



An Analysis of Project-Based Learning Activities in Enhancing Students' Speaking Ability in EFL Classroom



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Abstract

This study examined students' speaking performance and experiences during project-based learning (PBL) activities in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. A mixed-methods approach combined descriptive quantitative data from project-presentation scores with qualitative data from classroom observation and student interviews. Participants were 35 first-semester students in the Early Childhood Education Teacher Training program at STKIP Al Islam Tunas Bangsa. Speaking performance was assessed using six rubric dimensions—grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and task achievement—while observations focused on grammar, vocabulary, fluency, creativity, collaboration, gesture, and eye contact. The score distribution showed that 40% of students obtained an A, 31.43% a B, 20% a C, and 8.57% a D, with no students receiving an E. Observation data highlighted fluency, vocabulary, creativity, and collaboration as prominent aspects of project presentations. Interview data showed contrasting experiences: some students reported greater confidence, motivation, and peer support, whereas others described anxiety, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, grammatical concerns, and low motivation. The findings indicate that PBL provided a meaningful context for speaking practice and collaboration; however, because the study did not report pre-test/post-test or comparison-group data, the results should be interpreted as descriptive evidence of performance and student experience rather than proof of improvement. Future research should use longitudinal or comparative designs to estimate changes in speaking ability more directly.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English has an important role in global communication and provides access to academic, professional, scientific, and technological resources. In Indonesia, however, many learners continue to experience difficulties in developing English proficiency. Previous studies have associated these difficulties with factors such as limited interest and motivation, instructional practices, learning environments, and access to learning resources (Lena et al., 2023; Khairunnisa et al., 2025; Derakhshan et al., 2020). These conditions highlight the need for classroom approaches that give learners meaningful opportunities to use English rather than only learn about the language.

Speaking is particularly important because it enables learners to communicate ideas, information, and feelings in real time. It is often treated as a central indicator of communicative competence (Syafii, 2024), and Safitriani and Jayadi (2021) describe speaking as a communicative process in which meaning is conveyed through spoken language. Speaking is also relevant across professional domains, including business, politics, media, and education (Hamid et al., 2023). At the same time, speaking is demanding because successful oral performance depends on several interrelated dimensions. Assessment literature commonly considers grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and task or message achievement when evaluating oral performance (Coombe et al., 2007; Harmer, 2001).

The need to develop communication skills also aligns with broader expectations for twenty-first-century learning. Students are expected to develop critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration so that they can respond productively to complex academic and professional situations (Aslamiah et al., 2021). Project-Based Learning (PBL) is one approach that can create these conditions. PBL is learner-centered and typically involves sustained work in which students plan, investigate, collaborate, and produce a concrete product or performance in response to an authentic task (Holm, 2011; Kokotsaki et al., 2016). In language classrooms, such projects can provide a reason to use English for planning, negotiating, creating, rehearsing, and presenting.

Previous studies have reported positive relationships between PBL and oral-language learning. Project-based tasks have been used to support speaking practice through collaborative projects, presentations, and technology-mediated activities (Mafruudloh & Fitriati, 2020; Nugroho & Anugerahwati, 2019; Suryani & Argawati, 2023). Other studies have reported improvements in speaking-related outcomes or active participation after PBL implementation (Simbolon et al., 2019; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Widiyati & Pangesti, 2022). PBL has also been linked to problem solving, creativity, and higher-order thinking (Santoso et al., 2021; Zen & Ariani, 2022). Nevertheless, outcome-oriented evidence does not by itself explain how students experience project work, which aspects of speaking are most visible during presentations, or what difficulties persist while students collaborate and perform.

The present study therefore examines project-based speaking activities among first-semester students in an Early Childhood Education Teacher Training program. Rather than assuming that project scores alone demonstrate improvement, the study combines descriptive performance data with observations and interviews to provide a more nuanced account of students' speaking performance and experiences during PBL. The study addresses two research questions:

1. What speaking performance do first-semester EFL students demonstrate during project-based learning activities?
2. What benefits and challenges do students experience during project-based speaking activities?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-Based Learning in EFL Contexts

Project-Based Learning is grounded in learner-centered and constructivist views of learning. It gives students responsibility for making decisions, solving problems, managing tasks, and producing an outcome through sustained activity (Cocco, 2016; Mali, 2016). In EFL classrooms, the collaborative nature of project work is particularly relevant because students can use the target language as a tool for planning and completing a shared task. Dharmayanti and Joni (2021) emphasize that interaction during project work can support communication, creativity, cooperation, and engagement. Project work may also strengthen learner autonomy because students are required to plan and manage parts of the learning process themselves (Hidayatulloh, 2020; Dewi, 2020). These characteristics make PBL suitable for speaking instruction when the project culminates in an oral product, presentation, or performance.

Speaking Performance

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing and exchanging meaning through oral communication (Kosar & Bedir, 2014). Learners need speaking skills to express opinions, thoughts, feelings, and information in communicative situations (Irsyad & Narius, 2013; Benlaghrissi & Ouahidi, 2024). Ork et al. (2024) similarly describe speaking as a skill that enables oral interaction for information exchange and relationship building. Because English functions widely as an international language, the ability to speak it can support communication across linguistic and

cultural boundaries (Crystal, 2003). Speaking performance is multidimensional: accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, comprehension, fluency, and task fulfillment interact with affective factors such as confidence, anxiety, and motivation. For project presentations, non-verbal behaviors such as gesture and eye contact may also influence how effectively a message is delivered.

Project-Based Learning and Speaking

PBL can create repeated opportunities for oral communication because students must discuss ideas, divide responsibilities, negotiate meaning, rehearse, and present a final product. This interaction may support language use while also developing collaboration and autonomy. Prior studies have reported that PBL can support speaking performance and classroom participation (Mafrudloh & Fitriati, 2020; Simbolon et al., 2019; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021). Technology-supported and presentation-based projects have likewise been associated with speaking practice in EFL settings (Nugroho & Anugerahwati, 2019; Suryani & Argawati, 2023). The present study extends this line of work by examining not only the distribution of speaking scores but also the observed and reported experiences that accompany project-based speaking activities.

3. Method

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design that combined quantitative and qualitative evidence within one investigation (Creswell, 2012). The quantitative component consisted of students' project-presentation scores and was analyzed descriptively. The qualitative component consisted of classroom observation and student interviews. Because the available quantitative data represent performance after project activities rather than change scores across multiple measurement points, the quantitative results are interpreted as a description of speaking performance rather than as a causal estimate of improvement.

Participants and Context

Participants were 35 first-semester students in the Early Childhood Education Teacher Training program at STKIP Al Islam Tunas Bangsa. The students took part in project-based speaking activities in an EFL classroom and presented project outcomes as part of the speaking task. The study focused on the speaking performance demonstrated during these project presentations and on students' experiences of working and presenting in project groups.

Data Sources and Instruments

Three data sources were used. First, students' speaking performance was assessed from their project presentations. The scoring rubric, adapted from Brown (2004), included six dimensions: grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and task achievement. Each dimension was rated from 1 to 5. The project scores used in the course were reported on a 0–100 scale and categorized as A (≥ 76), B (66–75), C (56–65), D (45–55), or E (< 45). Second, classroom observation focused on grammar, vocabulary, fluency, creativity, collaboration, gesture, and eye contact during project presentations. Third, interviews were conducted with students to explore perceived benefits and challenges related to confidence, motivation, collaboration, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

Data Analysis

Quantitative project scores were summarized using frequencies and percentages for each grade category. Observation results were summarized as reported percentages across the seven indicators. Interview excerpts were examined qualitatively to identify recurring positive experiences and recurring difficulties during project work and presentation. The quantitative and qualitative evidence was integrated in the discussion by comparing the distribution of speaking performance with observed classroom behaviors and students' reported experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

Quantitative Results

Students' project presentations were assessed using the speaking rubric shown in Table 1. The rubric covers grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and task achievement and uses a five-point rating scale for each criterion.

Table 1. Rubric for Assessing Speaking Performance

Criteria	Rating Score	Comments
Grammar	5	Equivalent to and fully accepted by educated native speakers.
Grammar	4	Able to use the language accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Errors in grammar are quite rare.
Grammar	3	Control of grammar is good. Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics.
Grammar	2	Can usually handle elementary constructions quite accurately but does not have thorough or confident control of the grammar.
Grammar	1	Errors in grammar are frequent, but the speaker can be understood by a native speaker used to dealing with foreigners attempting to speak the language.
Vocabulary	5	Use of vocabulary and idioms is virtually that of a native speaker.
Vocabulary	4	Speech on all levels is fully accepted by educated native speakers in its breadth of vocabulary and idioms, colloquialisms, and pertinent cultural references.
Vocabulary	3	Able to speak the language with sufficient vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics. Vocabulary is broad enough that the speaker rarely has to search for a word.
Vocabulary	2	Has sufficient speaking vocabulary to express simple ideas with some circumlocution.
Vocabulary	1	Speaking vocabulary is inadequate to express anything beyond the most elementary needs.
Comprehension	5	Equivalent to that of an educated native speaker.
Comprehension	4	Can understand any conversation within the range of the speaker's experience.
Comprehension	3	Comprehension is quite complete at a normal rate of speech.
Comprehension	2	Can understand the gist of most conversations on nontechnical subjects.
Comprehension	1	Within a very limited range of language experience, can understand simple questions and statements if delivered with slowed speech, repetition, or paraphrase.

Table 1. Rubric for Assessing Speaking Performance (continued)

Criteria	Rating Score	Comments
Fluency	5	Has complete fluency in the language such that speech is fully accepted by educated native speakers.
Fluency	4	Able to use the language fluently on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs and to participate in conversation within the range of experience with a high degree of fluency.
Fluency	3	Can discuss particular areas of interest or competence with reasonable ease and rarely has to search for words.
Fluency	2	Can handle most social situations with confidence but not with facility, including introductions and casual conversations about current events, work, family, and autobiographical information.
Fluency	1	No specific fluency description; the level is inferred from performance in the other language areas.
Pronunciation	5	Equivalent to and fully accepted by educated native speakers.
Pronunciation	4	Errors in pronunciation are quite rare.
Pronunciation	3	Errors do not interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the listener. The accent may be obviously foreign.
Pronunciation	2	Accent is intelligible although often quite faulty.
Pronunciation	1	Errors in pronunciation are frequent but can be understood by a listener accustomed to non-native speech.
Task	5	Speaking proficiency equivalent to that of an educated native speaker.
Task	4	Would rarely be taken for a native speaker but can respond appropriately even in unfamiliar situations and can handle informal interpreting into and from the language.
Task	3	Can participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics.
Task	2	Able to satisfy routine social demands and work requirements but needs help in handling complications or difficulties.
Task	1	Can ask and answer questions on very familiar topics and satisfy routine travel needs and minimum courtesy requirements.

*Source: Brown (2004).**Table 2. Categories of Students' Scores*

Score (0–100)	Category	Category score
≥ 76	A	4
66–75	B	3
56–65	C	2
45–55	D	1
< 45	E	0

Table 3 presents the distribution of students' project-presentation scores. Fourteen students (40%) obtained an A and 11 students (31.43%) obtained a B. Seven students (20%) obtained a C, three students (8.57%) obtained a D, and no students received an E. Overall, 71.43% of the class received an A or B. These data describe the level of performance demonstrated in the assessed project presentations; they do not, by themselves, establish improvement over a previous level of speaking ability.

Table 3. Results of Students' Speaking Project Scores

Score (0–100)	Category	Number of students	Percentage
≥ 76	A	14	40%
66–75	B	11	31.43%
56–65	C	7	20%
45–55	D	3	8.57%
< 45	E	0	0%
Total	—	35	100%

Qualitative Results

Observation Results

Classroom observation focused on seven indicators during the students' project presentations: grammar, vocabulary, fluency, creativity, collaboration, gesture, and eye contact. The reported observation profile was 12% for grammar, 18% for vocabulary, 20% for fluency, 17% for creativity, 15% for collaboration, 10% for gesture, and 8% for eye contact. Fluency represented the largest reported proportion, followed by vocabulary and creativity. Figure 1 displays the same observation profile. Because the percentages represent an observational distribution rather than pre–post change, they are interpreted here as indicators of what was observed during presentation performance, not as measures of the causal impact of PBL.

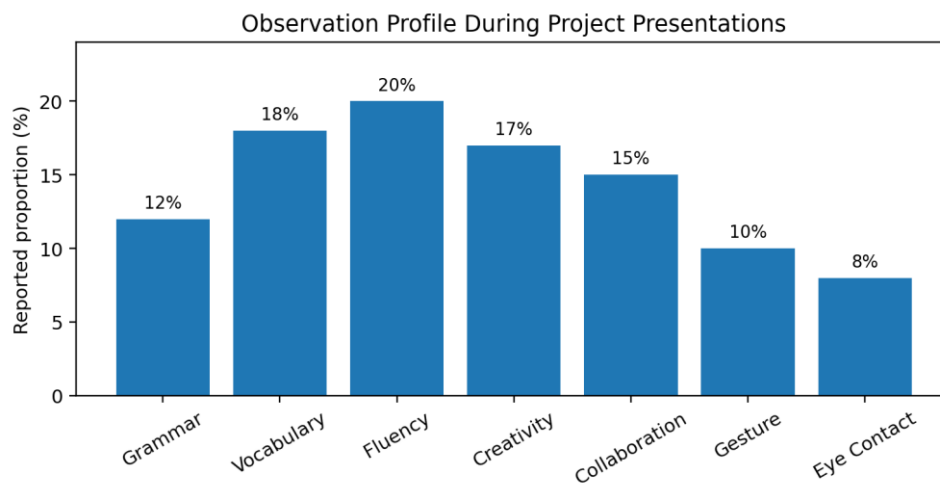


Figure 1. Reported distribution of observation indicators during project presentations.

Interview Results

Confidence and Peer Comparison

Interview data showed that collaborative project work did not produce the same affective experience for all students. One participant (R A) reported that presenting as part of a group increased confidence because peers could compensate for individual weaknesses. In contrast, other students described discomfort when comparing their English ability with more fluent peers or when anticipating negative evaluation from classmates.

"I am more confidence when I presented my project in a group work because they could cover my weakness"

R A, first-semester student

"I don't feel comfortable when work in peer because she is smarter than me. She speak fluently and less grammatical error. So, I bit nervous when I speak with her"

C G, first-semester student

"I feel shy when I have to present the project in front of the class because I feel like they will judge my pronunciation or the way I present the project. So, I am not comfortable to present it"

Z A, first-semester student

Motivation and Collaboration

The interviews also revealed contrasting motivational responses. N A described group work as an opportunity to learn from peers, including their pronunciation and accent, and viewed collaboration as motivating. Other students, however, continued to perceive English speaking as difficult despite repeated practice and expressed lower motivation.

"when I work in project group, it makes motivate me to learn more from the other students like their pronunciation, their ascent"

N A, first-semester student

"I don't know why working in group or not, I feel like speaking in English its so difficult, I try all the time to practice but the result is the same. It makes me feel like hmm I think, I give up to speak in English, maybe just read some books in English is better than I speak in English"

S A, first-semester student

Vocabulary and Pronunciation Challenges

Vocabulary and pronunciation emerged as recurring linguistic challenges. Students reported that preparing an English presentation required them to remember unfamiliar vocabulary and determine how to pronounce it accurately. The limited use of English in daily life was also perceived as reducing opportunities for regular practice.

"I think presenting my project in English is challenging because I have to memorize lots of vocabulary and how to pronounce it. I think it's hard to memorize because of that language. We don't use English in our daily activity so, it very challenging. I've tried so many time but still difficult"

T N H, first-semester student

Discussion

The quantitative findings show that most students achieved relatively strong scores in the assessed project presentations: 71.43% received either an A or B. This pattern suggests that many participants were able to complete the speaking task at the level expected by the course. However, the study did not report a baseline measure, a pre-test/post-test comparison, or a comparison group. Accordingly, the score distribution should not be interpreted as direct evidence that PBL caused an improvement in speaking ability. It is more appropriate to view the scores as descriptive evidence of speaking performance within a PBL context.

This cautious interpretation still allows the findings to be situated within the existing literature. Prior research has reported positive speaking outcomes after project-based instruction, including greater participation, speaking performance, and presentation ability (Mafrudloh & Fitriati, 2020; Simbolon et al., 2019; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021). Other work has shown that project-based tasks can create authentic reasons for students to plan, negotiate, collaborate, and present in English (Nugroho & Anugerahwati, 2019; Suryani

& Argawati, 2023). The present results are compatible with this literature, but the current design supports a descriptive rather than causal conclusion.

The observation profile provides additional information about the dimensions that were visible during project presentations. Fluency accounted for the largest reported proportion (20%), followed by vocabulary (18%), creativity (17%), collaboration (15%), grammar (12%), gesture (10%), and eye contact (8%). These indicators reflect both linguistic performance and broader presentation behaviors. This pattern is consistent with the idea that PBL can engage students in communication, creativity, collaboration, and problem solving (Santoso et al., 2021; Zen & Ariani, 2022). Hakimah (2023) likewise reports benefits of project-oriented learning for productive language work. Pramesti et al. (2023), however, examined problem-based learning rather than project-based learning; therefore, their vocabulary findings should be treated as evidence from a related but distinct pedagogical model. Widiyati and Pangesti (2022) provide more directly comparable evidence on project-based learning and speaking.

The interview results complicate a uniformly positive interpretation of PBL. Some students felt more confident when they presented with peers because group members could provide support. Others felt more anxious when comparing themselves with more fluent classmates or when anticipating judgments about pronunciation. This divergence is important because collaborative learning does not automatically reduce speaking anxiety. Widyasworo (2019) identifies inhibition, anxiety, low confidence, and low motivation as common barriers to speaking, and the present interviews show that these barriers may remain even within an interactive project environment.

Motivation was similarly mixed. Some students described peer learning as motivating, while others expressed frustration and a preference for reading over speaking. Ningrum (2020) emphasizes the role of motivation in speaking development, and the current findings suggest that project work may support motivation for some learners but may be insufficient for students who already perceive speaking as persistently difficult. For these learners, structured scaffolding—such as vocabulary preparation, pronunciation rehearsal, smaller speaking roles that gradually increase in complexity, and formative feedback—may be needed alongside the project itself.

Vocabulary and pronunciation were particularly salient challenges. Limited vocabulary can constrain students' ability to express intended meanings, while uncertainty about pronunciation can increase hesitation and fear of negative evaluation. Rosyada-AS and Apoko (2023) identify pronunciation, spelling, word meaning, and retention as factors that can make vocabulary learning difficult. The interview data in this study similarly indicate that students struggled to remember vocabulary and pronounce unfamiliar words, especially because they had limited opportunities to use English in daily communication.

Taken together, the mixed evidence suggests that the value of PBL in this classroom lies in the communicative conditions it creates: students have a concrete reason to work with peers, prepare a product, and speak before an audience. At the same time, the quality of students' experiences depends on the support built into the project. Teachers may need to balance collaborative autonomy with explicit language scaffolding, particularly for grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence. PBL should therefore be treated not as a stand-alone guarantee of speaking improvement, but as a framework within which carefully designed speaking practice can occur.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the quantitative evidence consists of post-activity project scores and therefore cannot establish change in speaking ability over time. Second, the study involved one class of 35 students from a single program, which limits generalization to other EFL populations. Third, the available methodological description does not provide enough information to evaluate inter-rater reliability, the conversion of rubric scores to the 0–100 scale, or the denominator used to calculate the observation percentages. Fourth, further procedural information about interview sampling, recording, transcription, and qualitative coding would strengthen transparency and reproducibility. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

5 Conclusion

This study examined speaking performance and student experiences during project-based learning activities in a first-semester EFL classroom. Most students achieved relatively strong project-presentation scores: 40% received an A, 31.43% a B, 20% a C, and 8.57% a D. Observation data highlighted fluency, vocabulary, creativity, and collaboration, while interview data revealed both benefits and challenges. Some students experienced greater confidence, motivation, and peer support; others reported anxiety, limited vocabulary, grammatical concerns, pronunciation difficulties, and low motivation. The main contribution of the study is therefore not evidence that PBL necessarily caused speaking improvement, but a mixed-methods description of how students performed and what they experienced while completing project-based speaking tasks. The findings suggest that PBL can provide a meaningful context for oral communication when it is accompanied by language scaffolding and supportive group structures. Future research should use pre-test/post-test designs, comparison groups, larger and more diverse samples, validated observation procedures, and explicit integration of quantitative and qualitative analyses. Further studies may also examine how project-based learning supports other language skills, including reading and writing, while retaining speaking as a central communicative component.

5 Daftar Pustaka

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