



Exploring Students' Experiences in Project-Based Learning to Improve Their Speaking Performance

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the experiences of three university students with Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and how it affects their speaking development, in terms of confidence, fluency, and idea organization. This study aims to understand how students respond to PjBL activities, the experiences they gain, and the challenges they face. A qualitative approach was applied using in-depth interviews to collect data. The three participants were purposively selected to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences rather than generalization. The findings show that PjBL contributes to students' speaking development, especially in confidence, fluency, and idea organization. It also creates a student-centered learning environment where learners actively engage in meaningful communication. However, students still face challenges such as time management and group coordination. Overall, this study highlights that PjBL can support speaking skill development and emphasizes the importance of teacher guidance and feedback in improving students' speaking performance in English language learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is considered one of the most important skills in learning English, yet it remains one of the most challenging for many students. Despite years of study, university students often struggle to speak English fluently and confidently due to limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient opportunities for meaningful practice. In many classrooms, speaking activities are still teacher-centered, which limits students' active participation and real communication practice.

In English language teaching, speaking is not only about producing grammatically correct sentences but also about conveying meaning effectively in real-life situations. Therefore, teaching speaking should emphasize communicative competence by providing interactive and student-centered learning environments that promote fluency, confidence, and meaningful language use.

One approach that supports these goals is Project-Based Learning (PjBL). PjBL is a student-centered approach that engages learners in meaningful and authentic tasks through projects. Through activities such as discussion, collaboration, and presentation, students are encouraged to use English in real communication. Previous studies have shown that PjBL can have positive impacts on language learning, including improving communication skills, collaboration, and critical thinking.

In the context of speaking instruction, PjBL is particularly relevant because it provides more opportunities for students to actively use English. By engaging in project activities, students are required to express ideas, negotiate meaning, and present outcomes, which naturally enhances speaking practice. In addition, collaborative learning allows students to feel more comfortable and reduces anxiety, creating a supportive environment for speaking development.

However, although many studies have reported the effectiveness of PjBL in language learning, most of them focus on writing skills or general academic outcomes. Research that specifically explores students' experiences in learning speaking through PjBL is still limited, particularly in the Indonesian university context. In addition, previous studies tend to emphasize learning outcomes rather than examining how students perceive the learning process, the challenges they encounter, and how these experiences contribute to their speaking development.

Therefore, this study aims to explore students' experiences in learning speaking through Project-Based Learning. Specifically, it investigates how students perceive their learning experiences, how PjBL contributes to their speaking development in terms of fluency, confidence, and idea organization, and what challenges they face during the learning process.

1. How do university students perceive their experiences in learning speaking through PjBL?
2. How do the students perceive their speaking development in terms of fluency, confidence, and idea organization?
3. What challenges do students face during PjBL activities in speaking classes?

To address these research questions, this study draws on relevant theories and previous studies related to teaching speaking skills and the implementation of Project-Based Learning in EFL contexts.

Teaching speaking in EFL contexts requires more than grammatical accuracy; it involves developing fluency, confidence, and the ability to communicate meaningfully (Putri & Maharani, 2021; Tia & Wangid, 2021). Richards (2015) emphasizes that speaking instruction should focus on meaningful communication, while Brown and Lee (2015) highlight the role of interactive activities in promoting language use. However, in practice, many classrooms still rely on teacher-centered approaches, which limit opportunities for authentic communication.

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has been proposed as one such approach. It emphasizes student-centered learning through collaboration and real-world tasks (Abdullah et al., 2022; Syamsinar & Jannah, 2020; We, 2020). Unlike traditional methods, PjBL requires students to actively use language for communication, which can support both linguistic and social development.

Several studies have reported the benefits of PjBL in language learning. For example, Alotaibi (2020), Camacho (2021), and Sari et al. (2025) found that PjBL improves students' speaking performance, confidence, and interaction. Similarly, Hermansson et al. (2019) and Rashid et al. (2022) argue that collaborative project work promotes meaningful communication and enhances students' ability to use language in authentic contexts. While these studies consistently highlight the positive impacts of PjBL, they mainly focus on outcomes rather than the learning process itself.

This indicates a limitation in existing research. Most studies emphasize improvement in speaking performance but provide limited understanding of how students experience the learning process, how they deal with challenges, and how these experiences shape their speaking

development. Furthermore, research focusing on students' experiences in speaking classes using PjBL in the Indonesian university context is still limited (Rafiq et al., 2023).

Therefore, a more in-depth exploration of students' experiences is needed. By examining how students perceive PjBL, the challenges they encounter, and how they respond to the learning process, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of PjBL in supporting speaking development.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design. According to Creswell (2022), a case study is used to explore a bounded system in depth through detailed data collection. This study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in learning speaking through Project-Based Learning (PjBL). It focused on a specific educational context, namely the implementation of PjBL in speaking classes, in order to understand how students experienced and responded to this approach.

Participants

This study involved three students from English Language Education programs at different universities in East Java. The participants consisted of two female graduate students (P1 and P2) and one male undergraduate student (P3). They were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) having experience in a speaking course that implemented PjBL, and (2) willingness to participate voluntarily. Although the number of participants was small, it is considered appropriate for a qualitative case study, which aims to explore participants' experiences in depth rather than to generalize findings. Each participant was selected to provide rich and detailed insights into the phenomenon being studied. The participants came from different institutional contexts, including both public and private universities, and had experience in speaking courses that incorporated project-based activities such as presentations, group discussions, and project-based assignments.

The demographic information of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant demographic information

Participant code	Gender	Educational Qualification	Educational Institution	Location
P1	Female	Master's degree	Islamic University of Malang	Malang (a big city)
P2	Female	Master's degree	State University of Malang	Malang (a big city)
P3	Male	Bachelor's degree	Hasyim Asy'ari University	Jombang (a small town)

Research Instrument and Data Collection

The primary instrument of this study was a semi-structured interview guideline. This type of interview allowed flexibility for participants to express their experiences in depth while still focusing on the research objectives.

The interviews focused on exploring three main aspects:

- (1) students' experiences during PjBL activities,
- (2) their perceptions of speaking development, and
- (3) the challenges they encountered during the learning process.

Before the data collection, the interview guide was reviewed by a lecturer with expertise in qualitative research and English language teaching to ensure clarity and relevance.

The interviews were conducted online via WhatsApp phone calls to accommodate participants from different locations. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. Although relatively short, the interviews provided sufficiently rich data to address the research objectives. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study,

and their consent was obtained before the interviews. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used only for research purposes. To maintain anonymity, participants were identified using codes (P1, P2, and P3).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved six steps: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. In this study, coding was conducted manually by carefully reading the interview transcripts multiple times to identify meaningful units of data. Relevant statements were highlighted and assigned initial codes based on recurring ideas related to students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges.

After coding, similar codes were grouped together to form broader categories. These categories were then developed into themes by identifying patterns across participants' responses. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data and were relevant to the research questions. To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were applied. Credibility was enhanced through careful data interpretation and repeated reading of the transcripts. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear and systematic analysis process. Confirmability was supported by grounding the findings in participants' actual responses. In addition, data triangulation was applied by comparing responses across participants to identify consistent patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored students' experiences in implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in speaking classes. The findings are organized into three main themes: (1) students' learning experiences, (2) speaking skill development, and (3) challenges during PjBL.

Positive Learning Experience

The findings indicate that students generally had positive experiences with PjBL. They described the learning process as engaging, collaborative, and more meaningful compared to traditional methods. Students felt more comfortable participating in speaking activities because they worked with peers in a supportive environment.

"I think Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is very effective. We can enjoy learning with friends without feeling too nervous." (P1)

At the beginning, some students experienced confusion due to unfamiliarity with the PjBL approach. However, this confusion decreased as they became more involved in the project activities.

"At first, I felt confused with the PjBL system, but after several projects, I started to understand it and became more confident." (P3)

Students also reported that project-based activities, such as interviews and presentations, made learning more meaningful because they used English to achieve real purposes.

Speaking Skill Development

Students perceived improvements in their speaking skills, particularly in fluency, confidence, and idea organization. Through repeated participation in discussions, planning, and presentations, they became more accustomed to using English.

"During the project, I could speak more fluently because I had to use English continuously." (P2)

In addition, students reported increased confidence when speaking in front of others. The collaborative learning environment helped reduce anxiety and encouraged active participation.

"At first, I was nervous, but after several projects" I became more confident because everyone was also learning." (P3)

Students also developed better ability to organize their ideas. Preparing project presentations required them to structure their thoughts clearly.

“When preparing the project, I learned new vocabulary and organized my ideas better.” (P1)

Challenges in Project-Based Learning

Despite the positive experiences, students encountered several challenges during PjBL activities. One major challenge was nervousness when speaking in front of peers. Students reported fear of making mistakes and feeling embarrassed.

“The main challenge was nervousness.” (P1)

Another challenge was group coordination. Differences in schedules and group dynamics sometimes made collaboration difficult.

“It was difficult at first because we had different schedules and were not used to working together.” (P2)

Students also found it challenging to consistently use English during discussions. They sometimes switched to their first language when they felt unsure.

“Sometimes we unconsciously switched to Indonesian during discussions.” (P2)

To deal with these challenges, students gradually adapted by practicing more, managing their time, and encouraging each other to use English during group work.

Discussion

The findings of this research show that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) supports students' speaking development and provides positive learning experiences. This is consistent with previous studies that report the effectiveness of PjBL in improving students' communication skills and engagement (Alotaibi, 2020; Camacho, 2021; Sari et al., 2025). However, rather than only confirming these findings, this research also provides a deeper understanding of how students experience the learning process and how it influences their speaking ability. This suggests that the effectiveness of PjBL is closely related to students' active engagement in the learning process.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning takes place through interaction and collaboration with others. In this research, students were actively involved in group discussions and project activities, which helped them learn through social interaction. This supports previous findings that highlight the importance of collaboration in language learning (Hermansson et al., 2019; Rashid et al., 2022). However, unlike previous studies that mainly focus on learning outcomes, this research pays more attention to students' experiences during the process, including how they adapt and respond to the learning activities.

This finding is also related to the concept of communicative competence, which emphasizes meaningful communication rather than only grammatical accuracy (Brown & Lee, 2015; Richards, 2015). Through PjBL activities, students were required to express ideas, negotiate meaning, and present their work. This means that students' confidence is influenced not only by practice but also by the learning environment that encourages communication. This finding extends prior research (Camacho, 2021; Purnami & Widiadnya, 2024) by showing that a supportive and collaborative environment plays a key role in reducing anxiety. A possible explanation for this is that students feel less pressure when working with peers, which helps them speak more freely.

Another important finding of this research is related to students' initial confusion when implementing PjBL. While previous studies tend to emphasize positive outcomes (Alotaibi, 2020; Sari et al., 2025), this research shows that confusion is also part of the learning process. A unique finding of this research is that this confusion helps students adapt to a more active learning environment. This might be because students are more familiar with teacher-centered approaches, so they need time to adjust to student-centered learning.

In addition, this research shows that challenges such as nervousness, group coordination, and inconsistent use of English are commonly experienced by students. Similar challenges have also been reported in previous studies (Rashid et al., 2022). However, this research highlights that these

challenges are not only obstacles but also part of the learning process that helps students develop their speaking skills and strategies. This finding extends prior research by showing that both positive and negative experiences contribute to learning.

This research contributes by highlighting that speaking development is closely related not only to practice but also to students' experiences, interaction, and emotional engagement during the learning process. Unlike previous studies that mainly focus on performance outcomes, this research provides a more complete understanding of how PjBL works in real classroom contexts.

In terms of pedagogical implications, teachers should not only apply PjBL but also design activities carefully to support students' learning. For example, teachers can assign clear roles in group work, provide structured speaking tasks, and guide students during discussions. In addition, teachers should encourage consistent use of English and provide continuous feedback to help students build confidence (Brown & Lee, 2015). These strategies can help make PjBL more effective in speaking classes.

In general, this research shows that PjBL is not only useful for improving speaking ability but also plays an important role in shaping students' learning experiences. The main takeaway is that understanding the learning process is just as important as focusing on the final outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) provides meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences for students and plays a significant role in shaping their experiences in developing their speaking skills. The findings show that students have a positive perception of the implementation of PjBL because this approach creates a more relaxed, collaborative, and student-centered learning atmosphere, thus encouraging them to participate more actively. Although students initially experienced confusion due to their unfamiliarity with the PjBL structure, their understanding improved as they became directly involved in each project they worked on. In terms of speaking development, students reported significant improvements in fluency, confidence, and organization of ideas. Continuous use of English during project discussions, interviews, and presentations helped them speak more spontaneously and naturally. A supportive learning environment, collaboration with group members, and repeated speaking practice also helped reduce anxiety and increase confidence. Furthermore, PjBL helped students organize their ideas in a more structured manner because project activities required them to plan, organize, and present information clearly and coherently. Overall, this study confirms that PjBL is an effective approach to improving students' speaking skills because it integrates authentic communication tasks, collaboration, and meaningful language use. The success of PjBL is strongly influenced by clear directions, structured project design, and a supportive learning environment, enabling students to navigate obstacles more effectively.

However, students still face several challenges during the implementation of PjBL, such as nervousness when speaking, inconsistent English use, and coordination challenges in group work. Differences in schedules, communication styles, and group dynamics often hinder the smooth running of the project. Nevertheless, students strive to overcome these challenges through various strategies, such as creating a clear work plan, dividing tasks fairly, practicing together, and changing their mindset to reduce the fear of making mistakes. These challenges actually become opportunities for them to develop both language skills and collaboration skills. Given that this study only involved three participants and used data from interviews, future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants and utilize multiple data sources, such as classroom observations or speaking performance assessments. Further research could also explore how varying project types, levels of lecturer support, and psychological factors such as motivation, anxiety, and self-efficacy influence students' speaking development in the context of PjBL.

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