



## Enhancing Vocational High School Students' Oral Communication Skills through Project-Based Learning: A Case Study

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**Abstract.** In today's communication-driven workforce, vocational students must possess strong oral communication skills alongside technical expertise. This study investigates English teachers' perceptions of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a pedagogical approach to enhance speaking skills in vocational high schools. Grounded in constructivist theory of PBL model, the research employed a descriptive qualitative method through semi-structured interviews with four English teachers in Jember. The findings reveal that teachers generally perceive PBL as effective in fostering oral communication due to its emphasis on real-world application, collaboration, and student autonomy. However, significant challenges were identified, including limited teacher experience with PBL, student reluctance to speak, and a need for structured reflection strategies. Teachers proposed adaptive strategies to support engagement and reflection, showing a willingness to integrate PBL more fully with appropriate support. The study underscores the importance of professional development, curriculum flexibility, and institutional support to optimize PBL implementation, affirming its significant role in equipping vocational students with essential communication skills for their future careers.

**Keywords:** English Language Teaching; Oral Communication; Project-Based Learning; Teacher Perceptions; Vocational Education

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-evolving and interconnected world, effective oral communication skills are just as critical as technical competencies—especially for vocational high school students who are preparing to enter professional fields. While mastering technical expertise remains a core focus, students must also be equipped to articulate their ideas clearly, confidently, and appropriately in diverse workplace contexts. Success in the modern workforce increasingly depends on this dual capability. Despite this reality, technical skills often take precedence in vocational education. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), oral communication skills are frequently overlooked in vocational programs, potentially limiting students' long-term employability. In response, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as a promising approach. By involving students in real-world problem solving, PBL not only reinforces subject mastery but also enhances essential soft skills—including collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. Markham (2011) describes PBL as a teaching method that integrates knowing and doing. Through hands-on projects, students learn to apply their knowledge in practical contexts, producing meaningful outcomes. As they work in teams, communicate with peers, and present their ideas, they gain valuable experience in oral communication—experience that directly translates to workplace readiness. Vocational students often struggle with core aspects of verbal communication: organizing their thoughts,

presenting confidently, and managing professional interactions. These challenges may be attributed to traditional education models that prioritize technical knowledge over soft skills. As Tannen (1990) reminds us, we often "look through language" without acknowledging its immense power. This oversight is critical, especially as communication consistently ranks among the top skills employers seek (NACE, 2021). Supporting this, Robles (2012) found that while technical skills are essential, communication is a foundational trait for leadership, teamwork, and client interaction. Similarly, Carnevale, Smith, and Melton (2021) at Georgetown University argue that communication skills are essential for career advancement, particularly in technical and service-oriented fields. These findings underscore the urgency of integrating structured communication training into vocational education. John Hattie (2008) emphasizes the importance of "visible learning"—teaching that makes students aware of how to apply their skills in varied contexts. This approach aligns with PBL, where students are encouraged to participate in discussions, deliver presentations, and engage in group work. As they take on active roles, they develop confidence, clarity, and the ability to adapt their language for different audiences. These experiences cultivate the oral communication skills needed in both academic and workplace settings. Although previous research supports the broader benefits of PBL (Thomas, 2000; Bell, 2010), there is a lack of focused investigation into its direct impact on the oral communication skills of vocational students. Smith and Jones (2019) found that students involved in PBL felt more confident in their speaking abilities and displayed improved teamwork. However, more context-specific studies are needed to explore how PBL functions in vocational education environments. Markham (2011) reiterates that PBL "integrates knowing and doing," making it a viable strategy to close the soft skills gap. However, empirical studies that assess its direct impact on oral communication among vocational high school students remain limited. Addressing this gap is the primary motivation behind this study. Vocational programs typically focus on job-specific technical training. However, research shows that graduates often struggle with expressing their ideas and collaborating effectively, even when they excel in hands-on tasks (Dewey, 2015; Kaufman, 2016). Anis et al. (2018) found that many vocational graduates have difficulty communicating clearly, which can hinder their integration into the workplace. Furthermore, the World Economic Forum (2020) highlights communication as one of the most in-demand skills for future employment. Without targeted training, technically skilled students may struggle to build relationships with clients, peers, or supervisors—ultimately limiting their career growth. To address this issue, educators must seek strategies that effectively build both technical and communication skills. Project-Based Learning stands out for its ability to do just that. By

involving students in collaborative projects that require presentations, negotiations, and teamwork, PBL fosters communication in meaningful, authentic ways. It also increases student motivation and engagement—two key factors in educational success.

In this Reason , there is a Research Question : How do vocational high school English teachers perceive PBL as approach to build the oral communication skill ?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter reviews key literature that informs how Project-Based Learning (PBL) supports the development of oral communication skills in vocational education. It examines existing research on PBL as a student-centered approach, highlights the importance of communication in vocational contexts, and explores teachers' perceptions of its implementation. The chapter also presents the theoretical framework grounding this study, showing how constructivist principles and real-world learning experiences contribute to students' communicative competence.

### **Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a Pedagogical Approach**

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a student-centered teaching method where learners engage in extended projects that simulate real-world problem-solving tasks (Bell, 2010). This approach emphasizes active learning, collaboration, and the practical application of knowledge. As students work in teams and present their projects, PBL has been found to enhance motivation, engagement, and language development—particularly in oral communication (Stoller, 2006).

One of PBL's strengths lies in its collaborative and participatory nature, which creates a supportive environment for developing speaking skills. Several components of PBL are particularly effective in enhancing oral proficiency. First, real-world learning contexts allow students to use language in authentic, meaningful situations, which improves both fluency and retention (Buckett & Slater, 2025). For vocational students, projects that mirror real job tasks—such as drafting business plans or simulating customer service scenarios—are especially beneficial. Second, collaborative work in group settings encourages meaningful interaction and peer communication, which are essential to developing communicative competence (Haines, 1989). Students practice turn-taking, active listening, and responding appropriately—skills crucial to effective communication. Third, scaffolding and feedback provided by teachers are vital in guiding students through the process. Through structured support such as role-plays, modelling, and targeted practice activities, instructors help students overcome language

barriers and build speaking confidence (Simpson, 2011). This structured support ensures that students gain the necessary skills to engage in effective oral communication.

### **The Importance of Oral Communication Skills in Vocational Education Oral**

Communication plays a central role in vocational education, where students are expected to interact professionally with coworkers, clients, and supervisors in real-world settings (Nunan, 2013). Particularly in industries such as tourism, hospitality, and commerce, strong communication skills enable individuals to express themselves clearly, resolve conflicts, and collaborate effectively—attributes that are vital in team-based workplaces. However, research has shown that many vocational students struggle with speaking due to factors such as low self-confidence, limited vocabulary, and insufficient opportunities to practice in authentic contexts (Tran, 2017). These challenges can have serious consequences for workforce readiness. For instance, a lack of real-world speaking practice may lead to anxiety in job interviews or professional interactions, resulting in poor performance (Murray, 2018). Moreover, the absence of formal training in communication skills within many vocational programs exacerbates the problem, leaving graduates underprepared to meet industry expectations (Smith & Jones, 2019). Therefore, developing oral communication must become a central goal in vocational education—complementing technical training. Teaching strategies like PBL provide students with meaningful communication experiences and constructive feedback, ultimately enhancing both their employability and long-term career potential.

**Teachers' Perceptions of PBL** In the context of education, perception refers to teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and interpretations of their experiences with specific teaching approaches. These perceptions significantly influence how teachers implement and evaluate instructional strategies, including their openness to innovative methods like Project-Based Learning (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006).

Positive perceptions of PBL among teachers are often linked to increased student motivation, active participation, and improved learning outcomes—particularly in areas such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking (Bell, 2010). Despite challenges such as limited resources or rigid curriculum structures, research shows that educators who view PBL favorably recognize its value in fostering real-world skills. Students, in turn, are more likely to engage with PBL when they find it relevant and interactive. Many become more confident in using oral language during presentations and group discussions. However, some still face difficulties related to language proficiency or group dynamics (Beckett, 2006). Understanding both teacher and student perceptions of PBL is crucial, as it offers insights into how this

approach can be effectively implemented to enhance oral communication skills in vocational education settings.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through experience and interaction. Within this framework, Project-Based Learning (PBL) serves as an integrated approach that promotes active engagement, collaboration, and real-world application. PBL encourages students to take ownership of their learning by involving them in meaningful projects that relate directly to their career paths. Through these experiences, students not only develop technical knowledge but also learn to express their ideas clearly and collaborate effectively (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

Unlike traditional passive learning environments, PBL transforms the classroom into a dynamic space where students are required to communicate their thoughts, engage in discussions, and work together toward shared goals. This process naturally enhances their oral communication skills. As Johnson and Johnson (2013) note, cooperative learning encourages students to articulate opinions and actively listen to others—two essential components of effective communication. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which suggests that students thrive in social environments where they receive both support and constructive feedback from peers and instructors (Vygotsky, 1978). In a PBL setting, students regularly engage in group discussions, presentations, and peer evaluations—all of which contribute significantly to the development of their speaking and listening abilities. A key strength of PBL is its authenticity. Projects are designed to simulate real-world challenges that students are likely to encounter in their future professions. These tasks require effective communication with clients, coworkers, and supervisors (Bell, 2010). For instance, asking students to develop a marketing strategy for a local business not only deepens their understanding of marketing concepts but also requires them to answer questions and justify their ideas—closely resembling professional interactions. This level of realism ensures that communication practice occurs in relevant and meaningful contexts, making the learning experience both practical and engaging. Another essential element of this framework is reflection. PBL encourages students to critically evaluate their communication performance through self-assessment and peer feedback. This reflective process, as proposed by Schön (1983), helps learners identify strengths and areas for improvement, set personal goals, and continuously refine their speaking and listening skills. Through repeated cycles of practice and reflection, students build a growth mindset—a valuable trait for professional adaptability and lifelong learning. As a result, they not only become more effective communicators but also

gain confidence in their ability to express ideas clearly and professionally. The framework also emphasizes the importance of a supportive classroom environment, where teachers act as facilitators, modeling effective communication and providing constructive feedback. Instructors guide students throughout the PBL process, helping them understand expectations while fostering their development as communicators (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). By cultivating a respectful and collaborative atmosphere, teachers empower students to share ideas openly and learn from one another. In conclusion, this theoretical framework combines constructivist principles with real-world application through PBL, ensuring that vocational high school students develop both technical competence and the oral communication skills necessary for workplace success. Students educated under this model emerge as confident, articulate professionals equipped to navigate complex interactions and engage effectively with diverse audiences in their future careers.

### **3. PROPOSED METHOD**

This study employed a descriptive case study approach to explore how English teachers perceive the use of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in developing students' oral communication skills. The research focused on four English teachers from vocational high schools (SMKS) in Jember who had prior experience implementing PBL in their classrooms. To collect qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions. These questions were developed based on the PBL framework by Larmer et al. (2015). To ensure clarity and comfort during the interviews, the sessions were conducted in both Bahasa Indonesia and English, depending on the participants' preferences. The interview questions aimed to gather in-depth insights into several key areas: teachers' understanding of PBL, its perceived impact on students' oral communication, the challenges they faced during implementation, the strategies they used to encourage student reflection, and their overall perceptions of PBL as a method to enhance oral communication skills. To accurately document participants' responses, interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. The researcher also took brief notes during the sessions to capture additional observations that may not have been conveyed clearly in the audio recordings. These field notes helped enrich the data by highlighting subtle expressions, reactions, or contextual details. The interviews produced a rich collection of qualitative data, revealing teachers' perspectives on the advantages and challenges of PBL. To analyze the data, the researcher applied Larmer et al.'s (2015) conceptual framework, which provided a structured lens for interpreting how PBL influences the development of students' oral communication skills in the

## Data Analysis

### *Analyzing Interview Data on English Teachers' Perceptions of PBL in Enhancing Oral Communication Skills*

This section outlines the analysis process of interview data collected from four vocational high school English teachers regarding their perceptions of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as an approach to enhance students' oral communication skills. The analysis was guided by Larmer et al.'s (2015) key elements of PBL.

**Table 1.** Familiarization with the Data.

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4
Expressed a positive view of PBL despite constraints such as rigid curricula and limited time. They observed increased student engagement and improvement in expressing ideas clearly, listening actively, and adapting to diverse speaking contexts.	Valued PBL for providing real-world contexts where students could practice English meaningfully. They noted the benefits of increased confidence and articulation but also mentioned challenges like varying student confidence and proficiency levels.	Viewed PBL as highly effective in creating authentic learning situations that promote fluency, teamwork, and presentation skills. They emphasized PBL's role in building both language proficiency and confidence.	Although lacking direct experience with PBL, recognized its potential to promote active participation and enhance oral communication through collaborative and authentic tasks

Teachers shared detailed perceptions of PBL and its effectiveness in promoting oral communication. Key highlights include:

**Table 2.** Coding the Data.

Participant	Understanding of PBL	Impact on Communication	Challenges	Support for Reflection	Summary
Teacher 1	Views PBL as real-world project-based learning.	Sees improvement in speaking, listening, and contextual communication.	Faces challenges due to limited experience.	Plans to use simple Q&A and feedback.	Developing perspective, recognizes strong potential.
Teacher 2	Understands PBL as active and engaging.	Believes PBL helps articulate ideas through discussions.	Notes student fear of mistakes.	Uses peer/self-assessment.	Positive outlook with strategies for challenges.
Teacher 3	Values autonomy and contextual learning.	Highlights confidence building and fluency.	Requires careful project design.	Plans reflection through feedback.	Emphasizes student choice and iterative learning.
Teacher 4	Basic knowledge, open to learning.	Believes PBL promotes natural communication.	Lacks practical experience.	Plans to use written reflections.	Appreciates potential, cautious due to inexperience.

Using open coding, recurring themes were identified:

**Table 3.** Categorizing Based on PBL Framework (Larmer et al., 2015).

Participant	Challenging Problem	Sustained Inquiry	Authenticity	Student Voice & Choice	Reflection	Critique & Revision
Teacher 1	Recognizes real-world focus but unsure about design.	Emphasizes group discussions and presentations.	Values authentic tasks for real-world communication.	Supports giving students topic/project choice.	Uses simple Q&A for reflection.	Plans to include revision sessions.
Teacher 2	Believes PBL helps solve real issues with clear communication.	Encourages ongoing inquiry through discussion.	Appreciates PBL's real-world applicability.	Encourages student-driven learning.	Applies self and peer feedback.	Emphasizes revision through feedback.
Teacher 3	Sees PBL as promoting meaningful dialogue.	Reiterates need for repeated practice.	Strong focus on realistic context.	Advocates student autonomy.	Supports regular reflection.	Understands the value but unsure of application.
Teacher 4	Interested in real-world tasks but lacks experience.	Supports project-based inquiry, limited by inexperience.	Recognizes importance but unsure of practice.	Sees value but lacks implementation strategy.	Plans structured written feedback.	Open to using feedback for revision.

The coded responses were categorized into key elements of the PBL framework:

#### 4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study explored how English teachers perceive the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a means to enhance students' oral communication skills. Drawing from interview data with four teachers, the findings reveal both the perceived strengths and challenges of using PBL in vocational high school English classrooms. In alignment with Larmer et al.'s (2015) framework on successful PBL practices, teachers' perspectives highlight varied experiences and levels of understanding.

##### Understanding of PBL

All four teachers demonstrated a foundational to moderate understanding of PBL. Teacher 1 emphasized that PBL encourages context-based speaking by involving students in solving real-world problems—aligning with Larmer et al.'s view of projects as catalysts for deeper communication and learning. Similarly, Teachers 2 and 3 highlighted PBL as a student-centered and dynamic approach that facilitates discussion and presentations, which are vital for developing communication skills. Their views support the idea that authentic, problem-solving tasks naturally require students to express themselves clearly. Although Teacher 4 had limited



prior exposure to PBL, they recognized its potential for hands-on, real-life learning experiences and expressed growing interest in using it to foster communication in the classroom.

### **Impact on Oral Communication**

All participants agreed that PBL has a positive impact on students' oral communication abilities. Teacher 1 observed improvements in speaking fluency and confidence through presentations and group debates—components central to effective language learning. Teacher 2 added that PBL fosters meaningful English use during project discussions, which encourages students to articulate their ideas and engage actively with peers. According to Teacher 3, allowing students to choose their presentation topics and formats reduces anxiety and increases engagement, thereby strengthening oral expression. This aligns with Larmer et al.'s assertion that student autonomy and authentic communication scenarios are vital to successful PBL implementation. Despite having limited experience, Teacher 4 supported the idea that PBL provides realistic speaking opportunities that can significantly enhance communication skills over time.

### **Challenges in Implementation**

While the benefits of PBL were widely acknowledged, the teachers also identified several challenges. Teachers 1 and 4 pointed to their own limited experience and uncertainty in designing effective projects as barriers to implementation. This echoes Larmer et al.'s (2015) findings that lack of familiarity and confidence can hinder teachers from adopting PBL. Teacher 2 noted that students often lack the confidence to speak, primarily due to fear of making mistakes—an issue frequently observed in communicative language classrooms. Meanwhile, Teacher 3 stressed the importance of careful project design to ensure student participation and language development. These insights underscore the need for ongoing training and support to help teachers implement PBL with confidence and clarity.

### **Support for Student Reflection**

Each teacher described strategies to support student reflection, a key component of effective PBL. Teachers 1 and 3 suggested using simple question-and-answer sessions and written feedback to help students evaluate their own speaking performance. These methods promote self-awareness and align with Larmer et al.'s emphasis on reflection as a driver of skill development. Teacher 2 highlighted the role of peer and self-assessment in helping students identify their strengths and areas for improvement—tools that can enhance oral communication by deepening student engagement with the learning process. Teacher 4, despite limited experience, expressed interest in using structured feedback methods to support reflective learning.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that while English teachers perceive Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a valuable approach to enhancing students' oral communication skills, its effective implementation is closely tied to addressing certain practical challenges. Teachers recognize PBL's potential to provide real-world, contextualized learning experiences that naturally encourage verbal interaction and collaboration. However, they also face significant hurdles, including students' reluctance to speak, the need for structured reflection, and a general lack of familiarity with PBL methodologies. These challenges align with the principles outlined in Larmer et al.'s (2015) PBL framework, which underscores the importance of professional development, intentional project design, and sustained support for both teachers and students. For PBL to be successfully integrated into vocational high school English instruction, educators must be given access to ongoing training, practical resources, and mentoring opportunities that help them refine their instructional practices. This study highlights the critical need for education policies and school-level initiatives that promote practical and strategic guidance in implementing PBL. By doing so, schools can empower teachers to harness PBL's full potential, ultimately fostering more confident, capable, and communicative learners prepared for the demands of the modern workforce.

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