The Use of Project-based Learning Focusing on Drama to Promote Speaking Skills of EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT
This study focuses on the use of project-based learning focusing on drama to promote the speaking skills of EFL learners. It also aims to investigate how the use of project-based learning focusing on drama is beneficial to learners’ speaking skills. The participants of this study were EFL learners majoring in English who were enrolled in Learning English through Drama course. The data of the current study was collected quantitatively and qualitatively. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis revealed that learners’ speaking skills were improved as a result of the use of project-based learning focusing on drama. Moreover, the principles of project-based learning and drama are advantageous for learners’ language learning and speaking skills. Hence, the use of project-based learning focusing on drama is recommended for promoting speaking skills and affective factors. The present study also highlights the advantages of using project-based learning focusing on drama as an effective teaching method as it provides learners with opportunities to speak English and is seen as an enjoyable way for learners to learn a foreign language. Finally, the study recommends the use of project-based learning focusing on drama in the language classroom as it provides learners with opportunities to speak a foreign language in a communicative context.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

English is an important language which is used as a tool for communication. It is used as a medium for various purposes such as education, business, tourism, and so on. English is a necessary foreign language which is used by people who speak different first languages in order to communicate with each other. Generally, speaking is an important skill as people use it to communicate for different functions and purposes. One important goal of learning English is to be able to communicate in English effectively. According to Bygate (2001, p.4), speaking involves the development of a particular type of communication skills. Speaking skill refers to the ability to function in the language which is generally characterized in terms of being able to speak the language (Nunan, 1999). It is seen as an important tool for learners to convey meaning and communicate successfully. Various communicative activities have been used to develop learners’ speaking skills. There are studies to confirm the effectiveness of project-based learning and drama instruction on learners’ communication (Miller, 2006; Miccoli, 2003; Gorjian et al., 2010). Project-based learning and drama impart advantageous benefits for learners’ language learning. Both of them rely on a learner-centered approach which focuses on learner independence and learner autonomy. Moreover, they respond to the objectives of communicative language teaching which steers learners to use language for communicative purposes. Hence the integration of project-based learning and drama could greatly help in learners’ development in language learning. There are various advantages of project-based learning and drama. Firstly, project-based learning and drama are beneficial for the development of learners’ speaking skills as they encourage learners to communicate actively and provide them with a useful speaking context. The principles in project-based learning and drama help the learners to develop their communicative skills through an active learning process. This is achieved by active interaction, discussion and negotiation among learners. Secondly, these two methodologies are advantageous for learners’ affective factors. This means that
learners’ motivation and confidence can be developed through fun instruction in a non-threatening environment. Thirdly, both methodologies encourage learners to learn and work through a cooperative learning context. Learners are required to work with their friends cooperatively and collaboratively in order to reach the goals of project-based learning and drama activities.

Rationale of the Study

According to Fried-Booth (2002), project-based learning is an approach which is popularly used to develop learners’ language learning in different levels and context. The project work is student-centered and focuses on the end-product so it is useful for learners’ development in language skills. Moreover, the process of producing an end-product provides the students with opportunities to develop their confidence and independence. While working on projects, students are required to work together on different tasks in an authentic context. In addition, project-based learning is appropriate with mixed ability class, and it provides learners with opportunities for individuals to contribute in ways which reflect their different talents and creativity. Fischer (2015) mentions that a project offers a chance for students to develop many skills because they work on the project themselves.

Drama is useful for the development of learners’ language skills. Maley and Duff (2006) note that drama integrates language skills in a natural way. It also integrates verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. Drama is used to develop learner’s language skills such as speaking skills. Hilliard (2016) explains that drama contributes to speaking skills as it relates to both verbal and non-verbal communication. Firstly, it relates to pronunciation, diction and voice control. For the latter case, drama is also relevant to body language and gestures, facial gestures, stance and posture. These verbal and non-verbal communication help learners to interact with their interlocutors in real life. To work on drama activities, learners can practice their speaking skills through working on intonation, stress and register. There are various advantages of drama. One of the greatest advantages of drama is that drama lifts the words off the page and makes language learning become active, meaningful and fun. Ashton-Hay (2005) explains that drama is useful for learners’ oral skills development as it assists them with pronunciation and intonation.

Mastery of English speaking is seen as one important characteristic of an efficient English speaker. EFL learners require constant practice to enhance their oral expression and speaking fluency. In order to gain effective speaking skills, learners should practice their speaking skills in communicative ways and in an authentic context. Affective factors are also important parts for learners’ speaking effectiveness. However, some EFL learners lack the confidence to use English in and outside of the classroom though they have studied English for many years. Zyoud (2010) mentions that the problem may result from the conventional English class which provides students with few chances to use language. Students thus lack adequate exposure to spoken English outside the classroom as well as lack exposure to native speakers who can communicate with the students in an authentic manner. To practice English in an authentic context may prove difficult for EFL learners as most of the communicating in their surrounding environment is based on their L1. Consequently, the learners may have less chance to practice and produce speaking skills in an active environment as they basically speak English in a non-English speaking context.

Statement of the Problem

The ability to speak a foreign language is seen as an important characteristic of good language learners. However, many Thai learners are unable to use English for effective communicative purposes. Some learners cannot express their feelings or thoughts efficiently. One important reason might be due to lack of opportunities to use English language in authentic communicative ways. Even though the classroom is a major place for learners to use language, it seems that learners have fewer opportunities to use language outside of the classroom. Therefore, it is necessary to consider what can be done to provide learners with opportunities to practice speaking skills both inside and outside class time. Harmer (2007) suggests some useful activities for encouraging students to practice their English as follows. Firstly, students can be encouraged to practice speaking outside the classroom through rehearsal. Secondly, lecturers can help the students by providing feedback on the activities they are working on or assisting when they have language problems. Finally, students should be engaged in good speaking activities which can motivate them to play an active part in the speaking class. Project-based learning provides learners with opportunities to focus on language functions through various tasks in the project. Furthermore, drama is seen as a method which encourages learners to speak English in a meaningful context and through interesting communicative activities. Both these methodologies can be used to encourage learners to speak in the provided context.

Nakorn Ratchasima Rajabhat University (NRRU) is a local university in the North Eastern part of Thailand. It provides various academic curriculums which serve different purposes of teaching and learning. English major is one field which aims to develop learners’ English proficiency for various purposes. English major students study English related subjects with aim of using English for communicative purposes. The students are required to use their English skills effectively. Basically, the students use English in the classroom which is the main context for them to practice their English speaking skills. However, they have less chance to practice their speaking skills outside the classroom. This is one reason why the researcher would like to study how project-based learning and drama can be used to promote learners’ speaking skills. It is expected that the use of project-based learning focusing on drama will provide students with opportunities to practice their speaking skills through communicative activities both inside and outside class time.

Significance of the Study

This study can provide insightful perspectives on how project-based learning and drama can be integrated to promote learners’ speaking skills. Moreover, it can lead to the teaching practice of how to develop learners’ speaking skills. However, few studies are available which focus on how to integrate the advantages of project-based learning and drama.
through a drama project with language students in an EFL learning context. This study hypothesizes that the use of project-based learning focusing on drama helps to promote learners’ speaking skills.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows. Firstly, it examines the results of using project-based learning focusing on drama to promote EFL learners’ speaking skills. Secondly, it aims to see how the use of project-based learning focusing on drama is beneficial for learners’ speaking skills. Such a study can be advantageous to both language learners and teachers. It could provide useful leads to creating effective speaking instruction for EFL teaching and learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-based Learning

Project-based learning is supportive to second language and foreign language learning (Stoller, 2006, p.34). It is used to develop learners in different areas. The benefits of project-based learning on learners include motivation, language skills, ability to function in groups, content learning, self-confidence, autonomy, and decision-making abilities. Project-based learning is referred to as a teaching model that organizes learning around projects (Thomas, 2000). To work on projects, students are assigned various tasks and required to complete the end-product. The tasks include designing, problem solving, decision making, investigating activities, and so on. Project-based learning aims to develop learners’ skills through meaningful activities based on the project (Rochmahwati, 2015). Project-based learning is valuable as it is connected to real-world issues and encourages learners to demonstrate their knowledge in practical ways. Moreover, it engages learners in sustained investigations and allows learners to participate in different tasks in a meaningful situation. For language teaching, Miller (2006) mentions that project-based instruction encourages teachers to teach various instructional goals such as promoting communication, integrating the study of culture with language, making connections between language and content, and making comparisons between the students’ first and second languages. Fischer (2015) mentions that a project may include small scale products such as a research topic or it could be extended to be larger-scale products such as exhibitions, murals, or even full plays. There are various studies to support the effectiveness of project-based learning on students’ language development. Rochmahwati (2015) examined the effect of project-based learning implementation toward students’ speaking ability. The study showed that there are positive results of the implementation on students’ speaking skills. Moreover, the students showed significantly positive attitude toward the implementation of project-based learning in the speaking class. Furthermore, Marwan (2015) conducted an action research implementing project-based learning with information and communication technology in an English classroom with 25 students of vocational higher institution. The results of the study showed that the students became more motivated to use English. Moreover, they experienced more interesting and meaningful learning in a project-based learning English class.

Drama

Drama is useful for teaching and learning of English because it brings to the learners knowledge about language and the development of language skills (Stewig & Buege, 1994, p.118). Drama is not only a performance, but it is a final product or output of a whole learning process (Fuentes, 2010, p.321). According to Chauhan (2004), when students act and interact, they are using their own personal store of language in order to communicate in a meaningful manner. So the students have opportunities to improve their linguistic abilities and oral communication. Drama leads to development of learners’ speaking fluency. Hillyard (2016) mentions that drama provides learners with drilling and use of ‘divided attention’. In doing this, learners’ attention is not only focused on accuracy, but also other physical activities. The aim of teaching English through drama is not to turn learners into professional actors, but to provide learners with an aid to learn and rehearse the language in its given context (Banerjee, 2014). Moreover, drama promotes a healthy and interactive environment for the learning of English. There are also studies to support the advantages of drama on students’ language skills. Firstly, Banjeree (2014) focused on the results of using drama for teaching and learning language and communication skills in the classroom. The results revealed that using drama in the classroom made learning experiences meaningful and fun. Teaching English through drama is a useful tool to encourage students to learn meaningful communication. In another study, Khosronejad and Parviz (2013) determined the effect of dramatized instruction on the speaking ability of EFL learners. The results of the study showed that dramatized instruction has positive effects on learners’ speaking skills. Drama is seen as a main aid in the acquisition of communicative competence which is an important part of speaking ability. Moreover, drama is beneficial to learners as it encourages students to become more self-confident in their English usage by experiencing the language in operation and real-life situations. Next, Manjooran and Resmi (2013) conducted a comparative study that involved the use of theatrical performance to enhance the communicative skills and confidence of a classroom of English language learners. The study showed that the students who received the instruction through the theatrical performance improved communicative abilities than those students in the control group who did not provide with the theatrical performance. The results suggest that drama activities can be used to enhance learners’ language skills. Moreover, the drama activities can motivate them to use the target language.

To summarize, both project-based learning and drama are useful for learners’ language learning development. They are used to promote learners’ language skills including speaking skills. To integrate project-based learning and drama is advantageous for both teaching and learning of English as the integration provides opportunities to learners to use language and encourage them to function on language through communicative activities in an active learning environment.
**METHOD**

**Design of a Study**

This study is based on one group pre-test and post-test design which aims to see the results of using project-based learning focusing on drama to promote learners’ speaking skills. The participants in this study were a group of 23 students who participated in the research study. To collect data, students were first pre-tested on their speaking skills. Next, the students studied the learning content in ‘Learning English through Drama’ course. Then, they worked on their drama project. They were post-tested on their speaking skills after they finished the drama project. Also, they were interviewed and assigned to reflect on their opinions towards the use of project-based learning focusing on drama to promote learners’ speaking skills. These qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed and used to interpret the results and its effects.

**Procedure**

**Stages of projects**

According to Fried-Booth (2002), each project consists of 3 steps: the planning stage, the implementation stage, and the creation of the end-product. Firstly, the planning stage requires discussion between teacher and students for the scope and content of the project. The teacher and the students shared ideas in details such as specific language needs. Students may come up with various ideas and shared with other members who worked in the project. The students were firstly notified that they were going to work on a drama project. The aims of this research and stages of the project were explained to them. Shakespeare was the theme for working on the project. ‘Romeo & Juliet’, a famous Shakespearean work, was selected for the project with agreement from the students. ‘Romeo & Juliet’ was assigned to them as it corresponded with the students’ language proficiency levels and students’ interest. Various issues had to be considered in order to plan a drama performance of this stage. As the project involved with large amount of work, the following had to be taken into consideration: amount of time, students’ responsibilities, motivation of teacher and students, voice projection, audio-visual elements, feedback and suggestions (Maley & Duff, 2006, p.238).

Secondly, the implementation stage aims students to work on different tasks of the project. In doing this, the students are expected to work on different roles. Teacher’s role is important as he or she is required to support and monitor the process of the students. At this stage, students participated in various tasks of the project, such as script writing, setting design, costumes, text analysis, cast, poster publicity, sounds and effects integration, and rehearsal. Students independently chose to work on different tasks according to their abilities and preferences. Moreover, they were allowed to take on different characters and roles. In this study, the teacher was seen as a facilitator who assisted students and approved the content. Moreover, the teacher assisted whenever the students could not reach a common decision or when the students needed to make careful consideration on important issues.

Finally, the creation of the end-product is the last step of the project. The end-product of this research study was a drama performance on stage. The performance lasted approximately 45 minutes. The students performed in front of an audience with all the elements of a drama production. A dramatic performance is beneficial to students in various ways: linguistic reinforcement, pronunciation practice, becoming more familiar with the text, self-esteem development, discussion skills, and meaning-focused (Maley & Duff, 2006, p.229). In terms of evaluation and feedback which are important processes at this stage, the students’ drama performance was evaluated based on verbal language, non-verbal language, learning lines, and staging. They were provided with feedback after finishing the performance.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**The Results of Using Project-based Learning Focusing on Drama to Promote Students’ Speaking Skills**

To respond to the first objective of this research study, the following table shows the results of the speaking scores on the pre-test and post-test.

Referring to Table 1, there were 23 students who participated in this study. The results show that the students’ mean score on the pre-test is 55.68 and the mean score of the post-test is 66.59. As shown in Table 1, the results of statistical analysis indicate that there are significant differences between pre- and post-test scores. It reveals that students’ speaking skills have improved significantly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>( \bar{X} )</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>55.68</td>
<td>11.35</td>
<td>8.59</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>66.59</td>
<td>11.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*p<0.01
The Usefulness of Project-based Learning Focusing on Drama on Students’ Speaking Skills

In order to see how the use of project-based learning focusing on drama is beneficial for learners’ speaking skills, data from semi-structured interviews and students’ reflections were analyzed and interpreted for the results of the study. Generally, students saw the benefits of the use of project-based learning focusing on drama and agreed that it helped promote their speaking skills according to the following reasons.

Firstly, the use of project-based learning focusing on drama provides students with great opportunities to practice speaking skills through communicative drama activities in the project. Both individual and collaborative speaking practices are important for speaking development. The activities include individual line learning and collaborative rehearsal which seem to encourage learners to speak English effectively. Individual line learning contributed to the students’ oral fluency as they were required to memorize their dialogues. The following extracts are examples of how the activities of project-based learning focusing on drama provide students with opportunities to practice speaking skills.

Student 2: “…I had chances to practice speaking from the beginning until the end of drama project. This project encourages me to learn and speak English. Moreover, I have learned all four skills…”

Student 23: “…Rehearsals made me have more confidence. Before working on drama project, I seldom dared to speak English. However, the project encouraged me to be confident in speaking on stage and in front of other people. It taught me many things which I could bring to apply in my life such as speaking skills…”

According to Zyoud (2010), drama activities facilitate the type of language behavior that should lead to fluency. Moreover, drama is useful for learners as it encourages them to become more confident in their use of English by experiencing the language in operation. Collaborative activity such as the rehearsal encourages them to practice and express more English with their friends. Communicative activities allowed them to practice English speaking in a more natural way. For the rehearsal, it is useful for learners because it allows students to practice language with an intensity and purpose that is not usually present in regular lesson (Matheny, 2003, p.362). To explain this, some students seem to enjoy repeated oral practice with a text and having an opportunity to spend more time than usual practicing and focusing on intonation patterns. Moreover, repeated rehearsals allow students to work and practice on pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation (Maley & Duff, 2006, p.229). Rehearsal is useful for learners in various ways. When the learners rehearse, they are involved with various processes which include the establishment of characters, personalities, motives, and persona, thus creating a genuine purpose for communication (Miccoli, 2003).

Secondly, the use of project-based learning focusing on drama provides a valuable speaking context to students. It can generate a communicative context where students can actively participate in speaking activities. The situation in drama performance encouraged them to speak with their interlocutors when they were playing their characters. Furthermore, it allowed them to think about how they have to respond to other characters in that situation. When students enrolled in English drama, they had a purpose for speaking. Consequently, the drama context helps them to memorize what their characters have to say, and to express in a dramatic situation both verbally and non-verbally. The situations in a drama encourage them to communicate with their friends. Other students’ comments of how the use of project-based learning focusing on drama provided them with speaking context are shown as follows:

Student 13: “…The activities encouraged me to speak and communicate with my friends in various situations…”

Student 21: “…When I forgot the script, I improvised based on the feeling and situation at that moment. That’s a good idea which can be adapted to use in real life situation when I have to speak instantly. At that time, there is no script…”

Dodson (2000, p.6) mentions that the most important facet of using drama in the language classroom is at the core of the idea that the students are learning the language because they are practicing it with communicative activities in a real context. According to Stewig and Buege (1994), drama situations challenged students to use various skills. Those challenges include creating dialogue, thinking on their feet, and composing as they go. Moreover, the students are provided with situational clues involving the following things: where they are, who they are, and what the problem is. To explain this, when the students are provided with situations, they are encouraged to improve their ability to create oral dialogue that is not written down and to project themselves into the person they are playing, as they act or interact verbally in ways the character might.

Thirdly, activities of project-based learning focusing on drama developed students’ affective factors. Most students referred to motivation and confidence in speaking English. For motivation, students explained that the activities motivated them to work on the related tasks of drama project. Moreover, they had speaking practice with their friends in a cooperative learning environment. The atmosphere when working on the project was fun. This also helped them gain confidence in speaking English. Communicative activities in a non-threatening environment could motivate them and develop their confidence in speaking. To explain this, the more they practice speaking, the more enjoyment and speaking confidence they have. It can be concluded that the activities of project-based learning focusing on drama are fun so this can result in learners’ motivation in learning language. Some students’ comments on how the activities of drama project developed their affective factors are presented below:

Student 8: “…I like activities in the project. They are interesting. It’s fun to work in the project. I’m very happy when I work with my friends. Moreover, I like acting
and I like the character that I enrolled. Before I worked on this project, I didn’t like acting. After that I found that I could act well.”

Student 22: “...I learn a lot of things from this project. I gain confidence. After working on drama project, I have developed my confidence in speaking in English.”

According to Rahimipoor (2012), drama fosters and maintains students’ motivation by providing an atmosphere which is full of fun and entertainment. Interestingly, from the results of the study, it was found that the audience was one important factor that motivated the participants of the study to perform with enjoyment. One student mentioned that she and her friends felt little nervous when acting on the stage in front of an audience; however, it positively encouraged them to do their best and put in their best effort to play the characters. It is obvious that the audience is one important factor which motivates learners to perform in English. From the researcher’s observation, it seemed students were a little nervous when they worked on the dress rehearsal; however, they looked more relaxed and confident on the day of the actual performance on the stage. Students tried their best and showed great effort in their actual performance. This is supported by Fischer (2015) who mentioned that when students know that larger audiences wait for their work, they will be more dedicated to their work.

Other Benefits

According to the results of this study, students also mentioned other benefits of using project-based learning focusing on drama. Firstly, learner autonomy is developed through working on the project. Project-based learning is advantageous for students’ autonomy (Stoller, 2006, p.34). While working on the project, students shared their responsibilities by assigning work duties to their friends according to their abilities and preferences. A number of tasks in the drama project were quite large and required great participation from all members in the group in order to accomplish the tasks. If they did not plan it well or if anyone was irresponsible, things can be ineffectively managed. The fact that there were no hitches in the performance showed how well the students could sufficiently manage and organize the project.

However, consideration should be given to the exact number of people who work on different tasks of the project. It is important to make sure that every student participates equally in the drama project. Some students may feel it is unfair to work on some tasks so it is necessary to obtain the consensus of everyone before starting the project. As a result, students gained negotiation skills so that they can balance the workload of the project. For this issue, the teacher can take on the role as a consultant of the project. Fried-Booth (2002, p.18) mentions that it is necessary for the teacher to maintain an overview and to inspire confidence so that students feel they are learning by working towards their objectives. Moreover, the teacher needs to develop strategies for dealing with the language that could possibly arise. Athiemoolam (2014) suggests that teachers should encourage learners to be active participants otherwise the learners will be reluctant to use the English. This may lead to learners’ communication problems. Another important skill that students developed as a result of using project-based learning focusing on drama is research skill. Students reported that they had to prepare and do many things for the project. It is obvious that students devoted themselves in various research tasks. To work on a drama project, students took on various roles as researchers. The students in the project gathered information about the assigned topic. They studied related information by themselves from various resources such as texts, Internet, movies, and so on. Those data were analyzed and adapted into their drama project. Moreover, they had to discuss about what should be implemented into their performance. They had to design, plan, and summarize the results together in order to produce the end-product. These encouraged them to be autonomous learners. It is supportive with what Stoller (2006) mentioned that the component of PBL increases students’ research skills as the students are required to take some responsibility for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information from target language resources.

The findings of this study are based on the use of project-based learning focusing on drama to promote learners’ speaking skills. The study shows the benefits of project-based learning and drama integration. Learners in this study had opportunities to construct knowledge and practice speaking skills by generating a drama project based on their talents and individual differences. Project-based learning focusing on drama consisted of communicative activities which allowed learners to practice speaking among themselves. Generally, many Thai learners are reluctant to speak English as they have few chances to speak the language in a communicative and authentic environment. However, the students in this study had practiced speaking English through various communicative tasks in the project. The communicative activities encouraged them to be independent and creative language learners who became more competent in speaking skills. They were allowed to plan, design, discuss and mostly control their working steps and processes. At the same time, the teacher was seen as a facilitator who always supported their work and provided help throughout the study.

CONCLUSION

This research study focuses on the use of project-based learning focusing on drama to promote students’ speaking skills. Moreover, it aims to see how the use of project-based learning focusing on drama is beneficial for learners’ speaking skills. It employed a one-group pre-test post-test design. It was carried out for a single semester period (4 months) involving a class of 23 students as the sample. Speaking tests, semi-structured interviews, and students’ reflections were used to collect the data. This research study concluded that the use of project-based learning focusing on drama is beneficial and can be used to promote students’ speaking skills. Moreover, it is beneficial for learners’ speaking skills based on the following reasons. Firstly, it provided learners with ample opportunities for English speaking practice. Secondly, it gave the learners with a functional context to use their speaking skills. Thirdly, it developed learners’ affective factors which motivated them to speak and developed more...
speaking confidence. In addition, learner autonomy and research skills were mentioned as additional benefits of using project-based learning focusing on drama. Interestingly, the process of project-based learning and drama reflected learners’ cooperative working skills which are useful for learners in other aspects of their learning in the long run. This study believes that the development of speaking skills is underpinned by the principles of project-based learning and drama. Therefore, it recommends the use of project-based learning focusing on drama to promote learners’ speaking skills as it provides learners with great opportunities to speak English and express themselves in a communicative environment. Suggestions for further study might include a short acting class for students as suggested by one student for it could help them a lot when working on dramatic scenes, especially emotional scenes. One limitation of this study is the small number of participants. Consequently, the researcher had used both quantitative and qualitative data collection in order to obtain sufficient information from the students so that the results can be satisfactorily explained.

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