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ASSESSING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IMPACTS ON 10th-GRADERS' ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS IN A VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

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Abstract

This quasi-experimental study investigates the impacts of project-based learning on the English-speaking skills of 40 tenth-graders from a rural high school in An Giang province, Vietnam. Over a 10-week intervention aligned with the English 10 textbook (Global Success), students participated in five speaking projects covering authentic and relevant topics. Quantitative data involved pre/post-English speaking tests assessed across five areas of fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, accuracy, and interaction. Also, semi-structured interviews with 18 students provided the qualitative data. Quantitative analysis revealed statistically significant improvements in all five assessed areas, with mean scores increasing across the board, and strong correlations between pre- and post-test results. Qualitative findings highlighted increased learner engagement, confidence, and skill development, especially in communication, teamwork, and autonomy. Students reported enhanced language use in authentic contexts through group presentations and collaborative tasks, though challenges such as time pressure and unequal group contributions were noted. The study affirms the effectiveness of project-based learning in developing speaking skills and provides pedagogical implications for integrating project-based learning into English as a foreign language classrooms, particularly in under-resourced rural settings. It also suggests further exploration of project-based learning impact across other language skills and educational levels in Vietnam.

Keywords: Benefits, challenges, English-speaking skills, impact, project-based learning.

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ĐÁNH GIÁ TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA HỌC TẬP THEO DỰ ÁN ĐẾN KỸ NĂNG NÓI TIẾNG ANH CỦA HỌC SINH LỚP 10 TRONG BỐI CẢNH VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu bán thực nghiệm này nhằm đánh giá tác động của học tập theo dự án đối với kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của 40 học sinh lớp 10 tại một trường trung học phổ thông ở vùng nông thôn tỉnh An Giang, Việt Nam. Qua 10 tuần tham gia, học sinh thực hiện năm dự án theo các chủ đề thực tiễn, phù hợp với nội dung sách giáo khoa Tiếng Anh 10 (Global Success). Dữ liệu định lượng được thu thập qua bài kiểm tra kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh trước và sau khi can thiệp, đánh giá theo năm tiêu chí: độ trôi chảy, phát âm, từ vựng, ngữ pháp và tương tác. Cùng với đó, phỏng vấn 18 học sinh với câu hỏi gợi mở phục vụ cho dữ liệu định tính. Phân tích định lượng cho thấy điểm số trung bình ở tất cả tiêu chí đều tăng đáng kể, có ý nghĩa thống kê. Phân tích định tính cho thấy học sinh hứng thú hơn, tự tin hơn, và phát triển các kỹ năng mềm như giao tiếp, làm việc nhóm và tự học. Tuy nhiên, một số khó khăn cũng được ghi nhận, như áp lực thời gian và phân chia công việc không đều giữa các thành viên nhóm. Nghiên cứu khẳng định tính hiệu quả của học tập theo dự án và đề xuất áp dụng mở rộng trong dạy học tiếng Anh, đặc biệt ở khu vực nông thôn. Hướng nghiên cứu phát triển tiếp theo cần bao gồm các kỹ năng tiếng Anh khác và áp dụng ở các cấp học cũng được khuyến nghị.

Từ khóa: *Học tập theo dự án lợi ích, kỹ năng nói tiếng anh, tác động, thách thức.*

1. Introduction

The General Education English Language Curriculum (MOET, 2018) has paved the way for several sets of English textbooks. These textbooks are designed to enhance learners' English language knowledge and skills. Most high schools in An Giang province have chosen the series of English 10, 11, and 12 of Global Success (Hoang et al., 2022) as the main materials for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). The teacher-researcher of the present study has tried various teaching methods in English classes at a high school. One approach standing out as relatively new in this context is project-based learning (PBL). This approach encourages teachers to be creative and independent in designing lessons, especially Speaking-Projects lessons.

The contents of Speaking-Projects lessons in the English 10 textbook (Global Success, 2022) emphasize English use in daily activities and situations. By implementing PBL, teachers can likely boost learners' engagement and enhance English classroom practices as it focuses on learners' roles, needs, and interests (Khoudri et al., 2023). Numerous studies have been conducted on PBL in classrooms worldwide (e.g., Avsheniuk et al., 2023; Hamidania et al., 2025; Probert, 2024; Yaprak, 2022; and Zaafour & Salaberri-Ramiro, 2022). Still, PBL-related research in English classrooms in Vietnam is far from rigorous, particularly in rural high schools in An Giang province. With that in mind, the present study assessed the impact of PBL on learners' English-speaking skills. To its goals, this study raised two core questions: (1) How does PBL implementation impact participants' English-speaking skills? (2) What benefits and challenges do participants perceive after completing the PBL intervention?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Project-based learning framework

Project-based learning can be defined as a working model that creates a learning environment where learners take action through projects. These projects pose challenging questions, tasks, or problems that require students to devise strategies for making decisions, solving problems, or conducting research activities (Thomas, 2000). In such a learning environment, learners have the opportunity to activate their mindsets and construct knowledge by participating in the assigned projects. By connecting new and existing knowledge, learners can apply it to similar settings (Esmail, 2006). In doing so, they collaboratively learn in a meaningful context while creating the target product (Wrigley, 1998). Hamidania et al. (2025), however, underscore the importance of authentic projects, deeper learning activities, collaboration, and sufficient support for learning engagement.

The PBL approach possesses six prominent features for language learning as follows (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Thomas, 2000):

- (i) Focusing on content learning with practical topics of interest to learners;
- (ii) Being learner-centered with the teacher offering support and guidance through the process;
- (iii) Being cooperative - learners work on their own, in small groups, or as a class sharing resources, ideas, and making decisions on their projects;
- (iv) Completing a target product or artifact (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a report, a stage performance);
- (v) Potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging;
- (vi) Pushing up learners' confidence, autonomy, critical thinking, and communicative skills.

2.2. Previous relevant studies

The study by Firdaus and Septiady (2023) among Indonesian university students found that PBL had a positive impact on participants' English-speaking skills, while also improving their soft skills, including problem-solving, creativity, and communication. Similar positive impacts generated by PBL implementation were also documented by Avsheniuk et al. (2023), who participated in a study, which involved EFL college students of diverse cultures from Ukraine. Drawing on the results (ibid), it suggests that teachers should effectively create opportunities for weaker students to participate in class activities. Additionally, teachers should develop strategies to leverage learning autonomy and motivation. Likewise, a study conducted with 17 Moroccan students by Khoudri et al. (2023) revealed varied levels of interest, with some learners being reluctant to engage in PBL due to a preference for traditional teacher-led methods. It also identified challenges such as anxiety, fear of mistakes, and reliance on the mother tongue. A recent study was conducted by Zhong et al. (2024) among EFL college students from China. These students joined a 6-week project-based intervention. Pretest-posttest results showed a significant improvement in participants' English speaking skills across three areas of fluency, accuracy, and linguistic complexity (i.e., vocabulary and syntactic structures).

The PBL approach has also gained implementation in Vietnam, including EFL education. Several studies have explored the benefits and limitations of PBL in Vietnamese educational contexts. Nguyen and Duong (2022), for instance, investigated the impact of PBL on fostering learner autonomy among 9th-graders. The results showed that the approach promoted autonomy in project planning, overcoming challenges, and self-assessment. Still, participants also struggled with goal setting and self-monitoring. Thus, it raised awareness of PBL benefits and can-improve points among teachers, students, and school administrators. Regarding challenges, the study by Nguyen and Do (2022) reported that many secondary school teachers of English declined to implement PBL due to (i) time constraints in the classroom, (ii) utility for English testing and assessment, and (iii) learners' lack of interest in the assigned projects. Similar challenges were also recorded by Ho and Nguyen (2022) when school teachers implemented PBL. At the university level, studies by Giao and Nguyen (2021), Dang et al. (2022), Nguyen (2024), Phan (2022), and Tran et al. (2024) reported positive impacts on students' soft skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, social-emotional regulation, and autonomy. Few past studies in Vietnam, however, have deployed pretest-posttest models to statistically assess the impact of PBL on participants' English speaking performance. In other words, there is still a lack of quantitative pre-post analysis on this topic, especially among high school students in the rural areas of the southern region, Vietnam.

The present study aimed to provide more insights into the impact of PBL on learners' English-speaking performance. This study, however, differs from most past investigations in terms of participants' characteristics, project topics, English-speaking tests, and PBL intervention applied in the current context of Vietnam. These aspects are presented in the next sections.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

Since the present researcher was unable to obtain sufficient randomized sampling, this study employed a quasi-experimental design (Creswell & Creswell, 2025; Bhattacharjee, 2012; Stockemer, 2019). Participants were an intact class of 40 tenth-graders (20 males and 20 females) from a rural high school in An Giang province, southern Vietnam. Their ages ranged from 15 to 16. They all learned EFL since their primary education. However, their English-speaking skills were generally weaker than those of their peers from most urban high schools.

In the present study, three phases were executed: Phase 1 - A pre-test (English speaking) was administered to collect preliminary data; Phase 2 - A 10-week PBL intervention was run; Phase 3 - A post-test (English speaking) and interviews on PBL impacts were conducted.

3.2. PBL Intervention

The primary PBL intervention consisted of 10 weeks of one 45-minute class session per week during the second semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. Speaking-Project lessons were based on the English 10 textbook (Global Success, p.66 - 119). In groups of three or four, participants completed five projects with five different topics: students' future jobs, an international organization, electronic devices for learning, protecting the environment, and an ecotour around An Giang province. A two-week cycle (two class sessions) was exclusively scheduled for one project completed with five structured steps as follows:

- Step 1 (approximately 25 minutes, Class Session 1): Project Access (problems/questions raised) - The teacher introduces the topic, allowing students to activate relevant ideas. Additionally, key English grammatical structures and expressions are reviewed to ensure that students can communicate their ideas sufficiently in English. Discussions and brainstorming activities help students engage with the chosen topic, encouraging them to delve into personal experiences and opinions.

- Step 2 (approximately 20 minutes, Class Session 1): Planning (actions to be completed) - Once students have a clear understanding of the project topic, they proceed to plan and organize their group work. Within groups, students self-assign specific roles they will play in the project operation (such as speaker, researcher, writer, or presenter). This division of tasks ensures that all group members equally contribute to the project. Students brainstorm ideas, create an outline for their presentation, and determine the most effective way to communicate their findings.

- Step 3 (as homework): Executing (taking actions) - Students engage in independent and collaborative research to gather relevant information. They use textbooks, online sources, and teacher-provided materials to collect facts, examples, and supporting evidence for their project. To enhance their presentation, students prepare visual aids such as PowerPoint slides, posters, or charts. They also practice their speaking skills, focusing on pronunciation, fluency, and interaction.

- Step 4 (approximately 30 minutes, Class Session 2): Reporting (actions and outcomes) - After thorough preparation, students deliver their presentations to the class. This stage allows them to apply their language skills in practice, developing their public speaking confidence. The teacher and peers provide constructive feedback, focusing on content accuracy, pronunciation, fluency, and overall presentation skills. A Q&A session follows each presentation, where students engage in interactive discussions by asking and answering questions. This step enhances spontaneous speaking ability and critical thinking.

- Step 5 (15 minutes, class session 2): Reflecting (lessons learned from the earlier raised questions) - The final step of the Speaking-Project lesson involves self-assessment and reflection. Students evaluate their performance using a rubric provided by the teacher, allowing them to identify strengths and areas for improvement. The teacher also gives individual and group feedback, helping them refine their communication skills for future projects.

3.3. Data collection instruments

3.3.1. Pre/Post-tests

Pre-Test and Post-Test (speaking tests) were used to assess students' English-speaking performance before and after the intervention (to answer the first research question for the

present study as addressed above). Speaking tests were implemented face-to-face, orally between one student and two examiners. Each test lasted approximately 5 minutes per student. Test tasks required students to respond to the examiners' questions based on one of the topics randomly selected by each student. Familiar topics such as daily routines, school activities, and social work are used for both pre-/post-tests.

Table 1. Sample topics with prompts for speaking tests

<p>Topic: Describe your family</p> <p><i>You should say:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What type of family it is, 2. How many people there are in your family, 3. How they shared the chores, 4. Why you share the chores. 	<p>Topic: Describe the social work you recently took part in.</p> <p><i>You should say:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What voluntary activity it is, 2. When and where it was organized, 3. Why you took part in it, 4. How you felt about it.
<p>Topic: Talk about your electronic device(s) for learning</p> <p><i>You should say:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What it is, 2. When you got it, 3. What it is used for, 4. How important it is to you. 	<p>Topic: Talk about ways to protect the environment.</p> <p><i>You should say:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How the environment is nowadays, 2. What factors worsen the environment, 3. What people should do to protect the environment, 4. What you should do to make living spaces better.

The rubric for assessing English speaking performance is based on 5 areas: Fluency, Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Accuracy, and Interaction (see Appendix A below).

3.3.2. Interview

After the PBL intervention, 18 students (among 40 partaking in the study) were voluntary to participate in the semi-structured interview. The interview questions were organized into two major areas:

(a) Comments on PBL impacts

- Overall, did you feel interested and excited when participating in PBL activities? (Which activity or content did you like the most? The least? Why?)

- In your opinion, does PBL generally have a positive effect on learning English? Why? In which specific aspects or activities is this shown?

- Was the time allocation and number of steps in the recent PBL implementation sufficient, too short, too long, or too content-heavy? Why? Did you encounter any major obstacles or difficulties?

(b) Specific reflections on English speaking skills

- In general, did PBL help you become more confident and active in practicing your English speaking after completing the intervention? (If yes, which specific activities or challenges helped you build self-confidence in using English? If not, what were the reasons—e.g., lack of opportunities to use English?)

- What do you think about your fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and communication strategies (asking, answering, explaining, reasoning, describing related content) during your participation in PBL? Did you have opportunities to interact and use English within your project group? Assess your English speaking skills after the intervention.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

3.4.1. Speaking tests

The speaking tests were conducted in a quiet, controlled English classroom (known as a functional room) at this high school. This room ensured optimal conditions for assessing English-speaking performance. All test sessions were audio-recorded using digital recorders to ensure objectivity, transparency, and data reliability for assessing and verifying results. The pretest was done before the PBL intervention implemented by the present study, while the posttest was conducted after the intervention.

The speaking performance of each participant was independently scored by two qualified English teachers. A scoring rubric was mentioned earlier. Each assessment area among five (Fluency, Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Accuracy, and Interaction) was rated on a scale of 1 to 10 points, with a total possible score of 10. The final score for each participant was the average of the two raters' scores. In cases where the score discrepancy emerged, the examiners reviewed the performance (via audio recording) and discussed it to reach a consensus.

Statistical analysis used IBM SPSS Version 26 (for descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests, correlation, and significant differences) to assess intervention effects by comparing pretest scores and those of the posttest (Cronk, 2018; Hair et al., 2019; Stockemer, 2019). Data visualization with tables (for numerical values) displayed validity and trends in participants' English-speaking performance under discussion.

3.4.2. Interview

The researcher administered the interviews to each interviewee to ensure privacy and encourage honest responses. Each interview lasted around 10 minutes. All interviews were held in the English classroom at this high school. The setup was designed to create a comfortable and non-threatening environment, ensuring interviewees could express themselves freely and honestly.

Upon the interviewee's consent, all interviews were audio-recorded using digital recorders with high sound quality. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim for content analysis. To comply with ethical research standards, all personal information (i.e., real names, ages, and genders) was anonymized.

The coding was manipulated initially with the NVivo software assistance. Then, the results were double-checked by two experienced teachers of English. This process covered five typical steps (Creswell & Creswell, 2025; Bhattacharjee, 2012; Flick, 2018): (i) *Initial coding*: examining the data and labelling items based on their meanings conveyed in words or phrases. (ii) *Axial coding*: finding the relationships between the labelled items, grouping them into categories or themes. (iii) *Thematic coding*: main themes are recognized, linking all other categories in line. (iv) *Memo writing*: Reflective annotations are written about interpretations based on the themes. (v) *Theoretical saturation*: The cutoff is established when analyzing more data does not provide any new themes.

3.5. Ethical considerations

To uphold ethical research standards, the researcher obtained informed consent from all stakeholders, including students, parents, and the school administration. Furthermore,

participants' confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and all personal information was safeguarded. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without repercussions.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Pretest and posttest findings

The results of the pretest and posttest were comparatively analyzed based on five assessment areas: Fluency, Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Accuracy, and Interaction. Detailed results are presented as follows.

Table 2. Comparisons between Pretest and Posttest scores (10-point scale per area)

Areas		Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Mean Difference: Post – Pre Mean	p-value (Sig.)	Correlation (r)	p-value (Sig.)
1	Fluency	6.36 (1.42)	7.16 (0.93)	.80	0.00	0.77	0.00
2	Pronunciation	6.53 (1.30)	7.23 (0.91)	.70	0.00	0.84	0.00
3	Vocabulary	6.41 (1.21)	7.31 (0.88)	.90	0.00	0.77	0.00
4	Accuracy	6.62 (1.16)	7.36 (0.81)	.73	0.00	0.67	0.00
5	Interaction	6.67 (1.11)	7.46 (0.81)	.78	0.00	0.85	0.00
Total Average		6.67 (1.06)	7.31 (0.80)	.63	0.00	0.88	0.00

As shown in Table 2, it is evident that all five areas exhibit a remarkable enhancement following the PBL intervention. Specifically, the mean score for fluency increased from 6.36 (Standard Deviation/SD=1.42) in the Pretest to 7.16 (SD=0.93) in the Posttest (i.e., Mean difference: 0.80 in comparison); Pronunciation from 6.53 to 7.23; Vocabulary from 6.41 to 7.31; Accuracy from 6.62 to 7.36; and Interaction from 6.67 to 7.46. As a result, the Total average rose from 6.67 to 7.31, indicating comprehensive progress in participants' English-speaking performance across all five areas.

Paired-sample t-tests (between the pre-test mean and that of the post-test) for five areas and Total Average were run. They yielded statistically significant results with a significance level $p < 0.01$, confirming that the differences between pre- and post-test scores are valid and not due to random chance (Cronk, 2018; Hair et al., 2019). The paired correlation coefficients (r) between pretest and posttest scores for all areas were also high, ranging from 0.67 to 0.89 ($p < 0.01$), indicating a stable relative ranking among participants and demonstrating substantial improvement at the individual level. Furthermore, the reduction in SD from 1.06 in the pretest to 0.80 in the posttest reflects increased consistency in learning outcomes across the board after the intervention. This not only demonstrates the effectiveness of the PBL intervention but also highlights its widespread and equitable impacts across all five areas on participants' English-speaking performance. These findings align with those reported in past studies (Firdaus & Septiady, 2023; Nguyen, 2024; Phan, 2022; Zhong et al., 2024), demonstrating the impact of PBL on participants' English-speaking skills, including areas such as fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, accuracy, and interaction. As a result, it is evident that the applied PBL model had a positive impact on the English-speaking skills of 10th-graders from Vietnam.

4.2. Interview findings

As presented above, 18 participants (among 40 involved in the present study) were invited to a semi-structured interview. This qualitative data not only provides supplemental evidence for the PBL impacts on participants' English-speaking performance but also offers a space for their voices. This makes sense because the findings would enable the researcher constructively assess what has been done and what needs improvement in the coming years.

4.2.1. Comments on the impact of PBL

The interviewees (coded as Inter from 1 to 18) reported a high level of interest in this new learning approach. For them, PBL offers significant advantages and certain challenges during the intervention. Most expressed that PBL brought novelty, excitement, and a marked difference compared to traditional learning methods. Inter-2 shared: *"I feel very interested in participating in the activities of the project-based learning program because this is a completely new approach compared to the usual way of learning I have known."* Similarly, Inter-4 stated: *"I feel very excited and enthusiastic to join the activities in the project-based learning program. This approach is quite new and helps me learn new knowledge and skills through group work."*

Some noted that PBL enabled them to use English in authentic contexts, thereby, enhancing their ability to apply language more flexibly and effectively. For example, Inter1 shared: *"I find that project-based learning has a positive impact on my English learning, especially my communication skills. Having to use English throughout the project—from group discussions to presentations—forces me to use what I have learned more flexibly. As a result, I feel I have made clear progress, especially in expressing my ideas."*

Similarly, Inter2 affirmed: *"Project-based learning helps me practice my English speaking and writing skills. When working in groups or giving presentations, I had to use vocabulary and grammar correctly, so my language skills have improved significantly."* Some others echoed this view, emphasizing that PBL supports comprehensive improvement in all language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), particularly through practical activities such as group work, presentations, and searching for foreign materials. For instance, Inter9 stated: *"Project-based learning is very beneficial for English learning because it helps learners use the language in real-life contexts, increasing their reflexes and communication skills. Through activities like group discussions, presentations, searching for foreign materials, or writing reports, I have significantly improved my listening, speaking, reading, writing, and teamwork skills in English."*

The majority admitted that group work and presentations were the PBL activities they enjoyed the most. Many stated that these activities not only helped them build confidence and cooperation skills but also provided opportunities to exchange knowledge and communicate more effectively. For instance, Inter1 emphasized: *"I especially like working in groups to prepare presentations because it helps me understand the lesson more deeply and learn how to exchange and share ideas with my friends."* Likewise, Inter18 remarked: *"My favorite activity is group work because when we work in groups, I have more opportunities to talk with my classmates, which helps us understand each other better."*

In addition, unique activities such as designing visual products (posters, videos) also fostered creativity and proactivity in learning. Inter6 particularly enjoyed the poster design activity because *"we can discuss together and work happily as a team,"* while Inter17 preferred making videos since *"it helps me use English in real situations."* In particular, Inter9 articulated that *"My self-discipline, autonomy, and ability to set learning goals have improved significantly."*

On the left side, difficulties and challenges are also pointed out. Time pressure and the unequal distribution of tasks among group members were identified as the main obstacles affecting their experience. Inter1 expressed: *"What I don't like is the allocation of tasks to group members, as I often take the role of leader and this can sometimes be stressful."* Similarly, Inter9 commented: *"I don't like the uneven division of tasks in the group because it puts pressure on some members."* Additionally, preparing and collecting materials was time-consuming and tiring, as Inter13 stated: *"I don't like the long and demanding process of preparing materials, which can sometimes be stressful and take a lot of time, especially when working outside class hours."* Inter4 justified: *"The time allotted to carry out project-based learning is quite short for covering so much content. I find it difficult to search for content that is appropriate, and concise, but also comprehensive within the required timeframe, especially since I have many other assignments from different subjects. This makes me feel quite stressed."*

The above findings verify the benefits brought about by PBL. These include the increased interest and engagement in learning and using English during the project execution. Soft skills, especially collaborative working, communication, time management, and self-regulation, are positively impacted. On the other hand, time pressure, filtering available information, and group issues challenge the BPL's success and participants' satisfaction. The findings of both benefits and limitations of the present study align with those documented by past investigations (Avsheniuk et al. 2023; Nguyen, 2024; Phan, 2022; and Tran et al., 2024).

4.2.2. Specific reflections on English speaking performance

The interview results reveal that increased confidence in using English as a communication tool was the most notable outcome of PBL impact. Specifically, Inter1 reported feeling more confident speaking English, especially during group presentations. He stated that response activities helped boost her confidence as she needed to react quickly and articulate her ideas clearly. Similarly, Inter2 shared that he was reluctant to speak or communicate in English due to fear of making mistakes. However, through participating in PBL, he had opportunities to express ideas, engage in group discussions, and, in particular, present in front of the class in English.

The others, Inter4, 5, and 6, also emphasized that PBL helped them overcome initial shyness, strengthen their confidence in communication, and improve their ability to use English in various situations. For example, Inter4 stated: *"Project-based learning has helped me make great progress... after multiple presentations and receiving constructive feedback from teachers, I have gradually improved and now speak better."* In addition, Inter9, 11, and 13 all affirmed that specific activities like presentations, group discussions, and recording videos provided opportunities for frequent and extensive practice, which significantly improved their pronunciation and communication skills in English. Inter13 noted: *"Before joining project-based learning, I was very shy about speaking English in class, but after participating, I feel much more confident and assertive... Having to prepare content, practice speaking multiple times, and receive feedback, I gradually became more confident in my English communication abilities."*

Regarding English pronunciation, most of the interviewees reported notable improvements due to frequent and thorough practice activities. For example, Inter1 pointed out that repeatedly practicing before presentations made her pay closer attention to pronunciation and present ideas more clearly. Similarly, Inter4 emphasized: *"When participating in project-based learning, I found that my speaking skills, especially pronunciation, improved thanks to thorough preparation before presentations and regular feedback from teachers and classmates."*

With regard to English vocabulary and grammar, several stated that through their involvement in PBL, they expanded their vocabulary and used grammar more accurately in real communication. Inter2 elaborated: *"Thanks to practicing presentations and group discussions, I learned new words, used grammar more correctly, and spoke English more naturally and coherently."* Inter9 agreed, noting that skills such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and fluency all improved markedly through project participation. On English fluency, Inter5 shared that group work provided valuable opportunities to practice regular English interactions, helping him learn how to ask questions, respond, and present viewpoints more logically. Inter18 added that through participating in projects, she could *"speak more fluently and knew how to use language for communication, such as asking questions or paraphrasing when needed."* Another important aspect is the frequent practice of real-life communication, which was highly appreciated by many of them. Inter7 and 14 emphasized the importance of regularly interacting and exchanging ideas with group members, which helped them improve communication skills quickly and effectively. Additionally, Inter13 explained that feedback from teachers and classmates helped her to understand strengths and areas for improvement, allowing her to continuously develop her English proficiency.

In summary, PBL has a positive impact on participants' confidence in English-speaking performance and promotes comprehensive development in English communication through interactive and practical activities. These findings reinforce the results from the pretest and posttest discussed earlier.

5. Conclusion and implications

The present study's findings demonstrate that PBL had a measurable impact the English-speaking skills of the involved students. It also outlines additional benefits and challenges faced by students from a rural high school in Vietnam's current context of English education. The quantitative and qualitative findings document significant improvements in the students' English fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, accuracy, and interaction. In addition, their self-confidence and soft skills, including collaborative group work, critical thinking, planning, self-discipline, and autonomy, are more or less developed and strengthened throughout the PBL intervention. Yet, findings from the interviews indicated that the students also experienced two key problematic issues related to time pressure and group work.

Based on these findings, several implications for maximizing PBL benefits are proposed. Firstly, teachers should design projects appropriate to the students' proficiency levels and academic abilities, while also supporting the development of teamwork and time management skills in every project. Secondly, schools and educational stakeholders should provide training in information technology to both teachers and students, enabling them to leverage online resources effectively. Additionally, regular PBL workshops for teachers and learners are recommended to enhance awareness, implementation skills, and the ability to address challenges during project work. Finally, further research should apply BPL to other lessons in English 10 (Global Success) of Language, Reading, or Writing, to propose context-appropriate solutions for high school English curricula. Additionally, due to time constraints and the limited scope of the study (encompassing only 40 students), this study was unable to explore all the potential challenges of PBL fully. As a result, some obstacles and difficulties may not have been captured. It is recommended that future studies organize workshops for English teachers at primary and lower secondary levels in rural areas to promote the early development of speaking skills and learner soft skills. Such initiatives can help foster practical English use and education in Vietnam.

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Appendix A

English speaking skills assessment rubric (10-point scale)

(based on CEFR: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*, Companion volume, 2020. Council of Europe)

Areas	1 - 2 points (Weak)	3 - 4 points (Average)	5 - 6 points (Good)	7 - 8 points (Very Good)	9 - 10 points (Excellent)
1. Fluency	Speaks very slowly, with many hesitations and fragmented sentences. Unable to sustain a conversation.	Speaks slowly, can form simple sentences but still hesitates a lot. Conversations are often interrupted.	Can speak continuously but sometimes pauses to find words or self-correct. Use simple linking words.	Speaks fluently, can express ideas logically, and maintains a conversation well.	Speaks fluently and coherently, adjusts speed appropriately, and uses linking words flexibly.
2. Pronunciation	Difficult to understand, many pronunciation errors affect comprehension.	Pronunciation is understandable but has many basic errors. Lacks natural intonation.	Pronunciation is relatively clear, with minor errors that do not hinder understanding.	Good pronunciation, few errors, natural intonation, and correct stress.	Excellent pronunciation, natural intonation, and the ability to adjust tone like a native speaker.
3. Vocabulary	Uses only basic vocabulary, repeats words frequently, struggles to express ideas.	Uses some simple phrases, but the vocabulary is limited, leading to unnatural expressions.	Uses appropriate vocabulary in various situations but sometimes repeats or misuses words.	Uses a rich vocabulary, minimal repetition, and can use idioms and collocations flexibly.	Has a wide and precise vocabulary, expresses ideas creatively and appropriately for different contexts.
4. Accuracy	Uses only simple sentence structures, and many grammatical errors affect comprehension.	Uses some complex grammatical structures but makes significant errors, sometimes confusing.	Uses a variety of grammatical structures with occasional minor errors.	Uses grammar flexibly with very few errors.	Mastery of complex structures, minimal errors, and natural communication.
5. Interaction	Provides only simple responses, requires significant support to continue the conversation. Does not ask questions.	Can sustain a conversation but struggles with new topics. Responses are slow.	Communicates naturally, responds flexibly in familiar situations, but occasionally hesitates.	Interacts well, responds quickly and shows initiative in conversations.	Communicates naturally and flexibly in all contexts, capable of debating and persuading effectively.

Total Score Calculation Formula

Students are assessed based on five criteria, each scored from 1 to 10. The average total score is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Total Score} = (\text{Fluency} + \text{Pronunciation} + \text{Vocabulary} + \text{Grammar} + \text{Interaction})$$