Panel Discussions: Skilled Communication And Knowledge Construction to Develop EFL Learners' Speaking Performance

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Abstract: The poor speaking performance is a big obstacle for EFL learners to communicate and to construct knowledge. The main aim of the study was to find out how panel discussion can be implemented to develop EFL learners' speaking performance. In panel discussion, students need to understand the topic and to construct knowledge by gathering information and deeply engaged in learning. The study followed action research methodology where data was gathered from an in-depth interview and Test of Spoken English (TSE), collected from 18 students in Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember. The speaking score was better than before the implementation of panel discussion, as seen from the mean score in TSE (64.63 in Preliminary to 70.93 in Cycle 1). The highest achievement made is in the aspects of vocabulary (67% better). Panel discussion can significantly improve speaking because the process of knowledge construction stimulates students to have extended and multimodal communication.

Keywords: panel discussion, skilled communication, knowledge construction, speaking ability

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the existence of the internet equals easier access for information–which is written mostly in English [1],[2]. Educators and learners need to acquire high literacy skills as it involves reading, writing, and conveying ideas in spoken form. In other words, to be able to speak well, one must read well [3]-[5]. EFL learners around the globe, including Indonesian students, are facing problems in learning speaking due to lack of vocabulary, poor ideas development, low self-esteem, poor grammar and spelling, mother tongue influences, lack of practice and uneven participation during classroom hours [6]-[9]. Similar problems are experienced by students at the case school where the research was conducted . To know more about these problems, I did an in-depth interview with eighteen students from the fourth-semester students who were taken from the class that has the lowest speaking achievement. They were passively participating in classroom activities, did not talk much, and were mostly silent during the discussion as they did not feel confident speaking in English. Most of the students here had difficulties conveying their ideas as spoken utterances. They actually knew what to say, even if it's merely a simple concept, but did not know how to say it in English due to lack of vocabulary or afraid that they were going to make grammatical mistakes. Sentences that they produced are commonly simple-structured and were mostly using vocabulary that is generally used on a daily basis. This class had the highest percentage of failure in doing the exam. Based on the data of students' score in the final semester exam, the class's mean score in TSE is 61.85. From this result, I decided to give a preliminary test for the students and the result showed that the mean score was 64.63.

Referring to the above problems, teachers/researchers need to propose an innovative method in teaching speaking. 21st century learning design offers a new curriculum that involves skilled-communication and knowledge construction [10]-[12]. Communication should not be limited in written or spoken language only [13], [14]. It can be in the form of pictures, videos, charts, or audio files, and students should find a medium that best suits their needs to help deliver the message. Skilled communications are required to build and to construct knowledge [15],[16]. When students have knowledge construction, it will help them to easily convey the ideas in spoken utterances.

Students who actively participate in panel discussions develop their speaking through rhetorical skills practice, discussing, debating, questioning, and stating argumentation [17]. Panel discussion has a great deal of impact toward learners' self-confidence [18]. This could be one of the alternatives to solve

their speaking problem. This qualitative research found that learners' self-confidence can be developed through the number of discussion practices that includes presenting and sharing ideas. However, this research was mostly based on biased opinions from the students and they did not have proper preparation before the implementation of panel discussion; the opinions and statements were not supported by factual evidence. Anwar suggested that students should read research journals so they may have more knowledge on the subject matter and can do the practice better. To address this gap, I designed a well-planned project for students where they are required to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the case in order to construct their knowledge about the issue as panel discussion covers divergent topics and subtopics. To be able to do this, students investigate social issues and find possible solutions through multi modal communication. Based on the explanation above, I decided to implement a panel discussion learning model to develop EFL learners' speaking performance at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Panel Discussion

Panel discussion is a discussion where panelists (speakers, specialists, experts who concentrate on a special field) discuss some particular topic which is currently happening or an up-to-date news. In order to play the role as panelists, students need to understand the topic well. The practice of panel discussion requires students to gather information, and to construct and apply knowledge in an interdisciplinary field [19],[20]   . They must process the information through interpretation, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation. The information should be from compatible sources like journals, books or newspapers. During the knowledge construction process, students observed and read a lot. This became a means for students to learn new words and how to arrange sentences in the correct grammatical order.

Skilled Communication

Skilled communication is an extended, multi modal communication. It is not one-way and not limited to just written or spoken utterances. The use of technology potentially supports multiple forms of communication and creates new ways for people to connect to each other through videos, audio files, or pictures [21]-[23]   As single, simple thought could not produce good communication, students need to represent sets of connected ideas. This is where extended communication is required. By combining tools to produce a stronger message, the communication is considered multi-modal. For example, students use a PowerPoint presentation that combines pictures, videos, and charts to explain about the cause of global warming. This has stronger impacts compared to using only words or any element alone. Skilled communication also requires supporting facts and evidence, this means that students need to gather information from credible sources (journals, books, newspapers), and support their thesis with examples.

Knowledge Construction

Students construct knowledge by engaging in deep learning. To be able to do so, they have to interpret, synthesize, analyze, and evaluate the information, then move beyond their existing knowledge and ideas in order to create a new one. Students need to learn across multiple disciplines rather than working within one specific subject. For example, to discuss global warming in a panel discussion, students need to construct their knowledge about real problems happening in the society. Students read scientific journals, browse the internet, see the impact of greenhouse gasses by interviewing real people, and find data and pictures about global warming to be presented later in the discussion. So their project is not only about speaking English but also related to other multidisciplinary subjects like science and social issues.

Speaking Performance

In this study, the aspects of evaluation in speaking performance include fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, content, and detail of the speech. Fluency in English speaking can be obtained through students' experience in practicing the language repeatedly, reading a lot, and reflecting on conversations [24]-[27]   . A learner can be considered fluent if they know exactly what to say in a wide range of sentences [28] speaking is smooth and fluid, no speech hesitation, clear volume of speaking, and no searching for words [29],[30]   . Pronunciation is the way students pronounce words correctly, including the sentence stress and intonation [31]   . Students are hoped to have intelligible, very clear and excellent pronunciation. To make communication effective, the students need to comprehend a wide-range of vocabularies, have excellent language features, and use words properly in a sentence when delivering ideas. Grammar includes some of the aspects of the language system where students understand rules for forming words and creating sentences. Students should make little to zero errors in the grammatical structures, so that listeners do not get difficulties

understanding the messages being conveyed. The content of speech must be error free and contextually correct. To support other speaking components mentioned above, students also need to pay attention to detail [32]   . The explanation must be specific, with an excellent level of description about the topic.

METHOD

In a case where actions need to be done and innovations have to be made to find a practical problem solving, Action Research methodology is the best option available. AR methodology with its cyclical process is suitable to be carried out in this study. The objective of this study as mentioned before was to develop EFL learners' speaking performance through the implementation of a panel discussion learning model that stimulates students to enhance skilled communication and knowledge construction. The methodology covers four stages: plan, implementation, observation and reflection. I followed the design adapted from Ferreira [33] .
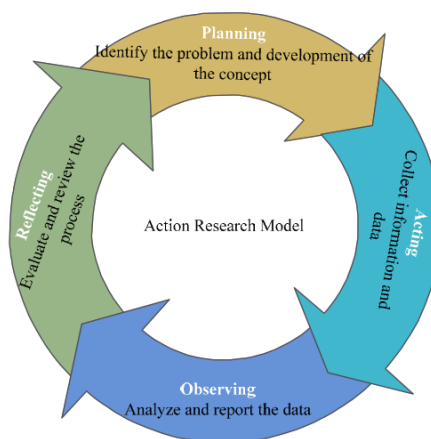

Figure 1. Cyclical Process of AR Methodology

The main stages were preceded by preliminary study and identification and analysis of the problem as shown below:
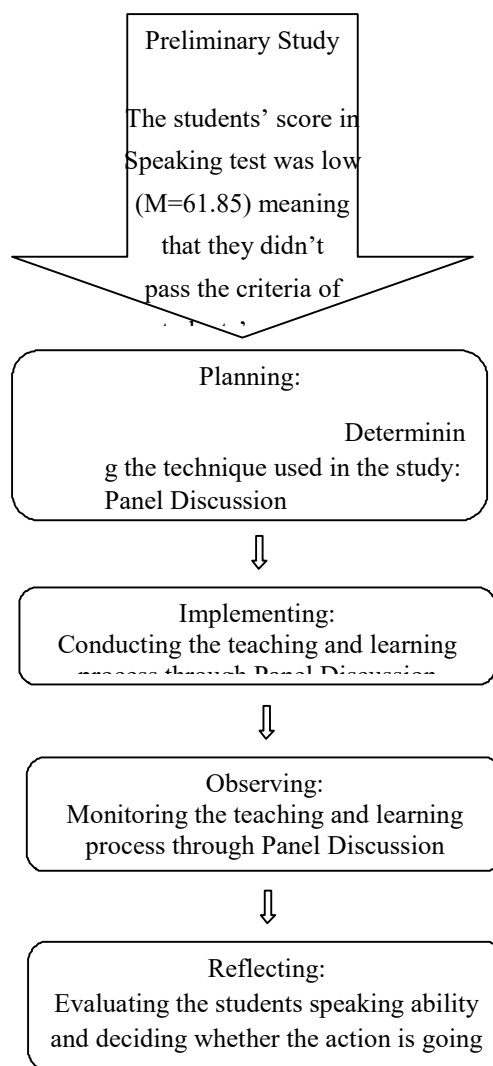
Preliminary Study

The students' score in
Speaking test was low
(M=61.85) meaning
that they didn't
pass the criteria of

Planning:

Determinin
g the technique used in the study:
Panel Discussion

Implementing:
Conducting the teaching and learning
~~process through Panel Discussion~~

Observing:
Monitoring the teaching and learning
process through Panel Discussion

Reflecting:
Evaluating the students speaking ability
and deciding whether the action is going

Figure 2. *Stages of Action Research in the Study*

Setting and Research Subject
The subjects were 18 fourth-semester students (five male, thirteen female, age 19-21) from class A in Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, East Java, Indonesia. The research subjects were chosen based on the consideration that the speaking performance of this class was the lowest among all the fourth-semester classes in Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember.
Research Instrument
    1.   The TSE (Test of Spoken English)
The purpose of using TSE was to identify and to measure the level of speaking performance of the participants. The test was in the form of an interview under a topic about agreement and disagreement. The speaking ability was evaluated using a speaking rubric that includes fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary mastery, grammatical structure, content of the speech, and detail. The speaking rubric used in this research is derived from Foreign Language Program of Studies, Pearson Longman Inc. and Sample Assessment Rubrics. It is a combined rubric because the researcher wanted to find the standard that suits the students most.
    2.   The Speaking Prompts
The speaking prompt will hopefully expand students' vocabulary and help them to come up with the ideas as in figure below.

1.1. Agreement/disagreement
     a. I agree with _____ because…
     b. I think _____ was right because…
     c. I disagree with _____ because…
     d. I don't agree with you because…
     e. I don't think that…

1.2. Questions
     a. Why do you think that…?
     b. Can you tell me more about…?
     c. Can you give me an example of …?
     d. Can you clarify…?

Figure 3. *Speaking Prompts*

Research Procedures

Following the cyclical model from Ferreira, the procedures cover four stages: plan, implementation, observation and reflection which is preceded by a preliminary study and a pretest. In the preliminary study, I observed the final semester score from class A-D to investigate which class of the fourth semester students had the worst problem in speaking and it was class A. The next step in the preliminary was doing an interview with another teacher and students from class A to find out what were their problems in speaking. From the interview with the English teachers at the case school, I found that they never give the list of vocabularies before teaching. They also seldom correct their students when they make mistakes in grammar or pronunciation. After the preliminary study I conducted the pretest using TSE. The topic was about agreement and disagreement. The pretest was in the form of a one-on-one interview. I interviewed the students one by one, every student had approximately 3 to 5 minutes to answer the question.

     1. Planning

First, I designed the students' project. Students did a deep research regarding the topic in three weeks (three meetings) and conducted the panel discussion in week 4. I gave the topic to the students and divided them into groups; students as panelists and students as audiences. During their three-week research, the groups decide their subdivisions based on the topic given. They need to collaborate with their group mates to divide the subdivisions, the job and shared-responsibility for each student, make substantive decisions together, and have to work interdependently. For example, the topic is about the excessive use of plastic. Every student based on the substantive decision and the job division do their research: read scientific journals, gather data, charts, and supporting evidence, take pictures or videos in their surrounding environment where plastic trash cannot be recycled, and interview experts regarding the effect of the excessive use of plastics. While they did the project they were welcome to consult with me and were given feedback and suggestions about their work. The time needed for each panel discussion practice is 90 minutes. The targeted mean score in TSE is 70 based on the Students' Category Scores (Category GOOD: 70-79). The actions were regarded successful if the mean score is minimum 70 ($M \geq 70$).

     2. Implementation

The action given was teaching speaking by using a panel discussion learning model which requires students to have skilled communication and to construct knowledge. Before conducting the panel, I had to make sure that students understood the procedure well. I handed out models and examples of panel discussion in order to give more understanding to the students about what panel discussion is. From those models, I also provided explanations and topic examples related to this study. Panelists or the speakers of the panel had different points to discuss. In this case, I explained what they had to do in preparing research about the topic and subdivisions would be discussed in the panel. Audiences were not only sitting quietly watching the panel but they needed to observe, give supporting opinions, and/or ask questions to the panelists.

The panel discussion learning model was implemented in week 4 after students had done their research. For the discussion which was done in week 4, the panelists were the students number 1-9, and the audiences were

the students number 10-18. The job of the audience was to observe, to agree or disagree, add some opinion, and ask questions to the panelist. During the panel discussion, every panelist had approximately 3 up to 5 minutes to deliver their idea about the subdivisions of the topic that had been given to them at the beginning of the project. For the second practice of panel discussion (week 8), I switched the students' roles. The panelists became the audiences and vice versa. For the third practice (week 12) and the fourth (week 16), they switched again so that every student performed as both panelists and audiences twice. The action was designed to be implemented in 16 meetings at every cycle, including four projects (three meetings each) and four practices of the learning model with four different topics. The topics were as follows: The Excessive Use of Plastics (lesson plan 1), The Digital Economy (lesson plan 2), The Role of Women in Politics (lesson plan 3), and The Alternative Energy (lesson plan 4).

   3. Observation

The observation was done in every meeting, both in students' projects and during the panel discussion practices. For the projects, the groups are required to report their progress weekly. They consulted the results and in return I provided feedback and suggestions about their work. I observed the progress and the improvement in their speaking performances as well: fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, content, and the detail of the speech.

   4. Reflection

Reflection focuses on knowing how far the success or failure has been done on the previous cycle or during the action, based on the observation results. In this reflection I concluded the result of the cycle and the overall implementation to determine whether or not another cycle is needed, and whether or not the action has reached the criteria of success. In doing the reflection, I randomly took five students of class A as a sample and did the scoring together with the collaborator. The collaborator was also a lecturer in Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember. Before giving the test, I showed the TSE prompt and scoring rubrics. I and the collaborator scored the students based on their fluency, accuracy in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, content of the speech and the detail. The reflection was done before conducting the test of Cycle 1. The cycle stopped if the criteria of success had been achieved.

Reliability of the Test

Reliability is determined by the carefulness of the evaluation instrument and the importance of reliability consistency (haas, tillman). Inter-rater reliability is used to know whether the oral test is reliable or not (persons). Based on the calculation, the reliability of the test is 0.89 ($r11 = 0.89$). Meanwhile, R-table for N=18 and significance 95% is 0.878. It can be concluded that the test is reliable because $r11 > r$ table.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of Implementation

   1. Result of Implementation in the First Practice (Meeting 4)

After three weeks of engaging in deep learning, students learnt some new vocabularies, practiced pronouncing new words and used them in sentences. Some students had difficulties using the vocabularies in sentences with proper grammar. The role of the researcher here was to correct their pronunciation and grammatical structure. Students showed their enthusiasm when practicing panel discussion. Some of them were still confused about how to do the panel discussion as this was their first time doing it. Some students playing as panelists answered the question wrong because they didn't really engage in the research project so they did not completely understand the topic. The discussion was not properly done as the audience did not participate actively and did not provide beneficial atmospheres. Only some asked questions to the panelists. The smart students dominated the discussion and students' participation was uneven.

   2. Result of Implementation in the Second Practice (Meeting 8)

Students were getting better in making up sentences using proper grammar. The role of the researcher here was to correct their pronunciation and grammatical structure, and to lead the audience to ask questions to the panelists. Students who were passive in the previous panel discussion practice became more enthusiastic during the second practice. Students with higher intelligence were still dominating the discussion but those with lower level of intelligence participated more compared to what they did in the first panel discussion. Panelists answered the question better because they already did better during the three-week research and had better

preparation in gathering datas and supporting evidence for their statement. The students could do the discussion better than the first practice.

3. Result of Implementation in the Third Practice (Meeting 12)

As this was the second time the students played the role, they became more confident and more fluent in speaking. The researcher gave more details in the feedback to later be discussed with the groups and it boosted the students to have a more qualified content and detail of the speech.

All of the students enjoy playing their role as the panelists and the audiences. The smart students were no longer dominating the discussion and this led to other students becoming more active in the discussion. Students playing as panelists answered the question better as they had better observation and revision from the feedback. The students could do the discussion better than the second practice as most of them were actively involved in the panel discussion.

4. Result of Implementation in the Fourth Practice (Meeting 16)

In the fourth meeting, the students shared and helped their friends in the group optimally. All of the students enjoy playing their role as the panelists and the audiences. The smart students and the other students were almost equal in participating in the panel discussion. Students playing the role as panelists answered the question well, and students playing the role as audiences asking more qualified questions. The students could do the discussion better than the third practice. All of them were actively involved in the panel discussion. They became more confident and more fluent compared to discussion practice 1-3.

Results of Speaking Test

The time for TSE was 90 minutes. I interviewed the students and asked whether or not they agree with the topic. The scoring was done by the collaborator based on the scoring rubrics given by the researcher. For the details, see the scoring rubrics below:

Name	ASPECT OF EVALUATION						Total Score	Converted Score
	Fluency	Pronunciation	Vocabulary	Grammar	Content	Detail		
	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5		
A	√	√	√	√	√	√	(18/30) X 100	60
B								
C								

Table 4.1 *Scoring Rubrics*

Results showed that 15 students got 70 and 3 students got < 70. The mean score was 70.93. The criteria of success is achieved (M = 70) and the cycle can be said to be successful.

Score Category	Interpretation	Frequency		Note
		Pre	C1	
80-100	Excellent	-	1	Passed
70-79	Good	6	14	Passed
60-69	Fair	8	3	Failed
40-59	Poor	4	-	Failed
0-39	Failed	-	-	Failed

From the table above, there were six students who were successful in the preliminary test and twelve others were unsuccessful. It means that only 33 % were able to comprehend the TSE, while 67 % others were not. After the implementation of a panel discussion learning model in the cycle which includes the skilled communication and knowledge construction, there was an improvement of students' speaking score in Cycle 1 TSE. It was found that 15 students were successful and only three failed the test. The average score of the preliminary test was 64.63 improved to 70.93 in Cycle 1 TSE. For the detail, see figure below:
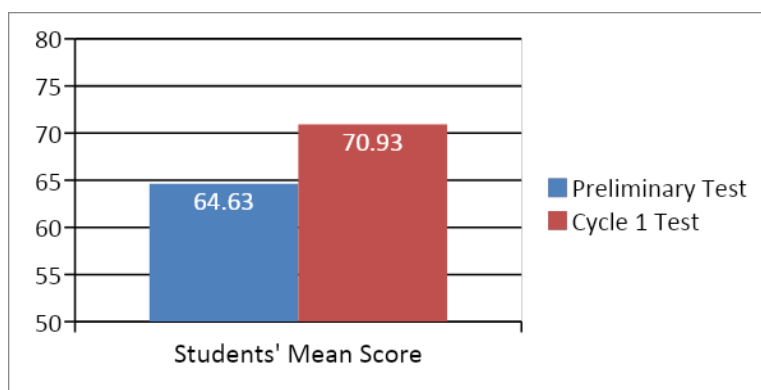

Figure 4. *Students' Mean Score in Preliminary Test and Cycle 1 Test*

Before practicing the panel discussion, students were deeply engaged in learning. During the three-week projects, they collaborated and communicated a lot with friends and people who became the source of information, they read books and journals, they constructed knowledge by analyzing, synthesizing, interpreting and evaluating the information. Of course by the time and the more practice they have (reading, speaking, and evaluating) students will absorb the knowledge and their memory recalls the vocabulary that they have learnt during the process. Task repetition can enhance EFL learners' speaking since it became a habit and fossilized into students' subconsciousness [34]-[36]   . The improvement was scored based on six components. They were the fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, content, and the detail of the speech. The following figure presented the students' improvement on those components:
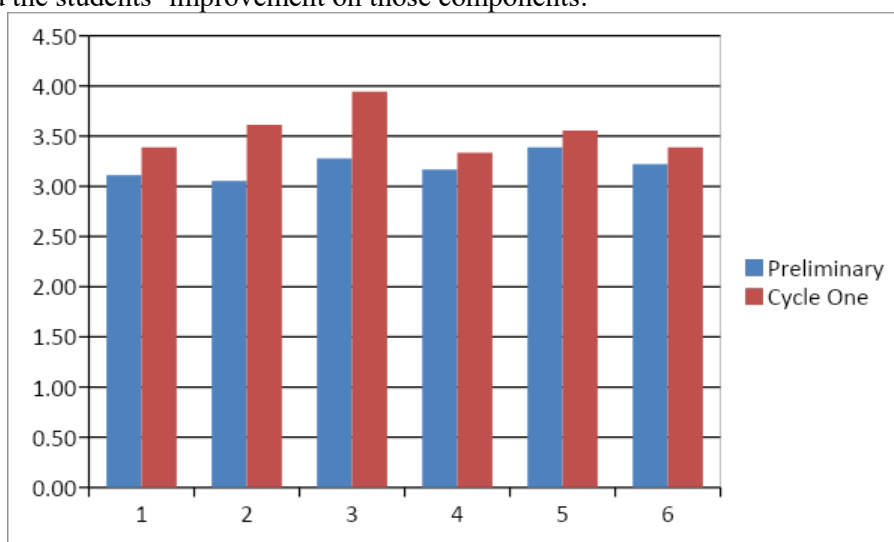

Figure 5. *Students' Improvement on Fluency, Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Grammar, Content & Detail*

From the above figure, we can see that:
a. The mean score of fluency (F) improved from 3.11 in the preliminary to 3.39 in Cycle 1 or 28% better.
b. The mean score of pronunciation (P) improved from 3.06 in the preliminary to 3.61 in Cycle 1 or 56% better.

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c. The mean score of vocabulary (V) improved from 3.28 in the preliminary to 3.94 in Cycle 1 or 67% better.
d. The mean score of grammar (G) improved from 3.17 in the preliminary to 3.33 in Cycle 1 or 17% better.
e. The mean score of content (C) improved from 3.39 in preliminary to 3.56 in Cycle 1 or 17% better.
f. The mean score of detail (D) improved from 3.22 in preliminary to 3.39 in Cycle 1 or 17% better.

The students' speaking components were better than the preliminary test since the implementation of panel discussion practice which was done for four months. The highest achievement made in the aspects of speaking was in vocabulary (67% better), followed by pronunciation (56%), fluency (28%), and grammatical structure, content, and the detail of the speech (17%). In every practice of panel discussion, students' were required to read a lot of scientific journals, books, newspapers, and other credible sources of information. Multi modal communication through the use of technology (social media, ebooks), pictures, and audio files can enhance learners' vocabulary [37]-[41]

The main goal of the researcher in conducting this research is to improve EFL learners' speaking performance. The actions were regarded successful if the mean score of the students is minimum 70 ($M \geq 70$). The requirement of the criteria of success in this research can be achieved in one cycle (16 meetings) with the increasing mean score from 64.63 in preliminary to 70.93 in Cycle 1. The more research and practices the students do, the better their performance in speaking.

CONCLUSION

Referring to the research problem, the implementation of panel discussion is able to develop EFL learners' speaking performance as the students are required to have skilled communication and to construct knowledge. In practicing the learning model, students should always develop skilled communication, collaborate with friends, consult with teachers, and construct knowledge. Students as panelists will have to do more research than one class period, preparing data and supporting facts, engage in deep learning, and analyze and evaluate problems that happen in their surrounding environment. For the audience, they can observe how the discussion is going and listen to different points of view elaborated by the panelists.

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