Project-Based Learning to Develop English Speaking Skills: A Case Study at SMKN 2 Blitar

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Abstract: This study investigates the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in developing the English speaking proficiency of vocational high school students in the Office Management Department at SMKN 2 Kota Blitar. Speaking proficiency is crucial for vocational students as preparation for workplace communication, yet traditional instruction often emphasizes grammar and written tasks over oral practice. This research employed a qualitative single case study design with data gathered from interviews, classroom observations, and documentation involving one English teacher, three 12th-grade students, and the vice principal of curriculum. The findings reveal that PjBL promotes student engagement, increases confidence, and improves fluency through authentic and collaborative tasks such as job interview simulations, business presentations, and promotional projects. Guided by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model, the analysis confirmed that PjBL fosters meaningful learning and helps overcome challenges such as low motivation and limited vocabulary. The study concludes that PjBL is effective in enhancing vocational students' communicative competence and professional readiness, offering practical implications for teachers and curriculum developers seeking to improve English speaking instruction in vocational contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, English proficiency has become an essential skill for students to compete in both academic and professional domains. Within vocational education, English communication is particularly significant since graduates are expected to perform tasks such as presentations, client interactions, and teamwork in workplace contexts. However, in many vocational high schools in Indonesia, the emphasis on technical skills often overshadows the development of English speaking proficiency. As a result, students frequently demonstrate low confidence, limited vocabulary, and insufficient fluency, leaving them underprepared for professional communication.

To address these challenges, innovative methods are required. One promising approach is Project-Based Learning (PjBL), a student-centered instructional model that integrates authentic projects into the learning process. PjBL allows learners to engage in meaningful tasks that mirror real-life situations, thus bridging the gap between classroom learning and professional demands. Prior research has shown its effectiveness in improving students' speaking ability. For instance, Simbolon et al. (2019) and Mafruudloh & Fitriati (2020) demonstrated that PjBL enhances fluency, critical thinking, and creativity through collaborative projects. Similarly, Dewi (2016) reported that PjBL implementation significantly improved students' speaking performance and motivation.

Despite these positive indications, the application of PjBL in Indonesian vocational schools remains limited. Factors such as inadequate teacher training, resource constraints, and time allocation in the curriculum hinder its implementation. However, vocational students, particularly those in the Office Management Department, require strong communication skills to support administrative, managerial, and service-oriented roles in their future workplaces. Integrating PjBL into their English lessons has the potential to provide contextual and meaningful practice, enabling them to present business ideas, conduct interviews, and communicate effectively in real-life scenarios.

Another important aspect to consider in this study is the nature of speaking proficiency itself. According to Richards (2008), speaking proficiency encompasses fluency, accuracy, and complexity, which are often difficult to achieve simultaneously in EFL contexts. Vocational students in particular tend to prioritize functional communication over grammatical correctness, highlighting the need for instructional models that provide opportunities for authentic interaction. Project-Based Learning responds to this need by creating tasks that simulate real-life communication and thus allow students to practice language in meaningful contexts.

In addition, the Indonesian national curriculum has provided flexibility for teachers through the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Belajar policy. These policies encourage innovative teaching strategies and emphasize learner-centered

approaches, yet the practical application in vocational schools often remains limited. Research on PjBL in Indonesian education has predominantly examined general senior high schools, while little attention has been given to vocational settings, especially in Office Management programs. This gap underscores the importance of the present study, which not only addresses students' linguistic needs but also their professional readiness in specific vocational domains.

The urgency of this study is further underscored by the low level of English proficiency among vocational students in Indonesia. According to national reports, only a minority of SMK graduates achieve basic English competence, with speaking identified as the weakest skill. This situation highlights the importance of adopting innovative and practical approaches such as PjBL to strengthen students' readiness for global competitiveness. Moreover, the 2013 Curriculum's flexibility in English instruction has created disparities among schools, making local initiatives such as this study highly relevant.

Based on this context, the present research focuses on exploring the implementation of Project-Based Learning to develop English speaking proficiency of Office Management students at SMKN 2 Kota Blitar. The problem formulation addressed in this study is as follows: (1) Why is PjBL implemented to improve students' speaking proficiency? (2) How is PjBL implemented in speaking lessons? (3) How do students respond to the use of PjBL? (4) What are the impacts of PjBL on their speaking proficiency?

The novelty of this study lies in its contextual focus on vocational students in the Office Management Department, an area often overlooked in previous studies that tend to generalize vocational education or focus on other disciplines. By employing a qualitative case study approach, this research provides an in-depth analysis of teachers' strategies, students' perceptions, and the practical impacts of PjBL. The findings are expected to contribute not only to the theoretical enrichment of PjBL in language learning but also to practical implications for teachers, administrators, and curriculum designers in vocational schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative approach with a single case study design. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena through participants' perspectives in their natural context, while Yin (2018) emphasizes that case studies provide an in-depth exploration of a bounded system or phenomenon. The case study approach was chosen because it enabled the researcher to thoroughly investigate how Project-Based Learning (PjBL) was implemented to develop English speaking proficiency at SMKN 2 Kota Blitar.

The study was conducted at SMKN 2 Kota Blitar, specifically in the Office Management Department. Participants consisted of one English teacher, three 12th-grade students, and the vice principal of curriculum. The selection of participants employed purposive sampling to ensure that only those directly involved in PjBL implementation were included. This allowed the research to capture rich and relevant data regarding both teaching practices and student experiences.

Data were collected through three techniques: interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher, students, and curriculum staff to gain insights into their perspectives on PjBL. Classroom observations were carried out to record teaching practices, student participation, and project implementation. Documentation, such as lesson plans, student projects, and assessment rubrics, was also analyzed to complement and verify the data obtained from interviews and observations.

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The process began with coding the data through open, axial, and selective coding, followed by thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and categories. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation across sources (teacher, students, curriculum staff), methods (interviews, observations, documentation), and time of data collection. Peer debriefing with advisors and member checking with participants were also conducted to confirm the accuracy and credibility of

the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the English speaking lessons at SMKN 2 Kota Blitar revealed several important findings. The teacher began by preparing structured and contextual learning activities that aligned with the students' vocational background in Office Management. Projects such as job interview simulations, business presentations, and promotional brochures were introduced as learning tasks. These activities provided authentic and meaningful contexts, allowing students to practice speaking in situations relevant to their future professional roles. The findings of this study provide insights into the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in developing vocational students' English speaking proficiency at SMKN 2 Kota Blitar. Data analysis revealed four interconnected focuses: preparation, implementation, students' assessment, and impacts of PjBL. Each is presented with thematic coding and supported by relevant literature.

Observations and interviews confirmed that students responded positively to the use of PjBL. Most students expressed enthusiasm in carrying out projects, as the activities required creativity and collaboration. For example, creating podcasts and vlogs on business-related topics allowed them to practice speaking in English while engaging with digital media. However, some students reported difficulties in vocabulary selection and confidence, indicating the need for continuous teacher support. The findings align with Simbolon et al. (2019), who emphasized that authentic and collaborative tasks increase student motivation and speaking practice.

Data analysis further showed that PjBL significantly improved students' speaking fluency and confidence. Students reported feeling more comfortable speaking in front of peers and performing in simulated professional contexts. The teacher also highlighted noticeable improvements in pronunciation and vocabulary use, particularly when students rehearsed and presented projects. These outcomes demonstrate that PjBL fosters communicative competence

through repeated, meaningful practice. In line with Dewi (2016), structured project cycles allowed students to gradually build proficiency, while collaborative learning reduced anxiety and encouraged peer support.

Table 1. Selective Coding Focus 1 (Preparation)

No.	Selective Theme	Axial Category	Thematic Description
1	Teacher planning	Lesson plan, alignment	Teacher created plans and aligned projects with vocational needs.
2	Project design	Task relevance, objectives	Projects designed around authentic tasks such as interviews and presentations.
3	Classroom readiness	Student orientation, motivation	Teacher briefed students, reducing anxiety and setting clear expectations.

Analysis at the selective coding stage showed three core themes in the preparation phase: (1) teacher planning, (2) project design, and (3) classroom readiness. The teacher designed lesson plans by aligning project themes with vocational contexts, such as business presentations and job interviews. Students were introduced to objectives and expectations before the project began, while the curriculum vice principal confirmed institutional support for flexible instructional design. This preparation stage reduced anxiety and clarified learning targets, in line with Funke (2022), who emphasizes that scaffolding and goal orientation are critical for PjBL success.

Table 2. Selective Coding Focus 2 (Implementation)

No	Selective Theme	Axial Category	Thematic Description
1	Collaborative work	Group roles, teamwork	Students collaborated in groups, negotiating roles during projects.
2	Authentic practice	Simulations, presentations	Tasks reflected workplace communication, e.g., job interviews and business pitching.
3	Teacher facilitation	Guidance, scaffolding	Teacher supported with feedback and additional resources when necessary.

The implementation phase involved collaborative activities where students engaged in job interview simulations, business idea presentations, podcasts, and promotional videos. Three central themes were identified: (1) collaborative learning, (2) authentic practice, and (3) teacher facilitation. Students actively participated, negotiated roles, and demonstrated teamwork. Teachers guided the process by providing vocabulary input and feedback, while documentation confirmed that students applied communication skills in real-world contexts. This aligns with Thomas (2000) and Omelianenko & Artyukhova (2024), who argue that PjBL promotes autonomy, critical thinking, and contextualized language practice.

Table 3. Selective Coding Focus 3 (Students' Assessment)

No	Core Category	Axial Category	Description
1	Formative assessment	Ongoing feedback	Teacher provided feedback during project process.
2	Performance evaluation	Rubrics, observation	Students evaluated through presentations, interviews, and project deliverables.
3	Self-reflection	Awareness, revision	Students reflected on their speaking, identifying strengths and weaknesses.

The assessment of speaking proficiency was conducted through project outcomes and performance evaluations. Three categories emerged: (1) formative assessment, (2) performance-based evaluation, and (3) self-reflection. Teachers assessed students using rubrics covering fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary use. Students also reflected on their performance, acknowledging areas of improvement. This assessment approach corresponds with Wrigley (2009), who states that authentic assessment in PjBL provides a more accurate picture of learners' competencies compared to traditional tests.

Table 4. Selective Coding Focus 4 (Impact)

No	Selective Theme	Axial Category	Thematic Description
1	Improved fluency	Vocabulary, accuracy	Students became more fluent and accurate in delivering ideas.
2	Increased confidence	Motivation, attitude	Students expressed greater confidence in public speaking contexts.
3	Professional readiness	Workplace simulation	Students practiced communication tasks relevant to their future professions.

The final focus showed significant impacts on students' speaking ability. Themes included (1) improved fluency, (2) increased confidence, and (3) enhanced professional readiness. Students reported that authentic projects reduced their fear of speaking, encouraged vocabulary use, and improved pronunciation. Teachers confirmed noticeable progress in students' fluency and willingness to communicate. These findings align with Deci & Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, as students' intrinsic motivation increased when given ownership of projects. Similar studies by Dewi (2016) and Riswandi (2018) also highlighted PjBL's effectiveness in boosting speaking proficiency and learner confidence.

Overall, the findings confirm that PjBL is highly effective in enhancing vocational students' English speaking proficiency. The preparation phase highlights the need for structured planning and contextualization. The implementation phase underscores the role of collaboration and authentic practice in building communicative competence. The assessment process demonstrates the value of authentic and reflective evaluation, while the impact emphasizes fluency, confidence, and readiness for professional contexts.

These results resonate with prior studies (Simbolon et al., 2019; Mafruudloh & Fitriati, 2020) while offering novelty in focusing on vocational students in the Office Management Department. Unlike previous research that often generalized vocational contexts, this study illustrates how PjBL supports

specific professional competencies required in administrative and business communication. Thus, the study contributes both theoretical and practical insights into English language pedagogy for vocational education.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions are based on the analysis of interviews, observations, and documentation, this study concludes that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is an effective instructional approach to enhance vocational students' English speaking proficiency in the Office Management Department at SMKN 2 Kota Blitar. The preparation phase demonstrated the importance of careful planning, contextualization, and orientation to ensure students' readiness. The implementation stage revealed that authentic, collaborative, and project-based tasks encouraged active participation and provided meaningful practice. Assessment through performance-based evaluation and self-reflection offered accurate insights into students' communicative competence. The impacts of PjBL were evident in improved fluency, greater confidence, and increased professional readiness. These findings confirm that PjBL supports both linguistic and affective dimensions of learning, aligning classroom practice with vocational needs.

Based on the findings of the second focus, it can be concluded that the use of vocabulary books elicits a positive response from students in the vocabulary learning process. Students feel that the books help them because they make it easier for them to record, remember, and learn vocabulary in a more structured way. Some students showed the initiative to review their notes independently outside of class hours, even developing their own methods for recording and organizing vocabulary. Additionally, students felt more confident when using new vocabulary in exercises and conversations. Affective responses such as enthusiasm, joy, and a desire to learn were evident throughout the learning process. Thus, it can be concluded that vocabulary books not only function as learning aids but also shape a more independent, reflective, and positive attitude toward vocabulary mastery.

The novelty of this study lies in its contextual focus on vocational Office Management students, an area underrepresented in existing PjBL literature. While

many studies concentrate on general secondary or higher education, this research demonstrates how PjBL can be tailored to specific vocational disciplines. The findings contribute theoretically by extending PjBL research into vocational education, and practically by offering a replicable model for teachers and curriculum designers seeking to integrate authentic, project-based speaking activities.

Overall, the results of the study show that the use of vocabulary books plays a significant role in the vocabulary learning process in class X at SMK Islam 2 Wlingi. This book is used not only as a place to take notes but also as a tool for students to understand, categorize, and actively use vocabulary in appropriate contexts. The learning process, which involves note-taking, exercises, and reflection, has formed a systematic learning pattern and made it easier for students to master new vocabulary. Additionally, students have responded positively to the use of vocabulary books, both in terms of ease of learning, self-confidence, and growing interest in independently studying vocabulary. These findings demonstrate that simple media, such as vocabulary books, can be optimized to support vocabulary learning that focuses not only on outcomes but also on the learning process and students' overall learning experiences.

Based on the findings, several suggestions are proposed for education practitioners and future researchers. For teachers, it is recommended to consistently integrate PjBL in English speaking lessons by designing projects that mirror workplace communication, such as interviews, business presentations, and negotiations. Teachers should also provide scaffolding for students with lower proficiency levels through vocabulary enrichment and step-by-step guidance. At the institutional level, schools are encouraged to support PjBL implementation by allocating sufficient time, training teachers, and providing access to relevant resources. For future researchers, expanding the study across multiple vocational departments or employing mixed methods could offer broader insights into the long-term effectiveness of PjBL. Exploring digital or hybrid project-based approaches may also provide alternative strategies to maximize students' engagement and outcomes in English language learning.

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