

ENHANCING SPEAKING PARTICIPATION THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Speaking skills continue to be a challenge for many Indonesian EFL learners, caused by anxiety, limited confidence, and teacher-centered practices. Although Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has been widely introduced to enhance communication and collaboration, the evidence on its effectiveness in improving speaking participation in Indonesian high schools is still limited. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of PjBL in enhancing students' active participation in English-speaking activities. Using a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, the study involved 37 students of class XI IPS-5 at SMAN 1 Keruak during the 2024 academic year. Data were collected through observation sheets, teacher's written reports, and student questionnaires, focusing on five indicators of speaking participation: asking questions, answering, engaging in discussions, expressing opinions, and delivering presentations. The findings show a noticeable improvement in students' active participation recorded throughout the observation and the field notes. Students' participation shifted from limited participation in cycle 1 to confident participation and full involvement during presentation by cycle 2. The questionnaire results revealed that from the 34 students, 100% reported increased confidence in speaking, over 90% indicated higher motivation and enjoyment, and 97% stated that PjBL helped them better understand the lesson. These outcomes illustrate that PjBL not only strengthens language skills but also supports confidence, motivation, and collaborative engagement. The findings have important implications for educators seeking to address the low speaking participation of English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners through the use of (PjBL).

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INTRODUCTION

As a productive skill, speaking is the most challenging for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to master (Amiruddin et al., 2022). This is due to the minimum exposure to real-world settings that learners have to communicate and express themselves. Further, students are not exposed to the cultures of English-speaking natives. A study

conducted at the Mechanical Engineering Department by Ratnasari (2020) found that the student faced some challenges in speaking English. First, the students felt that they lacked vocabulary. Second, the students felt confused when they wanted to speak, and when the teacher asked them to speak. Third, the students lacked exposure to English because English was only taught for one week.

In the context of classroom settings, speaking becomes more challenging due to anxiety, lack of confidence, and teacher-centered methods. Speaking is widely acknowledged as one of the most demanding skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in classroom settings where psychological and pedagogical barriers persist. Many learners struggle with anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence, which inhibit their willingness to participate in oral communication (Paneerselvam & Mohamad, 2019; Pohan & Kusumawardany, 2023). Students with low confidence often feel hesitant and reluctant to express themselves, and these challenges are further intensified in teacher-centered classrooms that emphasize rote learning over meaningful interaction (Hadiyansah, 2020). Similar to Putri (2024), speaking challenges are caused by the reluctance of teachers who are accustomed to traditional, teacher-centered methods, which makes it difficult to shift from teacher-led lessons to student-centered activities, especially when they lack sufficient training in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles. Further, in the Indonesian context, where English is learned exclusively as a foreign language, limited exposure to real communication outside the classroom adds another layer of difficulty (Agung, 2022).

A preliminary observation at SMAN 1 Keruak, particularly in class XI IPS-5, revealed a serious issue with student engagement in the English-speaking class. Out of 37 students, only 4 to 5 regularly participated actively, as reported by the English teacher. Various forms of active participation, such as asking and answering questions, engaging in group discussions, delivering presentations, and expressing opinions, were rarely demonstrated by the majority of students. Interviews with students stressed some factors, i.e., limited interaction, an unsupportive peer environment, and uninspiring teacher-centered methods that led to disengagement and boredom. These findings emphasize the urgent need for more dynamic and student-centered approaches in the classroom.

To address this challenge, educators are highly encouraged to explore alternative approaches that stimulate better student involvement. One of the most promising is Project-Based Learning (PjBL). This is because PjBL has been widely introduced as a method that encourages students to take an active role in their learning through self-directed strategies, marking a significant change in conventional teaching methods and traditional educational approaches (Ali, 2019). Kusuma & Artama, (2023) stated that PjBL is a student-centred learning that strengthens essential 21st-century skills such as creativity, citizenship, collaboration, connectivity, and communication.

Several studies have emphasized the benefits of PjBL, particularly in speaking classes. In particular, research conducted in Asian EFL contexts has shown that PjBL helps in reducing students' fear of speaking, encourages teamwork, and provides authentic purposes for communication (Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020). Research conducted by Nuswowati et al., (2017) on the implementation of problem-based learning with green chemistry vision to improve creative thinking skills and students' creative actions found that PjBL improves students' activeness in speaking and students' interpersonal skills. Further, Serevina & Sari, (2018) found that PjBL is effective in improving communication and collaboration, especially on team-based projects. Lastly, research conducted on the application of PjBL in grade 12 students at SMK Negeri 4 Bandung revealed that the PjBL learning model could increase the activity and learning outcomes. However, despite these promising findings, there remains a gap in classroom-based research that particularly examines how PjBL can be implemented to improve speaking participation among Indonesian public high school

students. Few studies have operationalized speaking participation using clear, observable indicators, leaving a need for more systematic investigation.

The present study responds to this need by investigating the implementation of PjBL to enhance student participation in speaking activities at a public high school in SMAN 1 Keruak during the 2024 academic year. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on linking (PjBL) with students' participation in English-speaking classrooms by examining five main indicators: asking questions, answering, engaging in discussions, expressing opinions, and delivering presentations, thereby providing both theoretical and practical contributions to EFL pedagogy.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning process in accordance with the model developed by (Kemmis et al., 2014) the research was carried out through four systematic and cyclical stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, implemented over two full cycles. Since the first cycle was used to identify and address the initial challenges of low speaking participation, while the second cycle aimed to improve the intervention and to confirm its effectiveness based on reflection from the first cycle, the use of two cycles was considered appropriate in this study.

CAR was chosen because it allows a teacher to become an active researcher in improving practice, focusing on both immediate pedagogical improvement and the development of experiential knowledge through collaborative inquiry. As Cohen et al., (2018) highlight CAR bridges theory and practice by involving teachers directly in diagnosing and addressing real classroom problems. In this study, each cycle particularly targeted the problem of low student participation in speaking activities.

In the first cycle, the planning stage included designing lesson plans integrating PjBL principles, preparing materials, and organizing instruments. During the acting stage, students worked in groups to complete project tasks related to explanation text topics. The observing stage involved documenting speaking behaviors through the observation sheet and field notes. The reflection of the outcomes of Cycle 1 showed that although participation had begun to improve, many students still lacked confidence. These findings would be the reference of Cycle 2, in which clearer guidelines for speaking tasks and the introduction of a point-based reinforcement system to encourage students' participation. Further, cycle 2 followed the same structural sequence but incorporated adjustments based on prior reflection. Students continued their project work and were followed by a group presentation. Afterwards, they participated in structured questioning and feedback sessions. By the end of cycle 2, the observations demonstrated substantial improvement with a higher number of students actively participating across all speaking indicators.

Subject and Setting of the Research

This study was conducted at SMAN 1 Keruak, located in Tanjung Luar Village, Keruak District, East Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara. The subjects were 37 students, consisting of 19 males and 18 females. The school serves students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom come from farming and fishing families. This background is relevant because students' social and cultural environments often influence their engagement and participation in classroom activities. Furthermore, class XI IPS-5 was purposively selected based on the English teacher's report, indicating that it had the lowest level of active participation in speaking activities compared to other eleventh-grade classes. Therefore, this class was considered representative for investigating strategies to improve

speaking participation among Indonesian EFL learners in a typical coastal public high school context.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data: observation sheets, questionnaires, and teacher's written reports (field notes). Each instrument was carefully developed, validated, and applied systematically throughout the two CAR cycles. Firstly, the observation sheets were constructed based on five indicators of active speaking participation (asking, answering, discussing, expressing opinions, and presenting). These indicators were adopted from (Andayani et al., 2025), who noted that the five indicators were aligned with the syntax of the Think-Pair-Share (TPS) learning model. Secondly, a questionnaire was distributed at the end of the intervention to gather students' perceptions of their participation, motivation, and learning experience through PjBL. The questionnaire consists of ten closed-ended (yes/no) items. Although yes/no items may limit the depth of responses, this format was purposely chosen to facilitate clarity and efficiency for students with varying English proficiency levels in giving their perception towards the implemented teaching model. Finally, the teacher's written reports during the implementation functioned as structured field notes that recorded classroom atmosphere, particularly on student responses, interaction patterns, and teacher reflections. This allows researchers to make a simple descriptive analysis of students' attitudes and engagement.

Data Analysis

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the PjBL model influenced students' active participation in speaking activities. Qualitative data obtained from observation sheets, teacher's written reports, and field notes were analyzed using Miles et al., (2014) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In practice, the researcher first coded field notes and observation data according to five indicators of active participation. Repetitive behaviors and patterns were then categorized into themes reflecting changes in student engagement between the pre- and post-intervention stages. These themes were compared across cycles to identify consistent improvements or remaining challenges.

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively by calculating the percentage of positive responses for each item and indicator. Although inferential analysis was not applied, comparative percentages between the first and second cycles were used to highlight observable trends in students' attitudes and participation levels. This quantitative data served to triangulate the qualitative findings and validate observed behavioral improvements.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

To answer the research question regarding how the use of PjBL increases students' active participation in the speaking classroom at SMAN 1 Keruak, the researcher focused on five key indicators: actively asking questions, actively answering questions, actively engaging in discussions, actively expressing opinions, and actively participating in classroom presentations.

Table 1
Comparison of observation and field note results between cycle 1 and cycle 2

Indicator of Active Participation	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Evidence of Change
Answering Questions	Several students answered teacher-led questions about the topic "Rain." Participation was repetitive and limited to confident students.	Most students answered questions voluntarily during presentations and competed to earn points. Responses became longer and more meaningful.	Shift from teacher-led responding to peer-driven engagement.
Participating in Discussions	Students discussed planning tasks: topic selection, role distribution, and materials.	Students discussed presentation content, formulated questions for other groups, and prepared arguments.	Improved discussion depth and focus (procedural academic).
Expressing Opinions	Some students expressed opinions but only after teacher prompting.	Many students voluntarily shared thoughts during peer presentations because topics differed among groups.	Participation became spontaneous and personally meaningful.
Presenting in Front of Class	No presentation occurred; students only prepared their projects.	All students presented collaboratively, using visuals and explanation text structure.	Full participation developed whole class involvement.

The observation results between cycle 1 and cycle 2 show a change in students' behavior in which students became more independent in class participation. In Cycle 1, most interaction occurred only when triggered or guided by the teacher. The number of students who asked questions was limited, while participation in answering and discussion was predictable and dominated by confident learners. This indicates that students were still adjusting to the demands of PjBL and relied heavily on external support. In cycle 2, participation became more autonomous and purposeful. Questions transitioned from procedural to more meaningful questions, and responses were fuller. Students were more competitive due to the meaningful context and reward system supporting engagement.

The most significant improvement was observed in the final indicator presented in front of the class. There were no presentations in cycle 1. However, all students presented confidently and collaboratively in cycle 2. This progression illustrates a shift from passive observation to active ownership of learning. Overall, the improvement across indicators shows that PjBL not only increased participation frequency but also improved the quality, independence, and communication. This indicates that PjBL effectively transformed the learning environment from teacher-centered to student-centered, stimulating confidence, motivation, and meaningful interaction.

These observational findings were reinforced by the results of the questionnaire. A total of 34 respondents showed predominantly positive attitudes toward PjBL, with over 90% of respondents confirming increased motivation, confidence, and enjoyment in speaking activities. All students (100%) agreed that project work improved their confidence to speak before the class, and 97% said it helped them understand the lesson better. These quantitative results triangulate the qualitative findings, confirming that PjBL not only improved students' speaking performance but also cultivated motivation and self-confidence. The responses of 34 students are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Students' responses to the elements of the questionnaire

Category	Questionnaire Item	Response	
		Yes	No
Participation/Activeness	Feel more active in speaking/discussing during project	31	3
	More motivated to join group discussions	30	4
	Had enough chances to speak and share ideas	30	4
Confidence/Communication Skills	Project improved confidence to speak in front of class	34	0
	Project improved speaking and communication skills	30	4
	Improved speaking and communication since doing project	30	4
Cognitive/Learning Outcomes	Helped understand learning concepts	33	1
	Project gave more real-life, relevant learning experience	32	2
Engagement/Enjoyment	Made learning more exciting	31	3
	Project was fun and engaging	30	4

To better understand the impact of PjBL on students, the questionnaire items were grouped into four categories: participation/activeness, confidence/communication skills, cognitive/learning outcomes, and engagement/enjoyment. These categories present a clear picture of how PjBL influenced students' classroom behavior, skill development, comprehension, and overall learning experience.

The first category, participation/activeness, illustrates how the project encouraged students to engage more in classroom discussions and collaborative activities. Most respondents (around 88–91%) reported feeling more active in speaking, more motivated to join group discussions, and having sufficient opportunities to share ideas. These results suggest that PjBL successfully developed active participation, fostering an interactive classroom environment where students felt comfortable expressing themselves and contributing to group tasks.

The second category, confidence/communication skills, highlights the impact of the project on students' self-assurance and ability to communicate effectively. All students (100%) agreed that the project improved their confidence to speak in front of the class, and most (around 88%) felt their speaking and communication skills improved since engaging in the project. Meanwhile, cognitive/learning outcomes and engagement/enjoyment emphasize comprehension and emotional involvement. Almost all students believed the project helped them understand learning concepts better and provided real-life, relevant experiences, while a large majority also found the activities fun and exciting.

Overall, the quantitative results show strong empirical support for the qualitative evidence gathered through observation and field notes. The findings suggest that PjBL not only enhances linguistic outcomes such as speaking frequency but also nurtures psychological factors like confidence, motivation, and social interaction, which are important for long-term language development. The consistency across data sources strengthens the study's validity and confirms that PjBL can be a positive strategy for promoting active participation in EFL speaking classrooms.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed valuable insights into the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the classroom. Based on the findings, three key points emerged. First, PjBL fosters students' confidence through authentic and collaborative tasks that encourage meaningful participation. Second, PjBL connects learning with real-world contexts, thereby enhancing students' motivation and interest. Lastly, PjBL provides a positive classroom atmosphere and inclusivity.

Throughout the learning process, students' engagement increased as PjBL built an environment that encouraged collaboration and shared responsibility. This setting facilitated learners to contribute according to their abilities, whether in leadership, creative design, or presentation roles, during the teaching and learning process. One of the principles in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, as cited by Balbay and Dogan (2018) in Dewi & Oktapiani (2024), is that learning is situated. The idea of collaboration mentioned earlier relates to this principle. Social interaction plays an important role in the learning process, as learners engage in a community of practice. Stefania et al. (2020) confirm that meaningful learning happens when students interact with other knowledgeable people, whether fellow students, teachers, or cultural tools, who facilitate their understanding through guided interaction.

Data from observations, field notes, and questionnaires reliably illustrated that students became more confident and communicative during project activities. Learners who were previously passive started to engage actively in asking and answering questions, participating in discussions, and expressing ideas. These results support Miguel & Carney (2022), who found that project-based collaborative tasks lower language anxiety and encourage risk-taking in communication. However, unlike their findings, which emphasized language fluency, this study highlights that emotional safety and inclusivity were equally important to student participation.

The contextual relevance of the project topic "natural phenomena" also played an essential role in increasing motivation. When students connected the lesson to real-life experiences, such as how rain occurs, they demonstrated greater curiosity. This observation aligns with Chang et al. (2024), who reported that authentic tasks in PjBL stimulate interest and cognitive engagement. Yet, the present study extends those insights by showing that real-world relevance also fosters emotional engagement, leading students to perceive learning as meaningful and applicable beyond the classroom.

The classroom environment shifted into a more inclusive and supportive space. Students across different proficiency levels collaborated effectively. This finding corresponds with Gillies (2023), who emphasized that structured peer collaboration enhances both academic achievement and social inclusion. The use of a point-based reward system further reinforced engagement, turning participation into a dynamic and enjoyable experience. This result aligns with Wang & Tahir (2020), who demonstrated that gamified learning promotes motivation through feedback and recognition. Nevertheless, while gamification proved effective, it also introduced competitiveness that required careful monitoring to maintain a balance between learning and reward-seeking behavior.

Presentation sessions became important moments for both cognitive and affective growth. Students confidently showcased their projects, dividing speaking roles more equally during the activity. Bhardwaj et al. (2025) also stated that a student-centered approach fundamentally reshapes the educational experience by actively involving learners in their own learning. By leading discussions, presenting projects, and teaching peers, students developed a sense of empowerment and ownership.

Regardless of the positive outcomes, this study also noted several challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the sustainable implementation of PjBL. The preparation and coordination involved in project work proved to be time-consuming for both teachers and

students, often requiring extra effort to manage tasks and maintain engagement. Additionally, not all learners participated equally, as some still needed consistent encouragement and guidance to take an active role in group activities. Furthermore, while the point-based reward system effectively enhanced motivation and participation, it carried the potential risk of diverting students' attention toward external incentives rather than fostering intrinsic motivation. These findings highlight the importance of careful planning, sufficient time allocation, and strong classroom management when implementing PjBL.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the application of the PjBL model brought positive improvement towards students' active participation in speaking classes at SMAN 1 Keruak. Using a CAR design over two meetings, the study observed notable improvements across five key indicators of active participation, i.e., asking questions, answering, discussing, expressing opinions, and presenting. Qualitative data from classroom observations and teacher's written reports showed increased student engagement, enthusiasm, and collaboration during project activities. Meanwhile, field notes supported these findings by documenting behavioural changes and positive classroom dynamics, including greater inclusion and confidence among students. Quantitative results from a student questionnaire further confirmed the effectiveness of PjBL, with the majority of students reporting higher motivation, enjoyment, and speaking confidence. Grounded in constructivist theory, the study supports the idea that student-centered tasks that are relevant real world encourage deeper learning and stronger participation. Overall, PjBL proves to be a practical and meaningful instructional model to keep students' active participation in the learning process.

Regardless of the positive findings, this study has several notable boundaries that should be addressed in future research. One main limitation lies in the study's limited measurement of actual language learning results. While increased participation and engagement were obviously observed, the study mainly counts on noticeable behaviors and students' self-reported perceptions of their learning experience. Nevertheless, these indicators may not necessarily reflect actual improvements in speaking proficiency. The assumption that greater participation automatically translates into enhanced speaking skills may generalize the complex relationship between classroom engagement and language acquisition. In addition, this study relied on only three instruments such as observation, field notes, and a questionnaire. These data collection tools may be at risk of bias, including social desirability, the novelty effect, or selective observation. Students may have reported positive experiences not solely because of genuine learning gains, but also due to their desire to meet teachers' expectations or their excitement about engaging in an unconventional activity. To gain a more holistic and balanced understanding of the effectiveness of PjBL, future studies are encouraged to employ more diverse and rigorous data collection methods. For example, in-depth interviews or student reflective journals could offer deeper insight into students' actual learning processes.

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