identified by the researcher and checked by two other researchers who are experienced in analyzing qualitative data in order to ensure credibility.

Finally, to answer the last research question on how the HPBL model enhances the Libyan EFL learners' achievement in speaking English in the course, data were collected through qualitative tools. Data were also collected from the students' interactions during the HPBL process. The interactions were observed, recorded and analyzed based on the emerging themes (see the subsequent section for detail). In

addition, data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually with the students and the lecturers. The data were coded and analysed to find emergent major themes.

### Procedure of Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis procedure allows the identification of general aspects of qualitative data through coding and categorizing data (Ezzy & Brooke, 2002). In this study, thematic analysis was used to analyze participants' responses to the open-ended questions of the questionnaire. It was based on the six phase coding instrument developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.35).

The corpus of the data were the transcripts of the interview, audio-video recording and the observation notes. All the themes in the qualitative analysis derive from the data corpus. All the data sources were treated in the analysis as a single data corpus and consideration was paid to allocating the emerging themes to the relevant research questions they answer.

### Validity and Reliability

The researchers employed several strategies to ensure valid and reliable results of the qualitative data. To ensure content and face validity of the instruments, the questionnaires and the ill-structured problems, a panel of experts (Creswell, 2012) comprising of 1 ESL instructor and 2 researchers from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) validated the instruments.

The arguments concerning criteria for determining validity in qualitative research has always been a contentious one, as to whether it should develop its own validity criteria. These debates gave rise to recent efforts in developing such concepts as trustworthiness of the inquiry, based on the credibility of findings i.e. validation by respondents and how far others can audit the process i.e. transparency (Bryman, 2004).

Here the central assertion is that researchers must be able to show that their method of data collection and analysis can lay claim to a degree of validity and that conclusions have been based on evidence that has been subjected to rigorous process. Therefore, the process of data analysis must involve internal falsification strategy i.e. the data analyst must also pay attention to and be on continuous search for data that is incongruous, or that which does not support or conform to the theoretical theme pursued in the study. This study upholds consideration for such strategy. In the analysis, the researchers paid close attention to this procedure of internal falsification throughout data analysis procedure.

Bryman (2004) underscored the relevance of respondent validation also as a superior means of establishing the validity of the findings of a qualitative study. Respondents' validation involves reporting findings back to those who were interviewed or observed to ascertain the findings as representing their comments, assessments or remarks. Findings are always open to being revised in the light of their comments. Therefore, in this study, the informants were made

to validate the findings in which they attested that it was the true representation of their opinions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the semi-structured interviews and observations are presented in themes and later substantiated through discussions. Generally, the findings show that HPBL helped the Libyan EFL learners improve their speaking. The following are the themes that emerged from the data. In this section, pseudonyms were given to the student to facilitate the reading of conversations. And since the HPBL course took 9 weeks, students achievements in fluency etc. were observed in their speaking skills in the lessons at the beginning of the course and their abilities at the ending of the course. Real changes began to be noticed from the 5<sup>th</sup> week. The HPBL process enhances the students' fluency in communication. They were able to speak English without hesitation. The students learned how to ask for and give clarification, narrating incidents in their lives, argued and explained their reasons for opinions, cited sources, used stress and intonation patterns during the group interactions and during the class presentations. For example, during the presentation sessions, in the early presentations, most of the students did not contribute to the sessions; they could not participate principally perhaps they were afraid because they did not have good flow of English. Very few responses were made and few questions asked. But toward the last presentations, they appeared to be freely contributing and asking many questions as can be deduced from the excerpt below from observation notes during the presentations:

### HPBL Enhances Fluency in Communication

During the presentation sessions, in the early presentations, most of the students did not contribute to the sessions; they could not participate actively perhaps they were afraid because they lacked good flow of English. Very few responses were made and few questions asked. However, toward the last presentations, they appeared to be freely contributing and asking many questions as can be deduced from the excerpt below from observation notes during the presentations. In the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> presentations, only few, at most 3 of them were participating in the presentation by asking the presenter questions and responding when he asks questions. But in the last two presentations almost all of them were asking questions and participating. In the 5<sup>th</sup> lesson, many of the students struggled hard to make sentences. But in the 9<sup>th</sup> lesson, the flow of the sentences increased even though with some kind of mistakes in grammar. They were not shy to uncover their mistakes. They encouraged one another, when one of them stumbles in a sentence, some of the students try to correct the sentences.

The responses from the respondents based on the interview and observation showed that HPBL improved their fluency in communication through self-practicing. The students reported practicing several times for each exercise before making presentation. This was influenced by their speaking habit during their discussion. They also had to present their

discussion result in front of their classmate. Thus, it trained them a lot to speak, thereby increasing their fluency achievement. Observations have shown that the students were able to use the language fluently on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. They can participate in any conversations within the range of their experience with a degree of fluency. One of the students, during the interview mentioned that constant practice had improved his fluency in communication. He further explained that these practice were done both individually and through group work. This student said:

HPBL made me practice a lot by myself and with my colleagues after every exercise and this has help us in our fluency during communication in class and outside. HPBL encouraged me in reading every material giving to us a lot and other relevant English reading materials.

Another student also described that HPBL improved his fluency due to frequent and constant practice of his lessons and exercises. He also described how the course encouraged both individual and group practice. As he pointed out:

As a result of HPBL I frequently practice my lessons and exercises more. This had helped me greatly in improving my fluency. The structure of the course made me practice more at individual capacity and within the group.

From the interactions of the students during the HPBL process, it was observed that the group interactions enhanced their communication skills. They learned to express themselves and convince others on a topic. While discussing the problem of students' excessive use of the Internet which affects their academic performance, the students identified many factors that are responsible for the problem. Improvement was observed in their conversations. For instance, Mansoor mentioned that students engaged with social media because it is more interesting than their studies:

Social media are interesting, so they engage students. Social media provide opportunity for students to communicate with people outside the boundaries of the classroom. For example, a student may be in Europe studying while his counterpart is in Libya they get connected. As a result, they start chatting through WhatsApp, Facebook and whatever.

Another student, Muhammad, also agreed with the idea that social media is more interesting than studies. He expressed his opinion in order to convince the facilitator:

The study style or the mode of schooling is not very interesting. You sit down for two hours confined in a hall that is not very conducive while one is explaining things. Well, it may be interesting but there is social media which is more interesting. And people tend to like things that are more interesting. So social media affect our studies because they are more interesting than our studies. If now our school will be more interesting than the social media, may be we would like it more than the social media.

The excerpts above show that the group interactions enabled the students to develop their communication. They learned to think and develop ideas from their peers. This finding is in conformity with the finding reported in Yang and Paakpong (2016), in which the students reported that under PBL, they often practiced reading the information of their project and other materials in order to practice their speak-

ing before presenting the project, and this positively influenced their speaking skill. Similarly, another study in the US indicated that nothing pulls students' speaking, communication and presentation skills together as effectively as Project-Based Learning (Moss & Van Duzer 1998). The study is also in agreement with that of Khotimah (2014) where the students' fluency improved after the PBL course. Poonpon (2011) also reported that the students' speaking ability and fluency during the PBL course was enhanced because they rehearsed and often practiced their speech, as well as at the presentation stage when they performed or presented their project. As it seems, PBL gives student the opportunity to work autonomously during the course period, and this helps them in developing their fluency whenever they communicate (Klein, Taveras, King, Commitante, & Bey, 2009).

### HPBL Improves Grammar

The findings from the interview revealed that HPBL, as the students reported, influenced them in coming up with good and accurate grammatical structures of sentences indicating that the course made an improvement in their grammar. The students showed improvement in building correct sentences with the appropriate structure. They were able to use the language accurately pertinent to professional needs, with fewer grammatical errors, and were found correcting their grammar by themselves when they made a mistake when conversing. A student mentioned how HPBL helped him in forming better sentence structures with the use of appropriate clauses and phrases; as he commented:

The HPBL course taught me how to form better sentence structures using the appropriate clauses and phrases. This was possible because of the too much practice that we have been subjected to, during the course period.

Another student also mentioned during the interview how the HPBL course improved his grammar and sentence structure:

For me, my weakness was grammar. I always become confused in arranging a good sentence by thinking about the rules and structure. However, the PBL course improved my grammar ability in speaking.

It was observed during the group discussion, the students deliberated on grammatical issues while writing down the possible solutions to the problems. For example, the excerpt below shows how students discussed the subject-verb agreement rule:

Amir: Some of the possible solutions of such acts and viable solutions to them include... what do you see about this sentence?

Nusaiba: That 'include' must take 's'. write it as includes...

Amir: But we say some, there no 's'

Muhammd: No.

Amir: We said some of the possible solutions of such acts... then which act?

Muhammd: Solutions, with 's' is plural. So should 'include' be without 's'?

This finding is in conformity with that of Maulany (2013) who also revealed PBL to have improved students' speaking skills. Maulany (2013) reported that the improvement was more seen in their sentence comprehension and structure. These findings corroborate the theory that PBL can give an optimal opportunity to improve students' language skill (Levine, 2004, as cited in Tsiplakides & Fragoulis, 2009). Brown (2003) and O'Malley and Lauren (1999) revealed that PBL leads students to arrange every sentence with good structure and grammar after the completion of the course. This is true about the course in the current study because of the improvement seen in the students' construction of grammatical structures developed at the end of the course.

### HPBL Increases Comprehension

The results from the interview further showed that the ability of the students to understand sentences and contents of a story has improved significantly. This is an indication of how they understood spoken English and how they conversed. In addition, they also enhanced their comprehensibility through the use of keywords and rephrasing of sentences in order for the listener to have total comprehension of what is being said. Several students mentioned the HPBL course improved their comprehension in English, and as a result they interacted more freely among themselves and with their instructors. One of the students mentioned how the HPBL course improved his comprehension skill during conversations:

My comprehension skills and understanding of the spoken English language have increased remarkably. This is because of our frequent interaction within ourselves and our tutors during the PBL course.

This is also observed in the students' interactions during the HPBL process. The students helped one another to understand concepts and ideas. Whenever one has a problem, others supported him/her to explain things. This enhances the students' comprehension. For instance, in the excerpt below, Maryam did not understand the problem and what she and her friends were expected to do, so Ammar helped and explained it clearly to her:

Ammar: Now, we have a problem and we need to study it, but before we go into the problem, we need to all understand it. Is there any that we need to clarify?

Nur: Em... what is the problem?

Fatima: Well, it is about domestic rubbish is dumped everywhere and it increases day by day. As a result, it pollutes our environments, causes diseases and other inconveniences. So is there any term that we need to clarify before we move further, or are the terms all clear?

Mansoor: As far as I am concerned the terms are clear to me.

Fatima: Do you all agree?

Nur: Well, I think I understand the problem.

Fatima: Maryam, do you understand the problem?

Maryam: No, I understand. What do we do?

Ammar: You know, we are expected to identify causes of the problem, why people dump rubbish everywhere, and provide some solutions to the problems.

Maryam: Ok, I understand now.

Ammar: Good! What do we need to do first... we know the problem now. What is the next step?

This finding is in conformity with that of a study by Khotimah (2014), where the students' comprehension increased after the PBL treatment. The study mentioned that the students were unable to understand the teacher's instruction at the beginning of the course, which was observed to be quite different at the end of the program as they fully comprehended the teacher's conversation and replied accordingly. Previous studies have shown that PBL makes the students undergoing the course convey comprehensible and understandable communication while speaking English Language (Brown, 2003; and O'Malley & Lauren 1999).

### HPBL Enhances Good Pronunciations and Intonation

The students' pronunciation also improved as a result of the HPBL course. This was made possible because students engaged in both self and group practice during the course. The students practiced and learned from their various course mates freely during the course; and this helped them greatly. They discussed and explained how the course improved their pronunciation skill as compared with their situation before the PBL course. According to Brown (2003) and O'Malley and Lauren (1999), HPBL enables students to learn how to speak English with good pronunciation while they interact with one another and during class presentations. One of the students in this study mentioned how the course personally helped her in achieving clear and correct pronunciations:

The course has improved my pronunciations skills through group practice with my group members. I also had the opportunity for self-practice of words I found difficult to pronounce.

The above statement was supported by the data from the results of oral presentation scores, where even the group with the lowest scores fell within the satisfactory category. This was in line Yang and Puakpong's (2016) findings that showed PBL enhanced non-English major students' pronunciation ability. HPBL provided students with the authentic learning environment, required the students to be autonomous to foster meaningful learning, and prepared them with the basic knowledge and skill to speak. Afterwards, the students were engaged in group learning to apply their gained theory and knowledge into practice. In addition, the interview findings indicated how HPBL improved the intonation skills of the students. They improved on how to speak a statement sentence and an affirmative sentence. This was made possible because they listened carefully to their fellow group members during discussions and other group activities.

Furthermore, the students learned how to work together to achieve their target in order to solve the problem.

Thus, the students learned social skills such as cooperation, teamwork, and communication skills which are useful in improving their speaking ability. For example, one student described how the course helped her in improving her intonation abilities:

I have improved in my intonation ability in this course as I listen to how my fellow group members express and say words and how they communicate their meaning or attitude through intonation.

This is how one student reported that the PBL course enhanced his intonation skills compared with his previous state:

The course has enhanced my intonations skill. I can now differentiate and understand different rhythms, sounds and I equally use them in my conversation with others.

### HPBL Enhances Self-Confidence

Based on the responses from the interview, HPBL also improved the speaking ability of the student by increasing their level of confidence. This is because the students engaged in interaction freely among themselves, thereby alleviating the fear, anxiousness and their reserved nature. Every student was encouraged to participate and to contribute during the HPBL process. This made them more confident of themselves. The students' confidence level gradually increased as the course progressed, which is similar to what is found in other studies, where students were observed to have speaking anxiety and lacked the confidence to practice in groups and for the first time in their meetings during the HPBL course. However, after series of meetings, the students developed courage and confidence to speak up without hesitation, concern or constraint (Mohammed, Keong, & Abdalhussein, 2015). It was revealed by one of the students that the HPBL process assisted him in developing self-confidence, which he lacked before the commencement of the course:

My confidence level has increased so much during the period of this program, a quality that I didn't possess initially. I feel free to speak among my group and the entire class without any fear of making mistakes. In this course, I became used to communication and interaction more often which also helped in increasing my confidence.

According to Chavez (2013), the application of project-based learning motivated English learning of ninth year students; the method allowed teachers and students to interact with each other and developed the students' creativity causing an appropriate environment full of motivation for learning English.

### HPBL Increases Range of Vocabulary

During their discussions, it was observed that some of the students showed an effort to refine their choice of words. What follows is an example of our observation notes:

In week 5, the students exhibited some degree of familiarity with HPBL and some of them used more accurate words, which they did not use in the earlier lessons. For example, while referring to a former lesson, one student

said, "... the fat is harmful for man". Another student said, "Obesity is unhealthy". In week 7 surprisingly most of the students started to show some improvement. Sometimes in overconfidence they tried to use English words and expressions like "junk food" "authentic" and "harmful food" sometimes without knowing their actual meanings. The students became always happy in that they were responsible for themselves; they felt more confident to express themselves freely. They tried not to mix English with Arabic. They were encouraged to use words nearest in meaning to the ones they wanted to use; for example, when looking for the word 'conference', one used the word 'meeting'.

The results from the interview also indicated that the students improved in their vocabulary usage due to the HPBL approach. The students used vocabulary in their communication more accurately. The words used were more understandable and appropriate. Most students mentioned that they had improved in their vocabulary from their previous stage because of the HPBL course. This is true because based on my observation, the students used varieties of vocabulary items in their numerous expressions towards the end of the HPBL course. They could understand and participate in any conversations within the range of their experience, with a good degree of precision in word choice. By using the HPBL method, the students were challenged to enrich themselves on vocabulary variation in order to make a good conversation and for the sake of their discussions. The students' vocabulary achievement improved because they acquired new vocabulary from the treatment, and they become accustomed to speaking in English. They also tried to find new vocabulary from their dictionaries or asked the teacher. A student stated how HPBL improved her speaking ability to use correct vocabulary by constant practice, interaction and group work with her peers:

I have improved in my correct use of vocabulary when speaking English compared with my previous state when I only memorized a small number of words. I was able to achieve this through interaction during the period of the course and group work because I learned a lot of new words from my group members and constant practice of the modules given.

From the students' interactions, it was observed that they tried to use appropriate words in particular contexts. For instance, in the following excerpt, the students were proposing viable solutions to the problem of students' excessive engagement with the social media:

- Usman: It catches the minds of the students.  
 Amir: How?  
 Aish: The students use Facebook always  
 Usman: That the students always think about it.  
 Amir: I think she wanted to say that the students always engage with the Facebook. So how do we write it here? Do we just write it captures the minds of the students?  
 Usman: We need to paraphrase.  
 Amir: Amir: Yes, we need to get the most suitable word. So, what do we\_

- Aish: It affects reading habit of the students.  
 Hana: I think it is the same thing with it catches the mind of the students.  
 Amir: No, it is not the same. We are trying find out the best word.  
 Hana: Let's think. I think we can use the word attraction. It attracts.  
 Muhammad: I think we can use the word attraction.  
 Aish: Let's think of another one before we choose.  
 Usman: We can just write it down then later on we edit it.  
 Amir: Can we use the word distract?  
 Usman: Just write the point.  
 Hana: Then, why not say it distracts students' attention from their books?

A study by Shafaei (2011) revealed a significant relationship between using project-based teaching techniques in foreign language teaching and the learners' performance on standard vocabulary tests, even in delayed post-tests. She concluded that using PBL accelerates vocabulary learning and improves vocabulary recall. Another study by Maulany (2013) again indicated PBL improved speaking skills of students, especially in their vocabulary. Similarly, the study of Poonpon (2011) revealed that students believed their vocabulary knowledge was enhanced from the PBL course because they started to search for information from different sources, and had to read and compare a lot of information before selecting what was appropriate for their project. The studies by Brown (2003) and O'Malley and Lauren (1999) showed that PBL makes students speak English with appropriate vocabulary based on the topic of discussion. Furthermore, the findings from a study by Kamisah and Radjab (2013) revealed that project based learning can improve students' speaking skill and influences students' speaking skill in terms of accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, as well as their confidence. Thus, it can be concluded that the technique is very useful in teaching speaking. This is because the students have many opportunities to practice speaking and have active involvement in their project. Moreover, they work very cooperatively, try to defend their teams, and speak more actively in the classroom. Findings of another study by Mohammed, Keong, and Abdalhussein, (2015), conducted among 11<sup>th</sup> grade among Iraqi secondary students in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, showed that the PBL approach was able to improve students' speaking ability and motivate them toward better language achievement. According to the speaking performance tests in both cycles, the students progressed in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and grammar. Mergendoller, Maxwell, and Bellisimo (2006) argued through empirical research that PBL has a positive effect on students with average to low speaking ability and students with little previous content knowledge. They reported that PBL works as an effective teaching alternative that boosts students' engagement and motivational factors to speak more. Thus, they come to be competent speakers over time.

## CONCLUSION

The results of observations and interviews with the participants showed that HPBL successfully secured the future of the students by making them actively involved in learning to speak English fluently and enabling them to work more autonomously. Therefore, it could be concluded that this model (HPBL) is effective because it has evidently been found to have improved the fluency, grammar, comprehension, vocabulary, intonation, pronunciation, and confidence, of Libyan EFL learners.

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