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Investigating The Effect Of Project-Based Learning On Speaking Skills In English Language Classes

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Abstract: Project-Based Learning (PBL) has become a widely advocated approach in English Language Teaching (ELT) because it promises to cultivate authentic communication, collaborative problem-solving, and learner autonomy. Yet its specific effects on speaking—fluency, accuracy, complexity, and interactional competence—vary across implementations. This article develops an evidence-informed account of how PBL influences speaking outcomes and the conditions under which gains are most likely to occur. Using an integrative review of research from task-based language teaching, second language acquisition, and PBL in language education, the study synthesizes mechanisms that plausibly link project work to oral proficiency: increased pushed output and negotiation of meaning, richer opportunities for planning and rehearsal, heightened motivational investment due to authentic audiences and public products, and expanded discourse functions beyond display talk. The article proposes a design framework that aligns project purpose, communicative demands, language focus, scaffolding, and assessment with targeted speaking outcomes. In this framework, speaking development depends on a disciplined alternation between meaning-focused project activity and strategically timed language-focused episodes, supported by modeling, rehearsal, feedback, and explicit criteria. The discussion surveys recurrent challenges—imbalances among fluency, accuracy and complexity, diffuse assessment practices, and teacher workload—and offers solutions such as analytic rating scales, staged deliverables, micro-presentations, and peer-response protocols. The article concludes that PBL can reliably improve fluency and interactional competence and can also yield accuracy gains when projects embed planned form-focused instruction and iterative feedback; conversely, projects that privilege product over language learning tend to produce superficial oral performance. Practical implications are detailed for secondary and tertiary ELT programs seeking to deploy PBL as a vehicle for systematic speaking development.

Keywords: Project-based learning; speaking skills; EFL/ESL; fluency; accuracy; complexity; interactional competence; task-based language teaching; assessment of speaking; scaffolding.

Introduction: Speaking is the most public face of language ability and a central outcome of English language education, yet it remains difficult to teach and to assess in ways that reflect real communicative demands. Classroom routines often default to recitation or brief opinion exchanges that restrict opportunities for extended talk, negotiated meaning, and purposeful interaction with non-formulaic language. Project-Based Learning emerged in general education as a way to organize learning around complex questions and authentic products, and its migration into ELT has been driven by the intuition that extended projects should create richer ecologies for speaking. Projects promise time, audience, and purpose: they require learners to plan, coordinate, and present, to seek information and justify choices, and to articulate ideas for peers and stakeholders. These activities should, in principle, force learners to mobilize language resources in conditions that parallel real communication. However, without careful design, projects can deteriorate into artifact production where language practice is incidental, or into unstructured conversation in which accuracy and complexity stagnate. The didactic question is therefore how to harness the motivational and epistemic affordances of PBL to produce measurable gains in speaking.

Insights from second language acquisition clarify why PBL can be beneficial. The Interaction Hypothesis

argues that comprehension problems and conversational adjustments drive acquisition by making input comprehensible and focusing attention on form. The Output Hypothesis proposes that the need to express precise meanings prompts learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage and to test hypotheses about linguistic forms. Task-based research adds that the complexity of a communicative task and the availability of planning time shape the trade-offs among fluency, accuracy, and syntactic or lexical complexity. From this perspective, PBL offers a container for repeated meaning-focused tasks with varied discourse demands and for cycles of rehearsal and feedback that should nourish oral development. At the same time, the distribution of attention is limited; learners who devote all resources to message and management may neglect form unless the project architecture includes moments that reallocate attention to language.

The present study addresses this tension by synthesizing what is known about the effects of PBL on speaking and by translating those insights into a pragmatic design for ELT classes. The central argument is that PBL improves speaking most reliably when it is explicitly conceived as a language-learning method rather than merely as a vehicle for content or soft skills. This stance entails coherent alignment among project aims, communicative functions, targeted features of oral language, and assessment practices, and it privileges iterative speaking opportunities where feedback is close to performance. It also requires that teachers orchestrate the social and temporal dynamics of projects—roles, audience, interim milestones—so that every learner engages in substantive talk and receives actionable feedback.

The aim of this article is to investigate, through an integrative research synthesis and design analysis, the effect of Project-Based Learning on speaking skills in English language classes and to elaborate a set of design principles that translate these effects into teachable routines. Specifically, the study seeks to explain when and why PBL enhances fluency, accuracy, complexity, and interactional competence, to identify pitfalls that depress language gains, and to propose assessment and scaffolding strategies that keep speaking development at the center of project work.

The study employs an integrative review with a design-oriented lens. Sources include seminal and contemporary literature on PBL in second and foreign language education, task-based language teaching, interactionist approaches to SLA, motivation in language learning, and the assessment of speaking. The review considers peer-reviewed articles, program evaluations, and practitioner reports spanning secondary school, university foundation programs, and adult EFL contexts. Rather than aggregating effect sizes, the analysis focuses on convergent and divergent findings about speaking outcomes, mediating variables such as planning time and task complexity, and program design features such as public audience, scaffolding routines, and feedback mechanisms. The method followed an abductive cycle: mechanisms theorized in SLA were tested against the practical realities reported in PBL implementations, and recurring pedagogical moves associated with positive speaking outcomes were distilled into a design framework. This approach avoids overgeneralization from any single study and foregrounds the instructional decisions that make the difference between projects that are linguistically productive and those that are not.

Evidence from PBL and task-based studies converges on the conclusion that fluency and interactional competence improve when learners participate in projects that demand repeated oral rehearsal and public sharing of interim and final products. Projects with authentic audiences encourage purposeful preparation and incentivize clarity, turn-taking, and repair strategies because miscommunication has visible social costs. The presence of an audience beyond the teacher also diversifies discourse functions, expanding speaking beyond transactional exchanges to include stance-taking, justification, narration of process, and argumentation from evidence. These functions draw on broader lexical and syntactic repertoires and deepen pragmatic control. Gains in accuracy are more variable, but they become more robust when teachers embed planned language-focused episodes tied to the communicative demands of the project. For example, if groups must persuade a community committee, targeted mini-lessons on hedging and stance adverbials, followed by coached micro-presentations, can convert emergent noticing into durable control. Absent such design, projects may consolidate fluent but fossilized forms.

Task conditions and timing influence outcomes. When learners receive pre-task planning time, they can reduce processing strain during speaking, enabling more complex phrasing without a collapse in fluency. Within projects, planning can be operationalized as structured rehearsal, storyboard scripting, or agenda setting for meetings, but it should remain light enough to avoid scripted speech that suppresses interaction. A productive rhythm alternates between meaning-driven episodes, where ideas are developed and negotiated, and explicit language focus prompted by analysis of recorded rehearsals or by targeted feedback against rubrics. Technology can accelerate these loops: short smartphone recordings analyzed with checklists for

pausing, clustering, and prosody make features of oral production visible, while collaborative documents concentrate attention on discourse markers and cohesion before delivery. However, the didactic value of tools depends on teacher mediation that links feedback to the communicative purpose of the project rather than to generic correctness.

Motivation is a powerful mediator in PBL's effect on speaking. Projects situated in learners' social and disciplinary worlds generate personal investment, which sustains the effort necessary for repeated practice and refinement. Motivation, however, does not automatically translate into balanced language learning. Energetic collaboration can drift into first-language talk or into uneven participation where fluent speakers dominate and quieter students become logisticians. The solution is not to abandon authentic collaboration but to structure it so that oral participation is distributed. Assigning rotating communicative roles—discussion chair, summarizer, questioner, devil's advocate—creates discourse obligations for each learner. Interim checkpoints that require every member to deliver two-minute updates, respond to questions, or participate in stakeholder interviews ensure that speaking practice is not concentrated in a final presentation. These routines preserve authenticity while protecting equitable language opportunities.

Assessment practices exert strong washback on what learners attend to in their speaking. When evaluation is delayed until a single culminating presentation, learners optimize for performance veneer and visual design rather than for language development. A more productive approach uses analytic rating scales aligned to the targeted dimensions—fluency, accuracy, lexical and syntactic range, discourse management, pronunciation and prosody, and interactional strategies—and applies them across multiple low-stakes performances. Learners benefit from transparency about descriptors and from exemplars that illustrate levels of performance. Peer assessment, when trained with calibrated samples, can multiply feedback without excessive teacher workload and can also heighten learners' metalinguistic awareness as they listen for features they intend to adopt. Over a project cycle, improvement becomes visible in the form of reduced pausing and repairs, more stable control of tense and agreement in complex sentences, more precise lexical choices, clearer signposting and cohesion, and more agile turn-taking and clarification strategies.

Accuracy development in PBL settings raises a persistent design dilemma: the attentional resources required for message planning and social coordination can suppress attention to form. Research on form-focused instruction suggests that brief, explicit episodes are effective when they are timely, need-driven, and immediately recycled in production. In a PBL class, this means that teachers monitor rehearsals and meetings, identify high-leverage forms that constrain intelligibility or credibility, and deliver micro-lessons that address those forms with modeling and controlled practice. Learners then return to their project talk and deliberately deploy the targeted features, with feedback keyed to those features. This coupling of focus on form with swift return to communication aids proceduralization. It also avoids the pendulum swing toward grammar-only digressions that fracture the coherence of the project.

The nature of project products and audiences shapes speaking opportunities. Public exhibitions, client briefings, podcast series, debates, and stakeholder interviews inherently prioritize spoken language and generate dialogic exchanges that exceed scripted monologues. These genres elicit different discourse demands and can be sequenced to cultivate a repertoire: early projects might emphasize clear description and procedural explanation, mid-stage projects might foreground argument with evidence, and advanced projects might demand reflective evaluation and negotiation of compromise. Such sequencing creates vertical articulation across a program and allows repeated practice of discourse functions that underpin academic and professional communication. Importantly, product diversity must be balanced with the need for instructional economy; teachers should reuse project architectures with varied topics so that cognitive resources are not consumed by logistics.

Equity and inclusion require explicit attention. Projects can exacerbate disparities if language development is assumed to be an automatic by-product of busy group work. Learners with lower proficiency may retreat to peripheral roles, while those with higher proficiency shoulder all public speaking. To counter this pattern, teachers design interaction structures that normalize help-seeking and redistribute expertise, such as rehearsals in trios with rotating feedback roles, sentence stems that support hedging and turn management, and reflective journals that track individual oral goals. Providing multilingual resources at the research stage can enhance content access, but transitions to English for planning and delivery must be unambiguous to protect target language exposure. When learners perceive that criteria reward improvement and strategic effort, not just native-like polish, participation broadens and speaking gains are more evenly distributed.

Institutional constraints—time, class size, assessment regimes—complicate implementation, yet PBL can be adapted without losing its language benefits. Short-cycle projects completed in two to three weeks can still support speaking growth if they are tightly designed with clear communicative milestones. Teachers can manage workload by reusing rubrics, sampling performances for detailed commentary, and leveraging peer feedback responsibly. Coordination within departments can yield banks of well-tested project prompts, audience partnerships, and calibrated exemplars, reducing preparation costs while raising reliability. Over time, programs can map project genres to curriculum levels, ensuring that students spiral through increasingly complex speaking demands with cumulative support.

The underlying mechanism that links PBL to speaking development is not simply time on task, but the interweaving of purposeful interaction, rehearsal, feedback, and targeted form-focused instruction in service of a consequential communicative goal. When these elements cohere, learners experience meaningful pressure to express precise meanings, they receive guidance that helps them encode those meanings more efficiently and accurately, and they practice under conditions of rising complexity with safety nets that prevent fossilization. The result is accelerated fluency accompanied by managed growth in accuracy and complexity, alongside pragmatic and interactional gains that prepare learners for real-world communication.

Project-Based Learning can be a powerful engine for speaking development in English language classes when it is designed as language pedagogy rather than as a generic vehicle for activity. The most consistent gains occur in fluency and interactional competence, with accuracy and complexity improving when projects integrate timely, need-driven form-focused instruction and iterative feedback tied to analytic criteria. Productive projects align communicative purpose, targeted language features, scaffolding routines, and assessment across the project timeline, distribute oral participation through structured roles and checkpoints, and cultivate motivation by engaging authentic audiences. Challenges—imbalanced attention to language, diffuse assessment, uneven participation, and teacher workload—are surmountable through disciplined design: staged deliverables, calibrated rubrics, short recorded rehearsals with feedback, and collaborative moderation within programs. For institutions seeking to expand opportunities for meaningful speaking while maintaining rigor and equity, PBL offers a coherent pathway, provided that it is enacted with clarity about how language is learned and with tools that make speaking development visible and improvable.

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