

The Role of Project-Based Learning in Fostering Vocational Students' Oral Communication: Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores the contributions of project-based learning (PBL) in a vocational high school English class to students' oral communication skills. Data on English teachers' perspectives on PBL were collected through semi-structured interviews with vocational high school English teachers in East Java, Indonesia. Data analysis followed a six-step thematic analysis: immersion in the text, initial coding, theme identification, refinement, final naming, and reporting the final themes. The findings indicate that, from teachers' perspectives, project-based learning could foster authentic communication environments, promote fluency, accuracy, and confidence, and nurture the critical skills necessary for the 21st century. PBL is an innovative teaching method that helps policymakers draft curriculum regulations that align with industry needs and support teacher professional development. Future research could explore the longitudinal impacts of project-based learning on students' oral proficiency across semesters or grade levels.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning; Oral Communication; Vocational High School; Teachers' Perspectives

In a globalized society, proficiency in spoken English is a pivotal gateway to better job opportunities and empowers individuals to become more effective agents of social and economic change. For vocational students, mastery of effective oral communication significantly enhances employment prospects across professional contexts, from initial customer interactions to formal recruitment interviews (Klimova, 2021; Rao, 2019). Consequently, integrating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) into vocational training curricula is not merely beneficial but essential for workforce readiness. Unfortunately, a persistent challenge remains: many vocational students continue to struggle with spoken English proficiency due to a lack of authentic

communicative practice, insufficient classroom time devoted to speaking tasks, a rigid, exam-driven educational focus, and pervasive low self-confidence (Sirisrimangkorn, L., 2021; Zhang, X. et.al., 2022). As a direct result of these systemic pressures, many educators tend to disproportionately emphasize grammar and reading, areas that are traditionally easier to quantify and assess, while inadvertently neglecting the development of vital speaking skills (Zhong, et.al., 2024; Ahmed, 2023).

Innovative, student-centered teaching methodologies, such as PBL, are considered critical for addressing this pedagogical imbalance. PBL encourages students to tackle complex, real-world challenges collaboratively, thereby fostering the development of essential

21st-century competencies ([Miller & Krajcik, 2022](#)). Project-based learning (PBL) is an ideal model for vocational training, particularly for students pursuing careers in entrepreneurship and diverse business environments. To equip vocational students with the necessary oral communication skills, implementing PBL in the English classroom is a promising and effective solution. A business plan is a comprehensive written document that describes and analyzes a business entity and provides detailed financial projections for its strategic future ([McKeever, 2019](#)). Thus, learning English through the PBL model is highly effective, as students acquire language skills through the active process of writing, refining, and producing a professional business plan.

Within this framework, teachers' roles as facilitators, mentors, and instructional designers are paramount in fostering students' active engagement and project success. Teachers must meticulously design stimulating assignments, foster lively academic debates, and establish secure, supportive spaces for oral presentations. Furthermore, teachers' personal beliefs and professional practices deeply impact instructional quality and student engagement by shaping how curriculum guidelines are interpreted, how materials are adapted, and how resource constraints are managed ([Borg, 2023](#); [Richards, 2022](#)). PBL's contributions to students' oral communication skills are increasingly recognized in modern research. This is primarily because PBL provides meaningful, high-stakes contexts for students to interact with one another as they compose the project document and present their findings to target audiences.

Exposure to various practicing "arenas" for English skills not only improves oral proficiency but also significantly bolsters student confidence. Through this process, students may obtain models of proficient English usage from both their instructors and their high-performing peers. Additionally, the frequent use of English in group discussions, structured debates, and formal presentations

helps students master the nuances of oral communication. Hymes' communication context theory remains a foundational pillar in this discussion, positing that communication is a dynamic, fluid process shaped by physical, psychological, and sociocultural factors ([Baker & Wright, 2021](#)). In addition, social cognitive learning theory, as refined in recent applications, suggests that observing more competent English users in the classroom fosters greater fluency, accuracy, and self-confidence ([Bandura, 2023](#)). More importantly, the PBL model directly leads to the development of the "4Cs" within the 21st-century skills framework: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity ([Partnership for 21st Century Learning \(P21\), 2019](#); [Lucas et al., 2021](#)).

Although PBL is known to promote oral communication in vocational education, few studies have rigorously examined how English teachers apply it in practice. Most existing research focuses heavily on students' perspectives, often ignoring the complex educational processes and the specific difficulties teachers face in developing and managing PBL curricula. For instance, while contemporary research by Mai, & Nguyen, ([2022](#)) found that PBL tasks promote learners' language competence and autonomy, and scholars like Darling-Hammond et al. ([2020](#)) assert that structured speaking engagements within genuine ventures can enhance fluency, other studies raise concerns. Some argue that PBL does not inherently guarantee language development and suggest that poorly designed projects can lead to fragmented, surface-level communication rather than deep learning. Based on these previous studies and the identified gaps in the literature, the current study examines how PBL promotes vocational students' oral communication, specifically from the unique perspectives of English teachers.

The main research question guiding this inquiry is: "How do vocational EFL teachers perceive the PBL in building students' oral communication skills?" The primary objective

of this research is to explore how English teachers perceive the role and utility of PBL in facilitating vocational high school students' oral communication skills. This study provides valuable qualitative evidence on how vocational high school English teachers implement PBL to foster students' oral communication. Analyzing these teachers' perspectives bridges the critical gap between curriculum theory and actual classroom practice, thereby advancing pedagogical research in vocational English education. The findings of this study are intended to benefit educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers by offering an authentic view of PBL implementations. Insights from this research can help refine educational policies, ensuring the effective integration of PBL approaches to foster better language instruction and better prepare students for the real-world communication challenges of the modern global workforce.

Method

The present study employed a qualitative case study research design (Yin, 2024) to meticulously examine how vocational high school English teachers perceived the specific contributions of PBL to the development in students' oral communication skills. The research was strategically conducted within the marketing department of a prominent vocational high school in the Regency of Jember, East Java, Indonesia. This particular department explicitly targets students to become proficient and professional communicators in the modern workplace by regularly assigning them to perform academic and professional presentations, engage in complex business negotiations, and interact directly with potential clients. The immersive nature of this environment provided a fertile ground for examining the intersection of language instruction and vocational application in a real-world educational context.

The choice of this school was based on its systematic adoption of innovative PBL initiatives, including the integration of PBL

into the English curriculum. For two distinct reasons, the present study employed purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020) and recruited two experienced English teachers as the primary research participants. The first reason is that these teachers were deeply engaged in the design and execution of the PBL, which enabled them to provide highly relevant, nuanced insights into the pedagogical process of facilitating oral communication. Second, because these participants teach English across different vocational departments, they were able to offer a necessary diversity in classroom practices and varying student profiles. This diversity may provide a more comprehensive, holistic understanding of teaching strategies and instructional challenges, thereby significantly enriching the qualitative data gathered during the study.

The primary data for the present study were collected through semi-structured interviews (Tenny et al., 2022). This qualitative method was chosen because it effectively elicited the nuanced perspectives of vocational high school English teachers on the extent to which PBL can develop and refine students' oral communication skills. I developed a comprehensive interview guide based on the core research objectives and key thematic points to be explored, followed by flexible, in-depth follow-up questions designed to elicit detailed information and personal anecdotes. To minimize potential misunderstandings and ensure linguistic comfort, the interviews were conducted in a bilingual format, using both English and Bahasa Indonesia. The entire interview process was digitally recorded with participants' written consent to ensure an accurate transcription.

The interview data were analyzed using a rigorous thematic analysis framework to identify recurring patterns, concepts, or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The data analysis followed a systematic six-step process: familiarizing with the data through repeated reading, initial coding of relevant segments, identifying potential themes, reviewing and

refining those themes, defining and naming the finalized themes, and finally producing the analytical report. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was utilized as a validation strategy (Varpio et al., 2020). This was done meticulously by asking research participants to read the full interview transcripts and respond to the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of their statements. Furthermore, I triangulated the data by cross-checking the information gathered from the research participants with the teachers' actual lesson plans and instructional materials to ensure consistency between reported beliefs and classroom documentation (Flick, 2022).

Result and Discussion

Creating Genuine Communication Contexts

The design of project-based learning is to create real-world contexts and meaningful challenges that drive students to use their language skills effectively in practical situations. These tasks illustrate authentic business situations that require students to apply English for particular purposes, including making presentations, negotiating contracts, participating in discussions, and creating reports. This authenticity enriches language learning and prepares students for the communicative demands of future workplaces. The following interview data illustrate how Teacher 1 (T1) and Teacher 2 (T2) ensure that implementing project-based learning benefits students in acquiring communication skills.

"Project-based learning is a real arena for communication. Unlike traditional methods that tend to be one-way and passive, projects force students to discuss, debate, present ideas, and persuade others. This is not an exercise but a simulation of the working world. For example, students pretend to offer their products or services to 'clients', complete with presentations and Question & Answer sessions" (T1, interview, 02 Feb 2025).

"Project-based learning significantly enhances students' oral communication skills because it engages students actively in real-world tasks, fostering meaningful speaking opportunities

such as collaboration, discussion, and presentation." (T2, interview, 02 Feb 2025).

The quotations indicate that both teachers share similar views on the role of project-based learning in developing oral communication skills. PBL activities provide students with ample opportunities to practice authentic workplace oral communication. Via real-life speaking-task simulations, such as discussion, debate, and presentation, students are trained to communicate ideas, argue their points, articulate their thoughts, and convince others of their perspectives in English. Such a simulation replicates authentic workplace dynamics and promotes critical oral communication skills. It contrasts with the conventional or transmission teaching model, which is typically teacher-directed and focused on knowledge transmission.

Promoting Fluency, Accuracy, and Confidence

PBL has positively influenced students' oral communication abilities, improving their fluency, accuracy, and confidence. The project's stages, from brainstorming to final presentations, provide students with repeated, intentional speaking opportunities, encouraging them to communicate more naturally, express their ideas clearly, and refine their language use in context.

The following quotations from the interview data illustrate how Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 view PBL as a catalyst for refining students' communication skills. In addition, they share similar perspectives on using scaffolding techniques to develop students' oral communication skills. Both of the teachers target their students as follows:

"I target my students to be capable of speaking like professionals. They have to be able to express ideas, explain processes, give and receive feedback, and speak with the audience confidently" (T1, interview, 02 Feb 2025)

"The goals of oral communication development in my English class consist of building my students' self-confidence and clarity, nurturing critical thinking via clear expression of ideas and reasoning." (T2, interview, 03 Feb 2025)

"I began with small and gradual practices.

At first, students spoke in small groups, then proceeded to the class, and finally to external audiences” (T1 and T2, interview, 02 & 03 Feb 2025).

Teacher 1 argues that PBL makes students more expressive and accurate, while Teacher 2 believes that PBL potentially builds self-confidence and fluency. In these projects, students are trained to articulate complex thoughts with accurate grammar, a broad vocabulary, correct pronunciation, and fluency. In addition, they share the same view on the use of scaffolding techniques. They asked students to practice speaking English within their groups, move to the class, and extend their practice to diverse audiences.

Developing Critical 21st-century Skills

Finding business ideas requires students to think creatively with their group members. As part of the group project, for example, students must determine the types of businesses they plan to open and the prospective customers they aim to serve. In response to the unique selling proposition (USP), the group must create a unique business to clarify how to market its products. In short, the group must be able to demonstrate the strengths of their product innovation.

Solid teamwork is needed to communicate an effective business plan. They must be able to communicate a clear business profile in English, including their product description, market targets, competitors, marketing strategies, and financial projections: costs, income, and benefits. In addition, they have to provide a timeline for implementing the business plan with the management team. Indeed, this process requires students to learn to work by distributing responsibilities to the team members.

Based on interviews with English teachers, PBL helps develop oral communication skills by giving students opportunities to present their business plans. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 view how PBL in vocational high school stimulates critical thinking and creative problem-solving:

“They are not just talking to answer questions; they are talking to solve real problems. This is not a practice but a simulation of the working world. I structure group work with clear roles: leader, time keeper, presenter, and documenter. With this division, all students have reasons and space to speak.” (T1, interview, 02 Feb 2025)

“After participating in the ‘Pitching Creative Products’ project, one of the students successfully conveyed his ideas enthusiastically. That was a turning point, and he said, ‘I can speak too, Sir.’” (T1, interview, 02 Feb 2025)

“Project-based learning significantly enhances oral communication skills by engaging students in real-world tasks. I structure projects by clearly defining student roles, encouraging active participation, and fostering the practice of various communication skills in a low-pressure environment.” (T2, interview, 03 Feb 2025).

Previous quotes show that Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 view real-world tasks in project-based learning as supporting oral communication skills. Teachers have assigned roles to individual group members to ensure practical group work. For example, Teacher 1 assigns students to roles such as leader, timekeeper, presenter, and documenter. In contrast, Teacher 2 emphasizes a safe, supportive environment that encourages students to participate in group activities actively. To conclude, project-based learning challenges students to consider contexts such as the audience, the purpose of communication, and the choice of language formality for professional communication.

The above analysis showed that vocational high school English teachers perceived that project-based learning could foster authentic communication environments, promote fluency, accuracy, and confidence, and nurture critical skills necessary for the 21st century. These findings will be discussed in the context of communication context theory ([Hymes, 1974](#)), social cognitive learning theory ([Bandura, 2023](#)), and the twenty-first-century skills framework ([Partnership for 21st Century Learning \(P21\), 2019](#)).

Through the lens of communication context theory, communication is a dynamic process shaped by physical, psychological,

and sociocultural factors. The features of presentation venues, such as classrooms, auditoriums, or larger halls, as well as the audience's diverse backgrounds, can significantly affect how students prepare for group presentations. In this light, students are encouraged to thoroughly assess their target audience, strategically adapt their materials, and design engaging media that resonate with their ideas. Furthermore, they will practice their group presentations diligently to ensure a seamless delivery. From a psychological standpoint, students should strive to craft captivating and persuasive presentations and be equipped to handle audience questions confidently. From a socio-cultural perspective, students in vocational high schools will consider their choice of vocabulary, phrases, body language, and manners when managing their feelings when receiving constructive feedback.

The present study's findings align with recent research by Miller and Krajcik (2022), who found that PBL offers authentic contexts that motivate students to speak, solve problems, and negotiate meaning. Similarly, Zhang, X. et.al., (2022) found that authentic tasks increase second-language learners' engagement and language use. However, the study's added nuance lies in the specificity of the business simulation setting, where communication is not only authentic but also persuasive and performance-driven. This extends the theoretical perspective by showing how the pressure to sell an idea can heighten students' communicative clarity and rhetorical precision.

Via the lens of social cognitive learning theory (SCLT), project-based learning in vocational high schools provides a rich learning environment where students acquire business knowledge and actively build and refine their oral communication skills. Peer interaction during group work provides ample opportunities for repeated production practice, a key cognitive process for developing fluency. SCLT also provides clear pathways to enhance

accuracy, primarily through observational learning of correct forms and the development of self-regulatory capacities in social contexts. Learners can observe models, such as teachers or proficient peers, demonstrating accurate linguistic forms, structures, and pronunciation (Bandura, 2023). Lastly, self-efficacy, a core concept in Bandura's SCLT, represents a person's belief in their ability to achieve a specific goal. Research indicates that self-efficacy is a principal predictor in learners' performance, often surpassing actual abilities or aptitude (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Highly self-efficacious learners are consistently characterized as speakers who can confidently share their ideas with others.

From a 21st-century skills perspective, a business plan project can foster creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication. Mastering these skills is important for individuals to succeed in life, work, and citizenship in today's global and digital era. In this context, students were required to develop innovative business ideas, identify unique selling propositions, conduct market analysis, and present their findings collaboratively. These tasks demanded integrative use of language and thinking skills, consistent with the 4Cs of the 21st Century Skills Framework (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). This aligns with Lucas et al.'s (2021) assertion that communication in the 21st century is not just about expressing ideas but collaborating to solve complex problems. The emphasis on collaboration and communication as essential to solving entrepreneurial challenges gave students a sense of ownership over their learning. In this way, communication is not treated as an isolated skill but as one embedded in cross-functional competencies that mirror real work demands. Compared with prior studies such as Klimova (2021), which focused broadly on collaborative learning in ESL contexts, this study underscores the vocational relevance of 21st-century competencies.

These findings are consistent with

studies such as Zhong, et.al. (2024), who observed that PBL tasks promote both language competence and learner autonomy. Likewise, Derakhshan et al. (2021) confirmed that repeated, structured speaking opportunities within authentic projects lead to improved fluency and confidence. However, this study further examines vocational specificity, showing that tailoring communication tasks to professional contexts boosts motivation and relevance. On the other hand, studies like Mai, & Nguyen (2022) question whether PBL inherently supports language development, arguing that poorly designed projects can lead to surface-level communication. This study addresses that concern by showing how clear role assignments, targeted feedback, and reflective practice prevent such superficial engagement. Furthermore, few prior studies have emphasized teacher beliefs and practices as central to successful implementation. This research reveals that teachers' thoughtful design choices, such as scaffolding, assigning speaking roles, and using feedback loops, are pivotal in shaping students' oral development (Borg, 2023).

This study provides several theoretical contributions. First, it extends communication context theory by showing that simulated business interactions intensify students' need to use language precisely and persuasively. Second, it supports cognitive and social-cognitive theories by providing empirical evidence that scaffolding and confidence-building mechanisms in PBL enhance oral proficiency. Third, it operationalizes the 21st-century skills framework within a vocational EFL context, offering a concrete model for integrating all four Cs (collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication) in speaking tasks.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that PBL effectively enhances vocational students' oral communication skills by creating authentic communication contexts, supporting

accuracy, fluency, and self-confidence, and developing critical 21st-century skills. Guided by communication context theory, social cognitive learning theory, and the 21st-century skills framework, the findings confirm PBL's transformative potential in vocational English education. This research bridges theoretical assumptions with grounded classroom realities by focusing on teacher perspectives, offering actionable insights for curriculum design, teacher training, and educational policy.

Regarding positive teachers' perspectives on PBL's contributions in English classes, vocational high school English teachers should continue to implement PBL as an innovative teaching method to improve oral communication skills. Findings can also inform policymakers to prepare vocational high school curricula relevant to industrial needs. In addition, policymakers may enact regulations that support teachers' professional development and help them update their knowledge and skills.

Future research is needed to explore the longitudinal impact of PBL on students' oral communication proficiency across semesters or grade levels. Furthermore, future research could examine how digital platforms affect students' oral communication skills in business simulations. Investigating institutional dynamics may uncover strategies for holistic PBL integration and encourage systemic support for communicative competence across curricula.

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Gemini for information retrieval and Grammarly to improve language and readability. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the publication's content.

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