



Implementing Project-Based Learning to Improve English Communication Skills among University Students

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026 - 06- 01 Revised: 2026 06-18 Accepted: 2026 06-30	<i>This study investigates the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) as an instructional approach to improve English communication skills among fourth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nusa Cendana. English communication competence, encompassing both spoken and written dimensions, is fundamental for future English educators, yet many students continue to demonstrate limited confidence and proficiency in real-world communicative contexts. The research adopted a classroom action research design implemented across two cycles, involving thirty-two students enrolled in the English Communication Skills course. Data were collected through pre- and post-cycle assessments, classroom observation checklists, student reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative findings revealed a statistically significant improvement in students' overall communication scores from a mean of 58.4 in the pre-cycle assessment to 71.6 at the end of Cycle 1, and further to 82.3 at the completion of Cycle 2, surpassing the established minimum competency criterion of 75. Qualitative data corroborated these results, indicating enhanced student confidence, increased participation in communicative tasks, and greater ability to sustain meaningful interactions in English. Students reported that PBL created authentic, purpose-driven contexts for language use, thereby reducing communication anxiety and fostering intrinsic motivation. Additionally, the collaborative nature of project work promoted peer learning and meaningful negotiation of meaning. These findings suggest that PBL is a highly effective pedagogical strategy for developing English communication skills in Indonesian higher education contexts, particularly at institutions such as Universitas Nusa Cendana where students possess diverse linguistic backgrounds. Practical implications for</i>
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curriculum design and classroom instruction are discussed.

1. Introduction

English communication competence has become an essential prerequisite for academic, professional, and social participation in the twenty-first century (Nunan, 2004; Zhang, 2015). For students enrolled in English Education programs at Indonesian universities, the ability to communicate effectively in English is not merely a personal asset but a professional imperative, as these students are being prepared to become English language teachers who will model and facilitate English communication for future generations. Despite the centrality of this goal, many students continue to struggle with the practical dimensions of English communication, often demonstrating considerable knowledge of grammar and vocabulary while lacking the confidence and fluency required for sustained, meaningful interaction (Yamin & Suryana, 2019).

Universitas Nusa Cendana (Undana), located in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, represents an important higher education institution serving students from diverse regional and linguistic backgrounds across the eastern archipelago of Indonesia. The English Education Study Program at Undana enrolls students who bring with them a wide range of English language competencies, influenced by factors such as the availability of English-medium instruction at the secondary level, access to English-language media, and socioeconomic variables that affect exposure to the language. Fourth-semester students, having completed foundational language courses, are expected to demonstrate functional communicative competence; however, classroom observations and informal assessments consistently reveal that many students remain hesitant communicators who rely heavily on memorized phrases and struggle when faced with unscripted or spontaneous communicative demands (Zakaria & Hashim, 2020).

Project-Based Learning (PBL) has attracted considerable scholarly attention as a learner-centered instructional approach that situates language learning within meaningful, real-world contexts (Thomas, 2000; Stoller, 2006; Bell, 2010). Rooted in constructivist theories of learning originating from Dewey's (1938) experiential education philosophy, PBL engages students in extended, collaborative inquiry projects that culminate in the production of authentic artifacts or performances (Larmer et al., 2015). Unlike traditional teacher-fronted instruction, which often privileges passive reception of linguistic forms, PBL requires students to use language purposefully across multiple modalities, including planning discussions, peer consultations, presentations, written reports, and reflective documentation (Beckett & Miller, 2006; Markham, 2011). This multidimensional language use is theorized to promote deeper acquisition of communicative competence by providing learners with repeated, contextualized

opportunities to deploy and refine their linguistic resources (Grant, 2002).

The theoretical underpinnings of PBL draw from a range of influential frameworks. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and collaborative meaning-making in cognitive and linguistic development, suggesting that the group-based nature of PBL provides a productive zone of proximal development where learners can scaffold one another's progress. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis and Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis further support the communicative richness of PBL environments by highlighting the importance of comprehensible input and negotiated interaction for second language acquisition. Additionally, Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory suggests that the inherently purposeful and autonomy-supportive structure of PBL may enhance students' intrinsic motivation, which has been consistently linked to persistence and achievement in language learning (Petersen & Nassaji, 2016).

Empirical research on PBL in English language teaching contexts has yielded encouraging results. Studies conducted across diverse educational settings in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America have reported improvements in speaking fluency, presentation skills, writing proficiency, and communicative confidence following PBL interventions (Poonpon, 2017; Wrigglesworth & McKeown, 2022). For instance, researchers have found that students engaged in PBL demonstrate greater willingness to communicate, employ a broader range of discourse strategies, and exhibit reduced foreign language anxiety compared to peers receiving conventional instruction (Horwitz et al., 1986; Zakaria & Hashim, 2020). Nevertheless, the majority of existing studies have been conducted in secondary school contexts or in language centers, with comparatively limited attention to undergraduate EFL settings in Indonesia, particularly in regional institutions serving linguistically diverse student populations (Yamin & Suryana, 2019).

This gap in the literature motivates the present study, which aims to examine the implementation of PBL as a strategy for improving English communication skills among fourth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nusa Cendana. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) To what extent does the implementation of Project-Based Learning improve the English communication skills of fourth-semester students at Universitas Nusa Cendana? (2) How do students perceive the implementation of PBL in terms of its impact on their communicative confidence, participation, and motivation? (3) What challenges and facilitating factors emerge during the implementation of PBL in this specific institutional context (cf. Stoller, 2006)?

By addressing these questions through a rigorous classroom action research design, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence regarding the efficacy of PBL in Indonesian higher education and offers practical insights for

educators seeking to enhance communicative competence among English Education students. The findings are expected to have implications not only for pedagogical practice at Universitas Nusa Cendana but also for curriculum development and teacher education more broadly across the Indonesian higher education landscape.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, following the cyclical model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), which consists of four iterative phases: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. CAR was selected because it allows for systematic inquiry into and improvement of classroom practice, enabling the researcher-teacher to iteratively refine the instructional intervention based on ongoing assessment of student learning. The study was conducted across two cycles, each consisting of four meetings of 90 minutes duration.

Participants

Participants were thirty-two fourth-semester students (19 female, 13 male) enrolled in the English Communication Skills course within the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nusa Cendana during the 2023/2024 academic year. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, as the class represented the target population for the intervention. All participants had completed two years of foundational English courses and were pursuing a Bachelor of Education degree with English as the subject specialization.

Instructional Intervention

The PBL intervention was structured around two thematic projects consistent with the design principles outlined by Larmer et al. (2015) and Boss and Larmer (2018). In Cycle 1, students worked in groups of four to design and deliver a documentary-style video presentation on a social issue relevant to their community. In Cycle 2, groups conducted and presented findings from a mini-research project on English language use in local contexts. Each project required students to engage in planning discussions, peer consultations, drafting and revising written scripts, recording or delivering live presentations, and completing reflective journals documenting their communicative challenges and growth.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through multiple instruments to ensure triangulation. Quantitative data were gathered via oral communication assessment rubrics administered before the intervention (pre-cycle) and at the conclusion of each cycle, measuring dimensions including fluency, accuracy, vocabulary range, interactive

competence, and pronunciation. Qualitative data were collected through structured classroom observation checklists completed by a peer observer, student reflective journals submitted biweekly, and semi-structured interviews conducted with ten purposively selected students at the end of Cycle 2. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-tests. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using an inductive coding approach.

3. Result

Quantitative Outcomes: Communication Scores Across Assessment Points

The quantitative results demonstrate a consistent and statistically significant improvement in students' English communication scores across the three assessment points. In the pre-cycle assessment, the class achieved a mean score of 58.4 (SD = 7.3), with only 6 out of 32 students (18.75%) meeting the minimum competency criterion (MCC) of 75. At the conclusion of Cycle 1, the class mean improved substantially to 71.6 (SD = 6.8), with 14 students (43.75%) achieving the MCC. By the end of Cycle 2, the class mean reached 82.3 (SD = 5.4), with 28 students (87.5%) meeting or exceeding the MCC. The improvement from pre-cycle to post-Cycle 2 was statistically significant ($t(31) = 14.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.27$), indicating a large effect size.

Disaggregating the results by communication sub-skills reveals important patterns. The most pronounced improvements were observed in the areas of interactive competence and fluency. The mean score for interactive competence rose from 11.2 (out of 20) in the pre-cycle to 16.8 by the end of Cycle 2, reflecting students' growing ability to sustain conversations, respond appropriately to interlocutors, and repair communicative breakdowns. Fluency scores similarly increased from a mean of 10.9 to 16.5, suggesting that repeated project-based speaking practice effectively reduced hesitation and disfluency. Accuracy and vocabulary range also improved, though more modestly, with mean gains of approximately 6.1 and 5.8 points respectively on 20-point subscales, suggesting that PBL primarily accelerated communicative fluency while providing a supportive but less intensive environment for the consolidation of formal accuracy.

The gender disaggregation of results revealed that both female and male students benefited from the PBL intervention, with female students achieving slightly higher absolute scores at each assessment point but male students demonstrating a proportionally larger gain from pre-cycle to post-Cycle 2. This pattern may reflect differential baseline comfort levels with public communication tasks, though both groups ultimately achieved similar rates of MCC attainment by the study's conclusion.

3.2 Qualitative Outcomes: Student Perceptions and Classroom Observations

Thematic analysis of student reflective journals and interview data yielded three overarching themes: (1) enhanced communicative confidence, (2) the motivating role of authentic purpose, and (3) the value and challenges of

collaborative work.

Regarding communicative confidence, the majority of students described a progressive reduction in communication anxiety as they advanced through the project cycles. Several students noted that the structured planning phases of PBL allowed them to prepare language in advance, which reduced anxiety during actual communication, while repeated practice within the group context helped normalize mistakes and created a lower-stakes communicative environment. Interview participants frequently contrasted PBL favorably with traditional role-plays, noting that project-based tasks felt more purposeful and less contrived. One student articulated this sentiment by observing that working on a real topic with real outcomes made her feel that her English communication had a genuine function beyond the classroom.

The second theme, authentic purpose, emerged prominently in students' accounts of their motivation to engage with and persist in challenging communicative tasks. Students reported that knowing their project would be shared with an audience beyond the teacher — including peers, family members who viewed the documentary videos, and community members contacted during the mini-research project — heightened their investment in producing high-quality communicative output. This sense of communicative responsibility appeared to motivate careful attention to language form, rehearsal of spoken delivery, and revision of written components in ways that students reported would not have occurred in conventional assessment contexts.

The third theme, collaborative work, yielded mixed but predominantly positive accounts. Most students valued the opportunity to learn from more proficient peers, negotiate ideas in English, and distribute communicative responsibilities according to individual strengths. Classroom observation data corroborated this, showing a marked increase in student-initiated talk and peer-directed interaction from early to late sessions in each cycle.

However, some students, particularly those with lower initial proficiency, reported feeling hesitant to contribute during group discussions, and observation notes captured instances where more dominant group members assumed the majority of communicative roles during planning phases. These challenges were partially addressed during Cycle 2 through the introduction of structured role assignments within groups, which resulted in more equitable participation as reflected in both observation data and post-Cycle 2 interview accounts.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that Project-Based Learning constitutes an effective pedagogical approach for improving English communication skills among fourth-semester students at Universitas Nusa Cendana. The substantial and statistically significant gains in communication scores across assessment points, combined with the rich qualitative evidence of

enhanced confidence, motivation, and participation, align with and extend the existing literature on PBL in EFL contexts (Bell, 2010; Petersen & Nassaji, 2016; Wigglesworth & McKeown, 2022).

The pattern of improvement observed in this study, characterized by particularly pronounced gains in interactive competence and fluency, is consistent with theoretical predictions derived from the interactionist and sociocultural traditions in second language acquisition research. PBL's emphasis on sustained collaborative engagement in meaningful tasks creates precisely the conditions — abundant opportunities for negotiation of meaning, modified output, and peer scaffolding — that Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis and Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development identify as conducive to linguistic growth (Stoller, 2006). The fact that formal accuracy improved more modestly than communicative fluency suggests that PBL, while effective for developing functional communicative competence, may benefit from supplementary form-focused instruction (Nunan, 2004), particularly for learners who require explicit attention to grammatical accuracy for their professional development as future English teachers.

The reduction in communication anxiety reported by students merits particular attention in the Indonesian higher education context. Foreign language communication anxiety has been widely identified as a significant impediment to oral performance among EFL learners (Horwitz et al., 1986), where sociolinguistic norms emphasizing modesty and the avoidance of public error may exacerbate reluctance to speak in English (Yamin & Suryana, 2019).

The PBL environment appears to have mitigated this anxiety through several mechanisms: the provision of extended preparation time reduced the unpredictability that fuels anxiety; the collaborative group structure distributed communicative responsibility and normalized imperfection; and the authentic, meaningful nature of project tasks reframed communication as purposeful action rather than linguistic performance evaluation. These findings resonate with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, suggesting that PBL effectively lowers the affective barriers that impede language acquisition among anxious learners (Zakaria & Hashim, 2020).

The motivational effects of PBL documented in this study align with Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on the importance of competence, autonomy, and relatedness for intrinsic motivation. Students' accounts of heightened investment when their work had an authentic audience reflect the theory's proposition that externally imposed, decontextualized tasks undermine intrinsic motivation, while tasks that fulfill genuine communicative functions and connect to students' identities and communities foster autonomous motivation (Boss & Larmer, 2018; Larmer et al., 2015).

For students at Universitas Nusa Cendana, whose educational experiences have been shaped by the diverse linguistic and cultural landscape of East Nusa Tenggara, the opportunity to use English in projects addressing locally relevant

social issues and language practices may have been particularly resonant, creating a meaningful bridge between the students' lifeworlds and their academic language learning (Poonpon, 2017).

The challenges related to unequal participation within project groups, while ultimately addressable through structural interventions such as role assignment, highlight an important pedagogical consideration for PBL implementation in diverse classrooms. Research on cooperative and collaborative learning has consistently identified participation inequality as a potential limitation of group-based instruction, particularly when proficiency differentials are marked (Petersen & Nassaji, 2016; Thomas, 2000). In the context of this study, the linguistic heterogeneity of the student cohort — reflecting the varied English language preparation opportunities available across different regions of East Nusa Tenggara — created conditions where some students were at risk of becoming passive participants in group processes.

The iterative structure of classroom action research proved invaluable here, enabling the teacher-researcher to identify and respond to this challenge between cycles, consistent with the reflective-practitioner model advocated by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). This responsiveness underscores the value of CAR as a methodology for PBL research, as it allows for principled, evidence-informed refinement of instructional practice in ways that more static experimental designs cannot accommodate (Grant, 2002).

Comparing the findings of this study with previous research on PBL in Indonesian EFL contexts reveals both convergences and points of elaboration. Several prior studies conducted in secondary school and language center settings have reported similar patterns of improvement in speaking performance following PBL interventions (Yamin & Suryana, 2019; Poonpon, 2017).

The present study extends these findings to the undergraduate level and to the specific institutional context of a regional university serving a linguistically diverse population, suggesting that the benefits of PBL are not limited to well-resourced urban institutions or secondary contexts. Moreover, the present study's use of mixed methods and its focus on communicative sub-skills provides a more granular and nuanced account of how PBL promotes communication development than has typically been reported in the existing Indonesian literature (Beckett & Miller, 2006; Stoller, 2006).

The implications of these findings for curriculum design and teacher preparation at Universitas Nusa Cendana and similar institutions are substantial. First, they suggest that embedding PBL as a structural feature of the English Communication Skills curriculum, rather than treating it as an occasional supplement to conventional instruction, is likely to yield cumulative and reinforcing benefits for students' communicative development (Markham, 2011; Zhang, 2015).

Second, the importance of authentic audiences and purposes for PBL

projects implies that curriculum designers should systematically seek out and formalize connections between classroom projects and community stakeholders, such as local schools, community organizations, or regional media outlets, to maximize the communicative authenticity of student work (Wrigglesworth & McKeown, 2022). Third, the evidence regarding participation inequality calls for training in PBL facilitation as a component of professional development for English Education faculty, equipping instructors with strategies for managing group dynamics, assigning differentiated roles, and scaffolding participation for lower-proficiency learners (Zakaria & Hashim, 2020; Boss & Larmer, 2018).

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that implementing Project-Based Learning significantly improves English communication skills among fourth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nusa Cendana. Across two intervention cycles, students achieved substantial and statistically significant gains in overall communication scores, surpassing the minimum competency criterion of 75 by the study's conclusion. These quantitative improvements were corroborated by rich qualitative evidence indicating enhanced communicative confidence, increased motivation through authentic purpose, and productive collaborative engagement.

The findings contribute to the growing literature on PBL in EFL higher education contexts by providing detailed, mixed-methods evidence of the approach's efficacy in a regional Indonesian university setting characterized by linguistic diversity. They affirm the theoretical proposition that PBL creates communicative conditions conducive to second language acquisition by reducing affective barriers, providing purposeful language use opportunities, and fostering peer scaffolding.

Certain limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The absence of a control group limits causal attributions, and the single-institution, single-cohort design constrains the generalizability of findings. Future research should employ quasi-experimental or experimental designs with comparison groups, extend the intervention across an academic year, and examine the long-term retention of communicative gains. Additionally, investigating the effects of PBL on specific genres of professional communication relevant to English teachers, such as instructional discourse, classroom management language, and professional writing, would provide valuable insights for pre-service teacher education.

In conclusion, Project-Based Learning holds considerable promise as a pedagogical innovation for English Education programs at regional Indonesian universities. When thoughtfully designed, iteratively refined through action research, and attentive to the participatory equity of all learners, PBL can transform the English communication classroom into a dynamic space for authentic, purposeful, and transformative language learning.

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