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## A Case Study of a Young Child With 'Selective Mutism' Condition in Speaking

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### Abstrak

Studi kasus ini mengkaji pengalaman seorang anak laki-laki birasial berusia 4 tahun dengan gejala mutisme selektif (SM), suatu kondisi yang menghalanginya berbicara dalam situasi sosial, seperti lingkungan prasekolah. Untuk mengatasi SM pada anak laki-laki tersebut, para peneliti menerapkan Pembelajaran Berbasis Proyek (PjBL) sebagai strategi untuk mengurangi kecemasannya di lingkungan sekolah dan meningkatkan kepercayaan dirinya dalam komunikasi verbal dengan teman sekelasnya. Pilihan PjBL didasarkan pada teori pembelajaran bahasa behavioris dan interaksionis, yang menyatakan bahwa pemerolehan bahasa terjadi melalui peniruan, penguatan, dan praktik, yang difasilitasi oleh proyek kolaboratif dan interaksi intensif. Dalam penelitian ini, anak laki-laki tersebut dan teman-teman sekelasnya berpartisipasi dalam proyek "Pemandangan Taman" selama dua minggu, di mana mereka membuat kerajinan bertema taman menggunakan karton. Sepanjang proyek, mereka belajar dan menggunakan kosakata bahasa Inggris yang berkaitan dengan komponen taman. Tujuannya adalah agar anak laki-laki tersebut pada akhirnya mengucapkan kata-kata seperti "matahari", "bunga", "rumput", dan "pohon apel" dengan lantang di depan orang lain. Di akhir proyek, selama presentasi kelompok, anak tersebut berhasil mengucapkan kata-kata ini dengan lantang di depan penonton, menunjukkan berkurangnya kecemasannya dan peningkatan kepercayaan diri verbalnya. Hasil ini menunjukkan bahwa PjBL diharapkan dapat memfasilitasi pengembangan keterampilan sosial dan komunikasi anak laki-laki tersebut, sehingga membantu meringankan kondisi SM-nya. Hasil positif dari kasus ini menunjukkan bahwa PjBL mungkin merupakan strategi yang layak bagi para pendidik dan terapis yang menangani anak-anak yang memiliki tantangan serupa.

Kata Kunci: *Project-Based Learning (PjBL)*, *Selective Mutism (SM)*, *Keterampilan Berbicara*

## Abstract

This case study examines the experience of a 4-year-old biracial male with symptoms of selective mutism (SM), a condition that prevents him from speaking in social situations, such as his preschool environment. To address the boy's SM, the researchers implemented Project-Based Learning (PjBL) as a strategy to reduce his anxiety in school setting and improve his confidence in verbal communication with his classmates. The choice of PjBL is grounded in both behaviorist and interactionist theories of language learning, which suggest that language acquisition occurs through imitation, reinforcement, and practice, facilitated by collaborative projects and intensive interaction. In this study, the boy and his classmates participated in a two-week "Garden View" project, during which they created garden-themed crafts using cardboard. Throughout the project, they learned and used English vocabulary related to garden components. The goal was for the boy to eventually say words like "sun," "flowers," "grass," and "apple trees" aloud in front of others. By the end of the project, during a group presentation, the child successfully said aloud these words in front of an audience, demonstrating a reduction in his anxiety and an increase in his verbal confidence. This outcome indicates that PjBL is expected to facilitate the development of the boy's social and communication skills, thereby helping to alleviate his SM condition. The positive results from this case suggest that PjBL may be a viable strategy for educators and therapists working with children who have similar challenges.

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Selective Mutism (SM), Speaking Skill*

## INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a major aspect of English communication skills. However, many factors can hinder the ability to speak, one of which is a psychological condition known as Selective Mutism (SM). Selective Mutism is characterized by a consistent failure to speak in specific social situations despite being capable of speech in other settings. For example, a student may be unable to speak to teachers or classmates but can speak without any problems at home to parents or siblings. The condition typically starts in early childhood between ages 2 and 4 and is more common in multilingual households and immigrant families (Starke, 2018). In fact, more than 50% of children with SM have comorbid social anxiety disorder and speech impairment.

Several studies have reported the longitudinal effects of SM on the language learning process. For instance, children with SM may exhibit less social competence in both nonverbal and verbal social situations due to their withdrawal from social interactions, making it difficult for them to make friends (Diliberto & Kearney, 2016). The effects of SM also extend to the academic setting. A study found that children with SM often have lower academic performance (Mulligan et al., 2015). Additionally, teachers report greater difficulty establishing relationships based on affective closeness with children affected by SM

compared to unaffected children (Longobardi et al., 2019).

The behaviorist theory suggests that selective mutism occurs due to the reinforcement of undesirable behavior. For instance, a child could choose not to communicate verbally due to feeling pressured to speak fluently, opting for silence as a means to alleviate anxiety in such circumstances (Fernández & Cairns, 2020). This reinforcement makes the child believe that their silence successfully reduces anxiety. Unfortunately, if this situation continues without intervention, it can lead to severe speech difficulties in social situations (Walter, 2023). Failure to address selective mutism during early stages can have long-lasting effects on communication abilities throughout adulthood (Satang, 2024).

In the current educational setting of the researchers, there is a 4-year-old biracial child with Selective Mutism. He has been a preschool student for 1.5 years. His parents mentioned that his primary language is English, while Indonesian is his secondary language. School observations indicate that he only communicates freely with one friend and his homeroom teacher, and only during one-on-one interactions. He avoids speaking and making eye contact in group settings or when being observed by others. When prompted to speak, he often stutters and speaks softly, almost in a whisper. He frequently relies on body language to convey his messages. However, at home, he converses comfortably with his family and does not exhibit any speech difficulties, as shown in videos provided by his parents. In unfamiliar environments outside his home, he appears hesitant or anxious to speak.

This problem hinders the child's language development. According to Scharf et al (2016), children aged 3-4 should be able to confidently say names for groups of things like 'vegetables,' 'plants,' or 'animals,' use family terms like 'aunty' or 'brother,' and string together 3-5 words to express their needs in their first language. However, observing the language development of children with selective mutism according to milestones is difficult due to their inability to speak in social settings. Inevitably, communication problems can hinder future learning. Therefore, a strategy is needed that does not pressure the child to speak independently but empowers him to be involved, interact, and express himself through stress-free project activities. This aligns with Lev et al (2020), who state that group work involves communication between members and engaging projects, which can stimulate reluctant speakers to be more open and articulate their ideas.

Engaging children with selective mutism in group projects is suggested by Longobardi et al (2019), who note that continuous imitation, appreciation, practice, and interaction with friends are beneficial for overcoming SM and stimulating speech. This approach is rooted in behaviorism, which posits that spoken language is learned through imitation, appreciation, and practice (Budiman, 2017). Behaviorism emphasizes observable stimulus-response

interactions and the relationships between them. Fun group activities can reduce the burden of interaction for SM children by involving them in shared tasks. Project-Based Learning (PjBL) seems to be a suitable solution for children with SM in EFL classroom interactions. PjBL enables children to gain knowledge and skills by engaging with and exploring their environment, fostering teamwork and interaction. In PjBL, students collaborate on projects, which can range from short tasks to more involved assignments over a month or semester. Although PjBL involves group work, it is highly recommended for children with SM to improve their speaking skills.

The researchers conducted preliminary research and observed the child in the classroom before implementing PjBL. They made efforts to involve him in group play, despite his initial reluctance. The child gradually became more excited and eventually joined his peers when he noticed a miniature cow. Although he enjoyed playing, he did not verbally communicate, relying on gestures instead. This presented a challenge for the researcher: how to promote speech while ensuring a comfortable setting. To tackle this issue, the researcher utilized Project-Based Learning with a behaviorist perspective to motivate the child to participate and express himself in a supportive, collaborative setting. This method aims to alleviate the child's anxiety and enhance verbal communication through structured, interactive activities.

#### RESEARCH METHOD

The research was carried out over the course of four sessions. Observational methods were employed to gather the necessary data. These data were then analyzed to assess the child's development in terms of both verbal communication and social abilities. In summary, the following table outlines the implemented plan for the case study.

Table 1. Individualized Educational Program (IEP)

| Individualized Educational Program (IEP) |   |
|--|---|
| General Information                      |   |
| Student's Initials                       | : AM  |
| Age                                      | : 4 years old   |
| Class                                    | : Preschool A   |
| Time Allocation                          | : 4 meetings x 30 minutes   |
| Project Activities: Garden View Project  |   |
| Meeting 1                                | Making art and crafts of garden components, such as sun and flowers |
| Meeting 2                                | Making art and crafts of garden components,                         |

| Individualized Educational Program (IEP)   |  |
|--|--|
|  | such as grasses  |
| Meeting 3  | Making art and crafts of garden components, such as apple trees  |
| Meeting 4  | Presenting the projects to the parents in class exhibition   |
| Learning Outcomes  | To say aloud few English words about garden components in front of others (Listening and Speaking skills)<br>To improve collaboration through group project (Social skills)<br>To improve creativity, imagination, and hand-and-eye coordination (Fine motor skills) |
| Materials  |  |
| Meeting 1  | Cardboards in the shape of a sun and flowers<br>Paints<br>Brush  |
| Meeting 2  | Cardboards in the shape of grasses and bench<br>Paints<br>Brush  |
| Meeting 3  | Cardboards in the shape of trees<br>Stickers of Apple<br>Paints<br>Brush   |
| Meeting 4  | Presentation (Saying aloud the vocabulary of garden components)  |
| Learning Activities and Method   |  |
| <p>Meeting 1:</p> <p>The child was put in a group of 5 students.</p> <p>The teacher invited the child and his group members to do the nature walk in the garden.</p> <p>The teacher asked the child and his group members to say the names of the objects that they see in the garden, such as sun, flowers, grass, and trees. The child imitates the words (Behaviourism theory).</p> <p>The teacher invited the child and his group members to make a craft of sun and flowers by painting the cardboards. (Project-based learning method)</p> |  |

|   |
|---|
| Individualized Educational Program (IEP)  |
| The child and his group members were encouraged to say the words 'sun' and 'flowers' repeatedly while doing the project. (Behaviourism theory).   |
| <p>Meeting 2:</p> <p>The child and his group members were asked to say the words that they learned in the previous meeting (sun and flowers). (Behaviourism theory).</p> <p>The teacher invited the child and his group members to see some grass near the classroom door.</p> <p>The teacher asked the child and his group members to touch the texture of grass and say the word 'grass'. It gave a prior knowledge about 'grass' to the child.</p> <p>The teacher invited the child and his group members to make craft of grass.<br/>(Project-based learning method)</p> <p>The child and his group members were encouraged to say the words 'grass' repeatedly while doing the project. (Behaviourism theory).</p> |
| <p>Meeting 3:</p> <p>The child and his group members were asked to say the words that they learned in the previous meetings (sun, flowers, and grass). (Behaviourism theory).</p> <p>The teacher invited the child and his group members to see the miniature of a tree.</p> <p>The teacher asked the child and his group members to observe the tree and say the word 'tree'.</p> <p>The teacher invited the child and his group members to make craft of apple trees<br/>(Project-based learning method)</p> <p>The child and his group members are encouraged to say the words 'apple trees' repeatedly while doing the project. (Behaviourism theory).</p>  |
| <p>Meeting 4:</p> <p>The child and his group members showed their project works in the class exhibition and said the names of the objects that their crafts represent, such as sun, flowers, grass, and apple trees in front of other classmates.</p>   |
| Evaluation Technique  |
| Observation field notes (take notes in every meeting to describe the activities of the child at school and examine whether there is progress after experiencing PjBL.)  |

## RESULT AND DISSCUSION

### 1. Result

#### A. Project-Based Learning Implementation and Child's Progress

Through four sessions, the utilization of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) resulted in notable advancements in the child's verbal communication skills within a social environment. The carefully planned meetings aimed to boost the child's self-assurance and alleviate any apprehension related to public speaking. The activities centered around garden-related crafts and vocabulary, creating a comfortable and encouraging atmosphere for the child to enhance their speaking abilities.

#### B. Meeting 1: Introduction to Sun and Flowers

In the first meeting, the focus was on creating crafts of the sun and flowers. Initially, the child exhibited hesitation and was reluctant to participate. However, through engaging in the crafting activity alongside his peers and receiving consistent encouragement from the teacher, he began to engage more actively. The teacher used repetition and reinforcement techniques to help the child start imitating the words "sun" and "flowers." By the end of the session, the child managed to say these words during the activity, indicating initial signs of reduced anxiety and increased verbal engagement (Mitchell et al., 2019).

#### C. Meeting 2: Learning about Grass

The second meeting introduced the concept of grass. The activity involved observing real grass and then creating grass-themed crafts. The child showed a keen interest in the sensory experience of touching and observing grass, which helped in building his prior knowledge and comfort with the new vocabulary. Encouraged to say the word "grass" repeatedly while engaging in the craft activity, the child began to show increased confidence. He not only repeated "grass" but also used the words learned in the previous meeting ("sun" and "flowers"). This session marked a noticeable improvement in his verbal confidence and willingness to speak.

#### D. Meeting 3: Introduction to Trees

The third meeting focused on apple trees. The child and his group members were introduced to the miniature of a tree and then engaged in crafting apple trees. By this session, the child displayed a more proactive attitude, actively participating in the crafting process and using the words "sun," "flowers," and "grass" with increasing ease. The structured repetition and supportive group environment helped the child to successfully incorporate "apple trees" into his vocabulary. This session demonstrated the child's growing comfort and proficiency in using new words in a social setting.

#### E. Meeting 4: Presentation

The fourth and final meeting culminated in a class exhibition where the child and his peers presented their crafts to parents and classmates. This presentation required the child to say the words "sun," "flowers," "grass," and "apple trees" in front of an audience. The child's performance during this session was a significant milestone, as he successfully articulated these words, marking a substantial reduction in his speaking anxiety. This achievement not only highlighted the progress in his verbal communication skills but also indicated a positive shift in his social interaction abilities.

#### F. Impact on Social and Communication Skills

The gradual and supportive nature of PjBL, combined with the behaviorist approach of repeated practice and positive reinforcement, significantly contributed to the child's progress. The collaborative environment allowed the child to interact with peers, fostering social skills alongside verbal communication. Notably, the child's reluctance to speak and avoidance of eye contact decreased over the course of the project.

- a) Social Skills: The child's engagement in group activities improved, indicating enhanced social competence and willingness to interact with classmates.
- b) Communication Skills: Repeated verbal practice in a non-threatening environment facilitated the child's ability to articulate words clearly.

## 2. Discussion

The findings from this study support and extend previous research on the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and behaviorist approaches in helping children with Selective Mutism (SM) improve their verbal and social skills. The child's progress over the four sessions underscores the supportive activities to mitigate the challenges associated with SM, namely speaking skills, social skills, academic, and emotional impact.

#### A. Speaking Skills Development

The use of PjBL in this study aligns with Lev et al (2020) assertion that group work, which inherently involves communication between members, can stimulate reluctant speakers to be more open and articulate their ideas. The garden-themed project provided a familiar and engaging context, allowing the child to build confidence gradually. This method effectively created a low-pressure environment where the child could practice speaking without the intense anxiety typically associated with more direct forms of verbal interaction. The significant reduction in the child's anxiety and the corresponding increase in verbal communication corroborate Longobardi et al (2019)

findings. Their research emphasized the benefits of continuous imitation, appreciation, practice, and interaction with peers in overcoming SM. By integrating these elements into the PjBL activities, the study successfully fostered a supportive learning atmosphere that encouraged verbal expression.

Behaviorist theory, which posits that behaviors (including speech) can be learned through imitation and reinforcement, also underpinned the intervention strategy used in this study. Fernández & Cairns (2020) highlighted how reinforcement of negative behavior, such as silence, can perpetuate SM. Conversely, the positive reinforcement techniques employed during the project activities helped the child associate speaking with positive outcomes, thus gradually reducing anxiety (Walter, 2023).

#### B. Social Skill Development (H2 Accepted)

The child's progression through the four meetings demonstrated notable improvements in both social skills. This supports Diliberto & Kearney (2016) observation that children with SM often exhibit reduced social competence due to their withdrawal from social interactions. By engaging the child in group activities that required collaboration and communication, the study helped enhance his social skills. The structured nature of the activities, combined with the supportive group environment, allowed the child to practice social interactions in a safe and predictable context.

#### C. Emotional Development's Impact on Academic Performance (H3 Accepted)

The findings also reflect Mulligan et al (2015) study, which linked SM to lower academic performance. The PjBL approach not only aimed to improve verbal communication but also contributed to the child's overall engagement and participation in classroom activities, which are crucial for academic success. By creating opportunities for the child to succeed in speaking tasks, the study helped boost his confidence and reduce the fear of speaking in front of others, potentially leading to better academic outcomes.

Additionally, the emotional impact of the intervention cannot be overlooked. The child's increasing willingness to make eye contact and engage with peers indicates a reduction in social anxiety, which is commonly comorbid with SM (Starke, 2018). This positive shift in emotional well-being is crucial for the child's overall development and future learning experiences.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in this study has proven to be a highly effective approach in enhancing a child's speaking and social skills, particularly in the context of overcoming Selective Mutism (SM). Over the course of four structured and supportive sessions, the child's ability to articulate words and interact socially showed significant improvement. The garden-themed activities provided a familiar and engaging setting that facilitated gradual confidence building and anxiety reduction. The structured and supportive implementation of PjBL has demonstrated considerable potential in addressing the challenges associated with SM. The gradual improvement in the child's communication and social skills, alongside positive academic and emotional outcomes, underscores the value of this approach in educational settings. This study reinforces the importance of creating low-pressure, engaging environments that encourage reluctant speakers to participate and succeed.

Given the success of the PjBL approach in this study, further research is suggested to replicate the intervention across different categories of children with SM, including variations in age, severity of symptoms, and gender. Additionally, incorporating a control group in future studies would help determine the efficacy of PjBL more rigorously by comparing outcomes with those who do not receive the intervention. Such studies would provide deeper insights into the generalizability and robustness of PjBL as an effective strategy for addressing the challenges associated with Selective Mutism.

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