

# THE EFFICACY OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PBL) IN ENHANCING THE SPEAKING PROFICIENCY OF EFL LEARNERS: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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## Abstract

The development of communicative competence remains a primary objective in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Traditional teacher-centered methodologies often fail to provide learners with sufficient authentic speaking opportunities. This study investigates the efficacy of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing the speaking skills of EFL learners. Utilizing a quasi-experimental design, 60 undergraduate students were divided into an experimental group ( $n = 30$ ), which received a PBL-based intervention, and a control group ( $n = 30$ ), which received traditional textbook-based instruction over an 8-week period. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention speaking tests and a student perception questionnaire. The results indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in overall speaking proficiency, particularly in the domains of fluency and interactive communication. Furthermore, questionnaire responses revealed a highly positive attitude toward PBL, with participants reporting decreased speaking anxiety and increased motivation. The findings suggest that PBL is a robust pedagogical framework for fostering oral proficiency and autonomous learning in the EFL classroom.

## 1. Introduction

The ultimate goal of language acquisition is effective communication; however, speaking is frequently cited by EFL learners as the most anxiety-inducing and difficult skill to master (Krashen, 1982; Horwitz et al., 1986). In many traditional language classrooms, instruction remains heavily focused on grammatical accuracy and rote memorization, leaving students ill-equipped to negotiate meaning in real-world communicative contexts. This discrepancy between classroom practice and practical application necessitates a paradigm shift toward more student-centered, interactive pedagogical approaches.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as a promising alternative. Grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory and constructivist principles, PBL is an instructional method wherein students acquire knowledge and skills by working for an extended period to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge (Thomas, 2000). By shifting the focus from the teacher to the learner, PBL encourages active participation, collaborative problem-solving, and the practical application of language.

### 1.1 Literature Review

Previous research has widely documented the cognitive and affective benefits of PBL. Beckett (2002) noted that PBL allows learners to integrate language and content learning, thereby providing a dual focus that mirrors real-life language use. More recently, studies have demonstrated that PBL fosters not only linguistic competence but also 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and teamwork (Simpson, 2011; Bell, 2010).

Despite the theoretical support for PBL, empirical evidence specifically isolating its impact on distinct speaking sub-skills (e.g., fluency, accuracy, pronunciation) in adult EFL contexts remains fragmented. While some scholars argue that the unstructured nature of PBL

might lead to fossilization of errors due to a lack of explicit feedback, proponents argue that the increased volume of output and authentic negotiation of meaning far outweigh these risks (Swain, 1993).

## 1.2 Research Questions

To address the existing gaps in the literature, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Does the implementation of Project-Based Learning significantly improve the speaking skills of undergraduate EFL learners compared to traditional instruction?
2. Which specific sub-components of speaking (fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, interactive communication) are most impacted by PBL?
3. What are the learners' perceptions and attitudes regarding the use of PBL in their language acquisition process?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test control group design. A mixed-methods approach was utilized, gathering quantitative data from speaking assessments and qualitative/quantitative data from a post-intervention questionnaire.

### 2.2 Participants

The participants were 60 undergraduate students majoring in non-language disciplines at a mid-sized university. They were selected utilizing intact sampling from two parallel conversational English courses. The participants were assigned to either the experimental group (n = 30, 14 males, 16 females) or the control group (n = 30, 15 males, 15 females). Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years. Both groups were determined to be at a B1 (Intermediate) proficiency level based on a standardized placement test administered prior to the study.

### 2.3 Instruments

Two primary instruments were utilized for data collection:

**Speaking Proficiency Test:** A standardized oral interview was used for both the pre-test and post-test. Performances were evaluated using an analytical rubric adapted from the IELTS speaking band descriptors. The rubric assessed five criteria on a scale of 1 to 10: Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy, Pronunciation, and Interactive Communication (Total possible score = 50, scaled to 100 for percentage).

**Perception Questionnaire:** A 15-item, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was administered to the experimental group post-intervention to gauge their attitudes, perceived challenges, and motivation regarding PBL.

### 2.4 Procedure

The intervention lasted for 8 weeks (4 hours of instruction per week).

**Control Group:** Received traditional, textbook-driven instruction. Activities primarily included reading dialogues, fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises, controlled pair-work, and teacher-led drills.

**Experimental Group:** Received instruction centered entirely around a collaborative project. The project required students to form groups of 4-5, identify a local environmental or social issue, conduct research, interview stakeholders (in English where possible or translated), and produce a 15-minute documentary-style video presentation, culminating in a live Q&A

session with the class. The teacher acted as a facilitator, providing necessary language scaffolding and monitoring group dynamics.

### 2.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the speaking tests were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores between the experimental and control groups. Paired samples t-tests were used to measure within-group progress.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Pre-Test Results

Prior to the intervention, an independent samples t-test was conducted to ensure homogeneity between the two groups regarding their initial speaking proficiency. As shown in Table 1, there was no statistically significant difference between the experimental group ( $M = 62.45$ ,  $SD = 4.12$ ) and the control group ( $M = 61.80$ ,  $SD = 4.35$ );  $t(58) = 0.59$ ,  $p = 0.55$ .

### 3.2 Post-Test Results

Following the 8-week intervention, both groups demonstrated improvement. However, the experimental group exhibited a substantially larger gain.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Independent t-test for Overall Speaking Scores

Group	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain	t-value	p-value
Experimental	62.45 (4.12)	81.20 (5.25)	+18.75	10.45	< 0.001
Control	61.80 (4.35)	68.50 (4.80)	+6.70		

The independent samples t-test on the post-test scores revealed a highly significant difference between the experimental and control groups ( $t(58) = 10.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that PBL was significantly more effective in enhancing overall speaking skills than traditional methods.

### 3.3 Analysis of Speaking Sub-skills

A closer examination of the rubric criteria highlighted specific areas of growth. The experimental group showed the most profound improvements in Fluency and Coherence (Pre: 5.8 -> Post: 8.5) and Interactive Communication (Pre: 6.0 -> Post: 8.8). Gains in Grammatical Accuracy were present but less pronounced compared to fluency metrics, suggesting that while students became much more comfortable communicating, their error rates decreased at a slower pace.

### 3.4 Questionnaire Results

The qualitative data corroborated the quantitative findings. Among the 30 participants in the experimental group:

86% agreed or strongly agreed that PBL reduced their anxiety when speaking English.

93% reported that working collaboratively motivated them to practice speaking more frequently.

80% felt that the vocabulary they learned during the project was more memorable than vocabulary learned from lists.

## 4. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to determine the efficacy of PBL in improving EFL learners' speaking proficiency. The statistical analyses yielded compelling evidence supporting the integration of PBL into language curricula.

#### **4.1 Interpretation of Quantitative Findings**

The significant difference in post-test scores ( $p < 0.001$ ) confirms that PBL provides a superior environment for language acquisition compared to traditional, form-focused instruction. The substantial gains in Fluency and Coherence and Interactive Communication align with Swain's (1993) Output Hypothesis, which posits that producing language in a meaningful context forces learners to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing. Because the experimental group was tasked with completing a complex project (a documentary and live Q&A), they were required to negotiate meaning, clarify misunderstandings, and sustain extended discourse—activities rarely achieved through controlled textbook dialogues.

Conversely, the slower progression in Grammatical Accuracy within the experimental group highlights a known challenge of communicative approaches. When learners are highly focused on meaning and task completion, they may sacrifice grammatical precision. This suggests that while PBL is highly effective for fluency, educators must purposefully integrate 'focus-on-form' episodes during the project timeline to prevent the fossilization of errors.

#### **4.2 Interpretation of Learner Attitudes**

The questionnaire results emphasize the affective benefits of PBL. High levels of language anxiety often create an 'affective filter' that blocks language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). By shifting the focus away from individual linguistic performance and toward a shared group goal, the experimental participants experienced a lower-stakes environment for practice. The authenticity of the task—researching real local issues—provided intrinsic motivation, transforming English from an academic subject to be tested into a genuine tool for communication.

#### **4.3 Limitations**

While the results are robust, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size ( $N = 60$ ) was relatively small and limited to a single institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the 8-week duration of the intervention, while sufficient to measure short-term gains, does not provide data on the long-term retention of these speaking skills.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study provides empirical evidence that Project-Based Learning is a highly effective instructional approach for enhancing the speaking proficiency of EFL learners. By providing authentic contexts, fostering collaboration, and lowering affective barriers, PBL enables students to transition from passive recipients of grammar rules to active users of the target language. While traditional methods may still hold value for explicit linguistic instruction, they should be supplemented with robust, project-based tasks to develop true communicative competence.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess the retention of language skills acquired through PBL, as well as the exploration of hybrid models that seamlessly integrate explicit grammar instruction within the PBL framework to ensure balanced development of both fluency and accuracy.

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