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ENHANCING BUSINESS COMMUNICATION PROFICIENCY AMONG ESL UNDERGRADUATES THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: A MIXED-METHODS INQUIRY

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Abstract

Effective business communication in English has become essential for university graduates in English as a second language contexts as global workplace demands grow. This study examined the integration of project-based learning into a 15-week Business Communication course at Foreign Trade University, Vietnam, addressing three research questions: (a) whether students' business communication proficiency improved through project-based learning, (b) how students perceived the learning process, and (c) what challenges the instructor faced during implementation. Participants were 60 third-year undergraduates majoring in Business English, organized into 12 teams of five. Using a convergent mixed methods design, the study collected four data types: pre- and post-course rubric-based performance assessments in three skill areas (business writing, oral presentation, negotiation); a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire ($n=60$); three focus group interviews with 22 student volunteers; and a semi-structured interview with the course instructor, supported by classroom field notes. Quantitative analyses revealed statistically significant within-subjects gains across all three skills (Cohen's $d_z = 1.36-1.61$, $p < 0.001$). Questionnaire data indicated broadly positive student perceptions, with 82-89% agreement across the six measured dimensions. Focus group data converged on four themes: increased ownership, real-world language use, interpersonal-skill development, and a time-bounded period of initial uncertainty. The instructor reported greater student engagement and interaction than in previous teacher-led semesters, alongside substantial scaffolding demands during early project phases. The findings provide empirical support for project-based learning as a contextually relevant approach for advancing business English proficiency in TESOL programs at internationally oriented Vietnamese universities.

Keywords: English for business, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), higher education, project-based learning, TESOL, workplace communication.

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NÂNG CAO NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP TRONG KINH DOANH CHO SINH VIÊN ĐẠI HỌC HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ NGÔN NGỮ THỨ HAI THÔNG QUA HỌC TẬP DỰA TRÊN DỰ ÁN: MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU THEO PHƯƠNG PHÁP HỖN HỢP

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Tóm tắt

Giao tiếp kinh doanh hiệu quả bằng tiếng Anh đã trở thành một yêu cầu thiết yếu đối với sinh viên tốt nghiệp đại học trong bối cảnh tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ thứ hai khi nhu cầu của môi trường làm việc toàn cầu ngày càng gia tăng. Nghiên cứu này xem xét việc tích hợp phương pháp học tập dựa trên dự án (Project-Based Learning - PBL) vào học phần Giao tiếp Kinh doanh kéo dài 15 tuần tại Trường Đại học Ngoại thương Việt Nam (FTU), nhằm giải quyết ba câu hỏi nghiên cứu: (a) liệu năng lực giao tiếp kinh doanh của sinh viên có được cải thiện thông qua học tập dựa trên dự án hay không, (b) sinh viên cảm nhận như thế nào về quá trình học tập, và (c) giảng viên gặp phải những thách thức gì trong quá trình triển khai. Đối tượng tham gia gồm 60 sinh viên năm ba chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh Thương mại, được chia thành 12 nhóm, mỗi nhóm gồm 5 thành viên. Sử dụng thiết kế nghiên cứu hỗn hợp hội tụ (convergent mixed methods design), nghiên cứu đã thu thập bốn loại dữ liệu: đánh giá năng lực trước và sau khóa học dựa trên bảng tiêu chí ở ba lĩnh vực kỹ năng (viết thương mại, thuyết trình, đàm phán); bảng câu hỏi gồm 30 mục theo thang đo Likert ($n=60$); ba cuộc phỏng vấn nhóm tập trung với 22 sinh viên tình nguyện; và một cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với giảng viên phụ trách học phần, được hỗ trợ bởi ghi chép thực địa trên lớp học. Kết quả phân tích định lượng cho thấy sự cải thiện có ý nghĩa thống kê ở tất cả ba kỹ năng được khảo sát (Cohen's $d_z = 1.36-1.61$, $p < .001$). Dữ liệu từ bảng câu hỏi cho thấy sinh viên nhìn chung có nhận thức tích cực về quá trình học tập, với tỷ lệ đồng thuận từ 82-89% ở sáu khía cạnh được đo lường. Dữ liệu từ các cuộc phỏng vấn nhóm tập trung hội tụ vào bốn chủ đề chính: gia tăng tinh thần chủ động, sử dụng ngôn ngữ trong bối cảnh thực tế, phát triển kỹ năng giao tiếp liên cá nhân, và giai đoạn ban đầu còn nhiều bối rối do giới hạn thời gian. Giảng viên cho biết mức độ tham gia và tương tác của sinh viên cao hơn so với các học kỳ trước áp dụng phương pháp giảng dạy lấy giảng viên làm trung tâm, đồng thời cũng nhấn mạnh yêu cầu hỗ trợ và hướng dẫn đáng kể trong giai đoạn đầu của dự án. Những phát hiện này cung cấp bằng chứng thực nghiệm ủng hộ học tập dựa trên dự án như một phương pháp phù hợp với bối cảnh nhằm nâng cao năng lực tiếng Anh thương mại trong các chương trình TESOL tại các trường đại học Việt Nam theo định hướng quốc tế.

Từ khóa: giáo dục đại học, giao tiếp nơi làm việc, học tập dựa trên dự án, Tiếng Anh thương mại, TESOL, Tiếng Anh chuyên ngành (ESP).

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected global economy, the ability to communicate effectively in English within professional contexts has become an indispensable skill for university graduates. This demand is particularly salient in countries where English is not the primary language of instruction, but where it plays a central role in international business and trade. Consequently, teaching business communication in English to university-level students, especially those in English as a Second Language (ESL) environments, requires pedagogical approaches that not only enhance linguistic competence but also promote transferable workplace communication skills such as collaboration, negotiation, and presentation (Chaney & Martin, 2014).

Traditional instructional models, which often emphasize passive learning and rote memorization, have been criticized for failing to equip students with the practical abilities required in dynamic, real-world business settings (Ellis, 2018). While grammar accuracy and vocabulary acquisition remain important, the rapidly evolving needs of the 21st-century labor market call for educational strategies that integrate authentic tasks and learner autonomy into the language classroom (van Laar et al., 2020). One approach that has gained increasing attention across disciplines is Project-Based Learning (PBL), an instructional framework that centers on extended, inquiry-driven projects designed to solve real-world problems (Larmer et al., 2015).

PBL offers a promising avenue for teaching business communication within TESOL contexts, as it aligns with the goals of communicative competence, authenticity, and learner engagement (Beckett & Slater, 2020). Through collaborative, goal-oriented activities, students can practice using English in functional and meaningful ways that simulate professional environments. Furthermore, recent meta-analytic evidence indicates that PBL is associated with positive effects on academic achievement across educational levels (Chen & Yang, 2019; Guo et al., 2020) and on second-language writing performance in EFL/ESL contexts specifically (Cahyono et al., 2024). Empirical work in English-medium business courses has also reported gains in employer-valued soft skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, and team communication (Almulla, 2020).

However, the application of PBL to business communication instruction, particularly in non-Western university settings, remains under-researched. In many Asian educational contexts, including Vietnam, traditional hierarchical classroom structures and exam-oriented curricula may pose obstacles to the implementation of learner-centered methods such as PBL (Tran et al., 2020). Understanding how PBL functions in such environments is crucial to designing effective instructional models that support both linguistic and professional development.

This study examines how PBL can be integrated into a university-level business communication course in Vietnam to foster students' practical language use and workplace readiness. Specifically, it investigates (1) the extent to which students improve their business communication *proficiency* through PBL, (2) their perceptions of the learning process, and (3) the instructional challenges encountered during implementation. By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on PBL in TESOL and to offer actionable insights for educators seeking to bridge the gap between classroom learning and the demands of global business communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Business Communication Proficiency: Construct, Formation, and Measurement

To establish a coherent conceptual framework for the present study, this section defines

business communication proficiency (BCP) along three dimensions: (a) what the construct entails, (b) how it is formed through English language education, and (c) how it can be reliably measured.

Conceptualizing the construct. BCP is best understood as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond grammatical accuracy and vocabulary range. Following Bachman and Palmer's (2010) model of communicative language ability, the construct includes three components: organizational knowledge (grammatical and textual), pragmatic knowledge (functional and sociolinguistic), and strategic competence - that is, the metacognitive capacity to plan, carry out, and monitor communication in real time. In professional contexts, these abilities are used in genre-specific tasks such as email correspondence, persuasive presentation, and negotiation, while attending to register, professional etiquette, and intercultural sensitivity (Chaney & Martin, 2014; Guffey & Loewy, 2018). Contemporary scholarship reframes business English not as imitation of native-speaker norms but as Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF). Under this framing, proficiency is judged by communicative effectiveness - clarity of message, accuracy of content, and rapport-building - rather than by adherence to standardized native varieties (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018). This reframing is particularly relevant to the present study, since Foreign Trade University (FTU) graduates use English mainly with other non-native users in international trade contexts.

Formation through English language education. BCP develops through sustained, purposeful engagement with communicative tasks that resemble workplace conditions, rather than through grammar drills disconnected from real use. Task-based and experiential approaches emphasize that proficiency emerges when learners plan, produce, revise, and reflect on language in pursuit of authentic communicative goals (Ellis, 2018). Static, instructor-led curricula that focus on discrete-point grammar testing have been criticized for failing to create the cognitive and interactional demands under which professional communicative competence develops. This pedagogical premise informs the choice of PBL as the instructional approach in the present study, as further developed in Section 2.3.

Measurement. Because BCP is captured at the level of contextualized performance, its measurement requires assessment designs that prioritize task authenticity, construct representativeness, and interactivity (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Performance-based rubrics - evaluating dimensions such as message clarity, professional register, organizational coherence, audience awareness, and interactional appropriateness - are widely accepted as the most defensible way to capture the construct in instructional settings (Chaney & Martin, 2014). Multi-trait rubrics applied to authentic outputs (written correspondence, oral presentations, simulated negotiations) allow assessors to triangulate evidence across discrete sub-skills while keeping the assessment realistic. This assessment logic informs the measurement design adopted in Section 3.4, in which BCP is assessed through three core skills - business writing, oral presentation, and negotiation - using rubrics aligned with established business communication assessment dimensions.

2.2. Project-based Learning: Theoretical Foundations, Defining Features, and Empirical Evidence

Origins and theoretical foundations. The pedagogical use of "projects" as organizing units of instruction was formally articulated by Kilpatrick (1918) in his foundational essay *The Project Method*, in which learning was conceptualized as a sequence of "wholehearted purposeful activities" embedded in learners' lived experience. Kilpatrick's formulation drew on Dewey's (1938) progressive educational philosophy, which positioned authentic experience and reflective inquiry as the primary engines of meaningful learning. This

theoretical scaffold was further strengthened by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which identified collaborative interaction within the zone of proximal development as the mechanism through which higher-order cognitive functions develop. These three traditions - Kilpatrickian project pedagogy, Deweyan experientialism, and Vygotskian social constructivism - converge in contemporary PBL, most influentially synthesized by Blumenfeld et al. (1991), who characterized PBL as a model in which learners "sustain doing" by pursuing complex driving questions over extended periods while teachers scaffold the cognitive and motivational demands of the inquiry.

Defining features. Despite definitional variability across the literature, contemporary PBL is most consistently characterized by seven design features articulated as Gold Standard PBL (Larmer et al., 2015): (a) a challenging problem or question that frames the inquiry; (b) sustained, iterative investigation rather than one-off tasks; (c) authenticity in context, task, audience, or impact; (d) student voice and choice over process and product; (e) embedded opportunities for reflection on both content and learning processes; (f) cycles of critique and revision; and (g) the development of a public product addressed to a real or simulated audience. These features distinguish PBL from project-supplemented instruction, in which projects merely accompany conventional content delivery rather than drive learning itself.

Distinguishing PBL from related approaches. In the language education literature, PBL is often confused with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Problem-Based Learning. Although the three share commitments to authenticity and learner-centeredness, they differ in scope and orientation. TBLT typically organizes instruction around discrete communicative tasks of limited duration and explicitly targets language form through task design (Ellis, 2018). Problem-Based Learning, originating in medical education, centers on collaborative resolution of ill-structured problems but does not necessarily produce a public product. PBL, by contrast, operates on a longer cyclical timescale, integrates multiple sub-tasks under a driving question, and foregrounds product creation as both a learning outcome and evidence of competence (Beckett & Slater, 2020). This distinction matters for the present study, in which extended, product-oriented projects - rather than discrete communicative tasks - form the unit of instructional design.

Empirical evidence in higher education and L2 contexts. A growing body of meta-analytic and primary-study evidence supports PBL's effectiveness across educational levels and disciplines. Chen and Yang (2019), synthesizing 46 empirical studies, reported a medium-to-large positive effect of PBL on academic achievement compared with traditional instruction, with effects holding across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Focusing specifically on higher education - the level of the present study - Guo et al. (2020) reviewed 76 empirical studies and documented gains across cognitive, affective, behavioral, and artifact-performance outcomes. Primary studies converge with these meta-analytic findings: Almulla (2020), using structural equation modeling with 124 university teachers in Saudi Arabia, found that PBL significantly engaged students through four interrelated mechanisms (collaborative learning, disciplinary subject learning, iterative learning, and authentic learning), while Ngereja et al. (2020) reported strong positive perceived-learning outcomes among university students following a semester-long project-based course at a Norwegian higher-education institution. In L2 contexts, Cahyono et al. (2024), in a meta-analysis of EFL/ESL writing studies published between 2013 and 2023, similarly reported a significant positive overall effect of PBL on writing performance, with intervention duration emerging as the strongest moderating variable. These findings align with the theoretical premise that sustained, purposeful language production - central to PBL - creates the conditions under which communicative competence develops (Beckett & Slater, 2020; Almulla, 2020), a premise that intersects directly with output-oriented accounts of second language acquisition revisited in the Discussion (Section 5.1).

2.3. Applying PBL to Business Communication Courses

The potential of PBL for business communication instruction has gained attention in programs focused on English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Knight (2016) reported that students participating in project-based business English courses perceived increased confidence and engagement in using English for presentations and collaborative tasks, based on classroom observations and learner reflections. Deveci and Nunn (2018), evaluating a project-based ESP communication course (COMM151) at an English-medium engineering university, documented sizable student-reported gains in presentation skills (82% of students reporting significant improvement) and teamwork (83%), alongside qualitative evidence of growth in critical thinking and intercultural communicative competence - findings directly relevant to the present study's focus on professional communication outcomes in an ESP setting. More recent meta-analytic work in EFL writing contexts (Cahyono et al., 2024) confirms that sustained engagement in project tasks is associated with measurable gains in written-output performance, with intervention duration as a key moderator. Beyond language-skill development, PBL has been associated with learners' increased awareness of workplace-related soft skills: collaborative project work has been shown to provide opportunities for learners to develop and reflect on competencies such as teamwork, time management, and problem-solving (Almulla, 2020; van Laar et al., 2020), which are increasingly emphasized in employability frameworks for business graduates.

However, the shift from teacher-led instruction to project-based formats requires significant pedagogical adjustments. Instructors must take on the role of facilitators rather than content deliverers, guiding students through open-ended inquiries while balancing linguistic and task-based objectives (Beckett & Slater, 2020). Additionally, students may initially struggle with the self-directed nature of PBL, especially in contexts where rote learning and deference to authority dominate the educational culture (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2019).

2.4. Contextual Challenges and Research Gaps

Cultural-educational mismatch as a substantive design concern. Although a growing body of international evidence supports the value of PBL (Chen & Yang, 2019; Guo et al., 2020), most of this literature comes from Western academic environments in which student-centered learning, inquiry, and classroom debate are normative pedagogical defaults (Condliffe et al., 2017). Transferring such pedagogies to non-Western higher-education systems is not pedagogically neutral. Many East and Southeast Asian universities have historically been shaped by educational traditions that prioritize hierarchical teacher-student relations, examination performance, and convergent rather than divergent classroom discourse. Recent empirical evidence indicates that students socialized in these traditions experience measurable difficulty - and elevated stress - when asked to engage in the open-ended, debate-oriented forms of communication that learner-centered pedagogies assume (Langen & Stamov Roßnagel, 2023). For PBL specifically, whose effectiveness depends on student autonomy, voice, and sustained collaborative inquiry, this cultural-educational mismatch is a substantive design concern rather than a peripheral consideration.

Vietnam-specific implementation evidence. Within the Vietnamese context, empirical investigations of PBL have begun to accumulate but remain uneven in scope and disciplinary focus. Surveying 155 Vietnamese EFL high-school students, Tran and Tran (2020) reported broadly positive learner attitudes toward PBL across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, while also noting persistent gaps in students' self-directed learning capabilities. Nguyen and Balakrishnan (2019), examining Vietnamese EFL classrooms, identified a recurring cluster of implementation challenges including limited instructor preparation for facilitator roles, time constraints arising from rigid syllabi, and learner unfamiliarity with

collaborative and autonomous task structures. These studies converge on a central observation: positive student receptivity to PBL coexists with notable implementation challenges, much of which are shaped by instructor practice and institutional conditions.

Research gap aligned with the present study. Two gaps remain. First, despite the steady accumulation of student-outcome and student-perception studies, comparatively few investigations have examined PBL through the dual lens of learner experience and instructor perspective in a single integrated design, particularly at the tertiary level and in the ESP/Business English domain. Second, the existing Vietnamese evidence base is dominated by secondary-school contexts, leaving the intersection of PBL, business communication, and Vietnamese higher education under-researched. The present study addresses these gaps by examining (a) the extent to which PBL improves undergraduates' BCP, (b) students' perceptions of the PBL learning process, and (c) the challenges and benefits experienced by the instructor implementing PBL in a Vietnamese university - FTU - where English is increasingly tied to professional mobility and international economic integration (Tran, 2020).

Contextual specifics of the FTU setting. FTU, established in 1960 and headquartered in Hanoi, is among Vietnam's most internationally oriented public universities, with academic programs centered on international economics, international business, and international trade. Business English at FTU is positioned not as a generic language program but as an applied curriculum preparing students for graduate roles in import-export operations, international logistics, foreign-invested enterprises, and global supply-chain management - domains in which English functions predominantly as a lingua franca among non-native users (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018). Three institutional features of the FTU setting shape both the opportunities and the constraints encountered when implementing PBL: (a) FTU students enter undergraduate programs with comparatively higher English entry proficiency than the national average, which raises the linguistic ceiling at which PBL tasks can be pitched; (b) the curriculum operates under a fixed 15-week semester structure with a teacher-centered assessment tradition, which limits the timing and assessment flexibility that PBL designs typically assume (Beckett & Slater, 2020); and (c) employer-side demand for graduates with workplace-ready English communication skills creates institutional openness to authentic-task pedagogies but also generates pressure for short-cycle, measurable outcomes. These features make FTU a productive - and conditions-bounded - site for examining how PBL operates within a Confucian-heritage higher-education context (Langen & Stamov Roßnagel, 2023) characterized by both readiness and structural challenges.

2.5. Aims of the Study

Building upon these gaps, the study investigates the integration of PBL into a Business Communication course for FTU undergraduates. It focuses on three central research questions:

- RQ1: How does participation in PBL affect students' business communication proficiency in English?
- RQ2: What are students' perceptions of their learning experiences during the PBL process?
- RQ3: What challenges and benefits does the instructor face when implementing PBL in an ESL higher-education context?

Through this lens, the study aims to contribute to the growing discourse on experiential learning in TESOL and to provide context-specific insights for educators designing business English curricula in similar educational settings.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a *convergent mixed methods design* to examine the impact of PBL on the BCP development among university-level ESL students. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data provided a multi-faceted understanding of both learning outcomes and learner perceptions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative phase focused on evaluating students' progress through *rubric-based performance assessments* and a *structured Likert-scale questionnaire*, while the qualitative phase explored students' lived experiences and the instructor's perspective through focus group interviews, a semi-structured instructor interview, and classroom field notes. The design is positioned as a single-site exploratory case study rather than a confirmatory efficacy trial, an interpretive framing reflected in the implications discussed in Section 5.5.

3.2. Participants and Context

The research was conducted at FTU, a large public university in Vietnam specializing in international economics, business, and trade. Participants were 60 third-year undergraduates purposively sampled from a single intact cohort enrolled in a compulsory Business Communication course during the spring semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. All participants were majoring in Business English and had completed at least four semesters (Years 1-2) of general English instruction before entering the Business Communication course. Participant demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=60).

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Total sample size	—	60 (100%)
Gender	Female	39 (65%)
	Male	21 (35%)
Age range	19-20 years	34 (57%)
	21-22 years	26 (43%)
Year of study	Third-year (Year 3)	60 (100%)
Major	Business English	60 (100%)
Prior English instruction	≥ 4 semesters general English completed	60 (100%)
Project team composition	12 teams of 5 students each	—

The course was redesigned to incorporate PBL principles over the 15-week semester, replacing the previous lecture-and-textbook format with team-based, real-world tasks requiring collaborative problem-solving and professional communication. The instructor responsible for the redesigned course was a Vietnamese female faculty member with more than ten years of experience teaching business English at the tertiary level and a Master's degree in TESOL. She received targeted training on PBL implementation (a 24-hour professional-development workshop) during the academic year preceding the study, and prepared course materials in consultation with two additional TESOL educators who later participated in rubric development (Section 3.4).

3.3. Project Implementation

The 15-week intervention was organized into three sequential project cycles of five weeks each (Weeks 1-5, 6-10, and 11-15). All 12 teams completed the same three projects in

the same sequence, so as to enable within-cohort comparability across the post-intervention assessments. The three projects, designed to target the three focal sub-skills assessed in the pre/post measures were:

- Project 1 - Business Pitch (Weeks 1-5): designing and delivering a pitch for an original startup concept to a simulated investor panel;
- Project 2 - Professional Email Chain (Weeks 6-10): drafting a multi-turn email exchange in response to a simulated client inquiry, including handling of objections and clarification requests;
- Project 3 - Contract Negotiation Role-Play (Weeks 11-15): conducting a team-based negotiation simulation involving contract terms with a simulated counterparty team.

Each five-week project cycle followed an identical four-phase structure: (a) briefing and language-input workshop (Week 1 of the course), in which the instructor introduced relevant genre conventions and target language forms; (b) team planning and initial drafting (Week 2); (c) iterative revision with peer review and instructor formative feedback (Weeks 3-4); and (d) final product delivery and dual assessment by peers and the instructor (Week 5). Across all three cycles, language use, clarity of message, professional etiquette, and collaborative dynamics were treated as integrated learning targets rather than as separable assessment dimensions. The 12 teams were retained as stable units across the three projects to allow team-level skill development to accumulate over the semester.

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

Consistent with the convergent mixed methods design (Section 3.1), data were collected through complementary quantitative and qualitative instruments to enable triangulation of evidence across the three research questions. The quantitative stream comprised (a) pre- and post-course performance assessments and (b) a Likert-scale questionnaire. The qualitative stream comprised (c) focus group interviews with students, (d) a semi-structured interview with the course instructor, and (e) classroom field notes. While a reduced two-instrument design (quantitative only) would have lowered data-collection burden, it would not have allowed the present study to address RQ2 and RQ3, which call for in-depth understanding of student perceptions and the instructor's implementation experience - constructs that questionnaires alone cannot fully capture (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Miles et al., 2020). The five instruments are detailed below.

(a) Pre- and post-course performance assessments. To measure changes in business communication proficiency, students completed performance-based tasks at the beginning (Week 1) and end (Week 15) of the intervention. Each assessment cycle comprised three components mirroring the three focal skills: a business writing task (a professional email responding to a client scenario), an oral presentation task (a brief business pitch), and a negotiation role-play task (a contract-related scenario). The pre- and post-administrations used the same task format with parallel but non-identical scenarios designed to be comparable in cognitive demand, generic conventions, and lexical range, while differing in surface content (e.g., a logistics scenario at pre-test versus a manufacturing-supply scenario at post-test). This design choice preserved construct comparability across administrations while reducing the rote-familiarity effect that fully identical task replication would introduce. Performance was scored using analytic rubrics developed in consultation with two experienced TESOL educators and grounded in established business communication assessment dimensions (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Chaney & Martin, 2014); the rubrics evaluated message clarity, professional register, organizational coherence, audience awareness, and interactional appropriateness, with each task scored on a 100-point scale. The rubrics were criterion-

referenced instruments developed for the present study; they were not externally standardized or psychometrically pre-validated through formal factor-analytic procedures, a methodological constraint acknowledged briefly here for transparency.

(b) *Student questionnaire.* A 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was administered at the end of the course (Week 15) to capture students' perceptions of the PBL experience across six dimensions: (i) engagement and motivation (5 items); (ii) language skills development (5 items); (iii) collaboration and teamwork (5 items); (iv) confidence and autonomy (5 items); (v) challenges and instructional support (5 items); and (vi) overall perception of PBL (5 items). Items were adapted from PBL-related instruments (Bell, 2010) and refined for the business communication context through consultation with the two TESOL educators who participated in rubric development. The full questionnaire is provided in Appendix B.

(c) *Focus Group Interviews.* Three focus group sessions (6-8 students each, n=22 total) were conducted at the end of the semester to gather deeper insights into student experiences, challenges encountered, and perceived skill gains. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from across the 12 project teams (no incentive offered beyond informed-consent confidentiality assurances). Sessions, lasting 45-60 minutes each, were conducted in English and audio-recorded with consent. Semi-structured prompts elicited reflections on each of the six questionnaire dimensions plus open-ended invitations for additional commentary.

(d) *Instructor Interview.* A 60-minute semi-structured interview with the course instructor was conducted after the final project. The interview guide (Appendix A) elicited reflections on (i) implementation structure and scaffolding, (ii) observed student responses and outcomes, (iii) challenges encountered during PBL facilitation, and (iv) reflections on the suitability of PBL for the Vietnamese higher-education context. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

(e) *Classroom Field Notes.* The researcher attended six project sessions across the semester (two per project cycle) and recorded structured field notes focused on interaction patterns, student participation, and observable evidence of English use in task contexts. Field notes were treated as triangulation evidence supporting the focus group and instructor interview findings rather than as an independent dataset for primary analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative assessment data were analyzed using *paired-samples t-tests* via SPSS to evaluate within-subject change in rubric-evaluated performance from pre- to post-intervention. Effect sizes are reported as *Cohen's d z* (the standardized mean difference for paired samples), the appropriate within-subjects index. Questionnaire data were summarized using descriptive statistics, including item-level percentage agreement (combining "agree" and "strongly agree" responses) and sub-scale-level means. Qualitative data from focus group and instructor interview transcripts, supplemented by field notes, were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Themes were developed inductively to capture recurring patterns in student experiences and instructor reflections, with the three research questions providing organizing categories rather than predetermined codes. To strengthen credibility, triangulation was achieved by comparing data across instruments and participant perspectives (Miles et al., 2020).

4. Research Findings

This section presents the findings organized by the three research questions: (RQ1) gains in business communication proficiency; (RQ2) student perceptions of the PBL

experience; and (RQ3) the instructor's experiences and the implementation challenges encountered. Quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated within each RQ, in line with the convergent mixed methods logic of the study.

4.1. RQ1 - Improvement in Business Communication Proficiency

To answer RQ1, paired-samples *t*-tests compared students' pre- and post-intervention scores on the three rubric-evaluated tasks: business writing, oral presentation, and negotiation simulation. Each task was scored using the analytic rubrics described in Section 3.4. Effect sizes are reported as *Cohen's d z*, the standard within-subjects index for paired-samples designs (computed as the mean of the difference scores divided by the standard deviation of the difference scores). Note that *d z* values should not be interpreted using the between-groups benchmarks for *Cohen's d*. Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics, *t*-values, *p*-values, 95% confidence intervals for the mean gain, and effect sizes.

Table 2. Pre- and Post-Intervention Performance on Rubric-Evaluated Business Communication Tasks (N=60).

Skill area	Pre <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Post <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Mean gain	<i>t</i> (59)	<i>p</i>	95% CI for gain	Cohen's <i>d z</i>
Business writing	68.4 (7.1)	82.3 (6.5)	13.90	11.92	< .001	[11.57, 16.23]	1.54
Oral presentation	70.1 (6.9)	84.5 (5.8)	14.40	12.44	< .001	[12.08, 16.72]	1.61
Negotiation simulation	66.2 (8.0)	79.6 (7.2)	13.40	10.57	< .001	[10.86, 15.94]	1.36

Note. Effect sizes are reported as *Cohen's d z* for paired samples. Confidence intervals are computed using the *t*-distribution with *df* = 59.

As shown in Table 2, students made statistically significant gains in all three skills, with mean gains between 13.40 and 14.40 points on the 100-point rubric. All confidence intervals were well above zero. The effect sizes (*d z* = 1.36 to 1.61) indicate large within-subjects improvements in rubric-evaluated performance. Oral presentation showed the largest gain (*M* = 14.40, *d z* = 1.61), followed by business writing (*M* = 13.90, *d z* = 1.54) and negotiation simulation (*M* = 13.40, *d z* = 1.36).

Overall, students' performance on the three business communication tasks improved substantially over the 15-week intervention. Because the study used a single-group pre-post design without a control group, these gains should be read as evidence of measurable within-cohort change under PBL implementation rather than as causal proof that PBL alone produced the improvement.

4.2. RQ2 - Student Perceptions of the PBL Experience

To answer RQ2, perception data came from two sources: the 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire (administered to all 60 students) and the three focus group interviews (*n* = 22). Findings from each source are presented in turn and integrated at the end of the section.

4.2.1. Questionnaire findings

Survey data showed broadly positive student perceptions of the PBL approach across the six measured dimensions. Below, agreement percentages (combining "agree" and

“strongly agree” responses - scale points 4 and 5) are reported as averages across the five items in each dimension. The full item-level questionnaire is in Appendix B.

- *Section A - Engagement and motivation:* 82% mean agreement. Students most strongly endorsed the statement that PBL activities made the Business Communication class more interesting (87%); the lowest endorsement within this dimension was for active involvement in project work (78%).

- *Section B - Language skills development:* 80% mean agreement. Endorsement was highest for opportunities to practice English in real-world contexts (85%) and for organizing ideas more clearly in English (82%); lowest for use of professional/business vocabulary (74%), suggesting that lexical confidence developed more unevenly than discourse-level organization.

- *Section C - Collaboration and teamwork:* 86% mean agreement. The highest individual-item endorsement in the entire questionnaire fell within this dimension: “Working in teams improved my interpersonal and communication skills” (91%). Endorsement of equitable group contribution was comparatively lower (76%), suggesting that team-internal labor allocation remained an area of perceived friction.

- *Section D - Confidence and autonomy:* 89% mean agreement - the highest dimension-level score. “I felt confident when presenting or sharing my ideas in class” received 92% endorsement, and “PBL helped me become more independent in my learning” received 89%.

- *Section E - Challenges and instructional support:* Mixed pattern. Endorsement of “At first, I found it difficult to understand how to do the projects” was 71% (i.e., 71% acknowledged initial difficulty), while endorsement of “The teacher provided enough support throughout the projects” was 84%. This pattern - students reporting initial challenge alongside adequate scaffolding - converges with focus group Theme 4 (Initial Uncertainty) reported in Section 4.2.2.

- *Section F - Overall Perception of PBL:* 85% mean agreement. The closing item - “Overall, I had a positive experience with project-based learning in this course” - received 88% endorsement, and “I would like to have more project-based activities in other English classes” received 86%.

Overall, students rated the PBL implementation positively across all six dimensions. The strongest agreement appeared for outcomes most directly tied to authentic professional communication (confidence-and-autonomy, collaboration-and-teamwork, and overall valuation). Lower - but still majority-positive - agreement appeared for items capturing early-stage onboarding difficulty and equitable team contribution. These two areas may merit attention in future implementations.

4.2.2. Focus Group Findings

Thematic analysis of the three focus group transcripts (n = 22) yielded four recurring themes that elaborate on, and triangulate, the questionnaire findings.

Theme 1: Increased ownership and responsibility.

Many students described the PBL tasks as empowering. The autonomy given in project design and decision-making gave them a stronger sense of responsibility. As one participant stated, “We had to manage the whole project, from planning to presenting. That pushed us to be more organized and serious.” This theme converges with the high agreement on the confidence-and-autonomy sub-scale of the questionnaire (Section D).

Theme 2: Real-world language use.

Students emphasized that their English use felt more purposeful. Instead of studying isolated grammar points, they were, in their own words, “using English to solve problems, not just to pass exams.” Several participants expressed pride in using business-specific vocabulary and genre conventions authentically across email correspondence, presentations, and negotiations. This theme aligns with high agreement on the language-skills-development items (Section B) and overall-perception items (Section F) of the questionnaire.

Theme 3: Interpersonal and leadership skill development.

Working in teams required students to negotiate, allocate roles, resolve conflicts, and take informal leadership. One participant explained, “I learned how to listen and adjust when working with others. That’s not something I learned in regular classes.” Other students described managing disagreements over message tone during the email-chain project and over division of labor during the negotiation role-play. These findings align with the collaboration-and-teamwork questionnaire results (Section C, 86% agreement) and with broader evidence that PBL provides authentic conditions for developing employer-valued soft skills (Almulla, 2020; van Laar et al., 2020).

Theme 4: Initial uncertainty and role ambiguity.

Despite the broadly positive reception, students consistently described an initial period of confusion before they adjusted to the project format. They reported difficulty interpreting project briefs without explicit step-by-step instructions, anxiety about being responsible for outcomes that teachers usually decide, and uncertainty about how peer contributions would be assessed. One participant noted, “In the first project, I didn’t know what the teacher wanted. After that I understood, but at the beginning it was stressful.” Importantly, students described this uncertainty as time-bounded: most reported adapting after the first project cycle, once they had received instructor feedback and seen the structure of the deliverable. This theme matches the lower (yet still majority-positive) agreement on the challenges-and-support items of the questionnaire (Section E) and reflects documented patterns of early-stage discomfort when learners from teacher-centered traditions begin PBL (Langen & Stamov Roßnagel, 2023; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2019).

4.3. RQ3 - Instructor Experiences and Implementation Challenges

To answer RQ3, data came primarily from the semi-structured instructor interview, triangulated with classroom field notes. Because only one instructor delivered the redesigned course, the instructor data are presented as a single-case account. Findings are organized into three areas - observed classroom dynamics, scaffolding demands, and reflections on the contextual suitability of PBL. They are interpreted as complementary evidence to the student data rather than as standalone generalizations.

Observed classroom dynamics. The instructor reported a noticeable shift in classroom interaction compared with her previous teacher-led semesters. She described students as “more talkative and interactive than in previous semesters,” with sustained peer-to-peer communication during project work and visible initiative-taking, particularly in the second half of the semester. The structured rhythm of project deadlines, with milestone deliverables every five weeks, was characterized as a “natural rhythm for feedback and iteration” that supported sustained engagement across the semester rather than concentrating effort around mid-term and final examinations. The instructor further observed that English use during team meetings increased noticeably from Project 1 to Project 3, with a corresponding decrease in spontaneous Vietnamese-medium side conversations during task work - a pattern she

attributed to growing student comfort with the project format. Researcher field notes corroborated this observation, recording high levels of unsolicited English use during team meetings, especially during the iterative-revision phases of each project cycle.

Scaffolding demands. Alongside positive engagement, the instructor emphasized that PBL implementation was instructionally demanding. She described the early phases of each project as requiring intensive scaffolding - particularly for weaker students and during the transition from briefing to autonomous group work. The specific instructional moves she reported using included staged release of project requirements, the provision of genre-specific examples (sample emails, pitch outlines, negotiation transcripts), and short whole-class debriefs to surface and address recurring difficulties. The instructor noted that scaffolding intensity decreased substantially after Week 5 (end of Project 1), as students appeared to internalize project expectations and develop independent task-management routines. Even so, she reported needing to re-introduce structured guidance at the start of each new project cycle, because the genre demands of email-chain writing (Project 2) and negotiation discourse (Project 3) differed sufficiently from the pitch presentation (Project 1) that procedural familiarity did not fully transfer. The instructor also characterized her overall workload as higher than in conventional teacher-led semesters, but distributed more evenly across the semester rather than concentrated around mid-term and final assessments.

Reflections on contextual suitability. When asked about the fit of PBL with the Vietnamese higher-education context, the instructor reported that students adapted to the autonomy-oriented format more readily than she had expected. However, this adaptation depended on explicit early-cycle scaffolding rather than on assumed readiness. She also flagged structural constraints she had to work around: the semester schedule's fixed pacing, limited classroom time for facilitator-style coaching, and the absence of institutional templates for evaluating multi-component project work. These structural observations align with the implementation challenges documented in Nguyen and Balakrishnan (2019) and inform the implications discussed in Section 5.4.

5. Discussion

This study examined the integration of PBL into a Business Communication course for undergraduates at FTU. The discussion below is organized by research question. It interprets the findings against existing literature, offers theoretically grounded accounts of *why* and *how* the observed patterns may have arisen, and considers implications for TESOL pedagogy in the Vietnamese higher-education context. Section 5.5 then addresses implications for practice and future research.

5.1. Interpreting Gains in Business Communication Proficiency (RQ1)

The statistically significant pre-to-post gains across all three rubric-evaluated tasks (Table 2) show that students' performance on business writing, oral presentation, and negotiation improved substantially over the 15-week intervention. The effect sizes (Cohen's d $z = 1.36-1.61$) fall within the range of large within-subjects effects that meta-analyses of PBL have reported across educational levels (Chen & Yang, 2019; Guo et al., 2020) and in EFL/ESL writing specifically (Cahyono et al., 2024). This alignment provides useful benchmark calibration: the present results are consistent with what a well-implemented 15-week PBL intervention has been shown to produce elsewhere.

The mechanism most directly suggested by the design is sustained, purposeful language production. Across the three projects, students produced extended written and spoken output under conditions resembling professional use - drafting client-facing emails, delivering business pitches, and conducting negotiation role-plays - and then revised that output in

response to peer and instructor feedback. This sequence aligns with Swain's (2000) Output Hypothesis (see also Loewen & Sato, 2018), which holds that production tasks push learners from semantic to syntactic processing. Producing output reveals gaps in learners' interlanguage that targeted feedback can then address. The iterative drafting-revising-performing cycle in each project provides repeated opportunities for the noticing, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic reflection that Swain identifies as productive of acquisition.

A second mechanism is the alignment between task design and the proficiency construct described in Section 2.1. Following Bachman and Palmer (2010), the rubrics targeted organizational knowledge (linguistic accuracy, textual coherence), pragmatic knowledge (register, audience awareness), and strategic competence (planning, monitoring, repair). The three task types - writing, presentation, negotiation - each emphasize different component abilities, so sustained engagement across the three projects scaffolded the construct in its multidimensional form rather than developing any single sub-skill in isolation. This alignment helps explain why gains appeared across all three skills rather than concentrating in one.

Finally, the Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) framing of the rubrics (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018) is relevant. The rubrics rewarded communicative effectiveness over native-speaker mimicry, and the project scenarios placed students in non-native-to-non-native simulated interactions typical of the international trade contexts FTU graduates enter. This framing likely reduced affective barriers to extended production and supported the confidence gains reported in Section 4.2.1.

5.2. Engagement, Autonomy, and Soft-skill Development (RQ2)

Student perceptions reported in Section 4.2 indicated broadly positive engagement, high perceived relevance of the project tasks, and notable gains in collaborative and interpersonal skills. These patterns align with prior reports of PBL's motivational potential (Almulla, 2020; Knight, 2016), but the present study's contribution lies in articulating *why* the observed engagement profile arose under these particular conditions.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) offers one explanation. The theory identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as three psychological needs whose satisfaction supports intrinsic motivation. The PBL design as implemented satisfied each. *Autonomy* was supported by student voice and choice over project scope, division of labor, and stylistic decisions - consistent with Theme 1 (Increased ownership and responsibility). *Competence* was supported by the rubric-based feedback cycle, which made progress visible and attainable, and which underlies the proficiency gains reported in Section 4.1. *Relatedness* was supported by sustained team collaboration over the 15-week period - consistent with Theme 3 (Interpersonal and Leadership Skill Development). This account fits with the 82% endorsement of higher motivation on Section A of the questionnaire and with the qualitative descriptions of pride and purpose in Themes 1 and 2.

A second explanatory layer comes from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. The team-based structure positioned more and less confident speakers as collaborators in a shared zone of proximal development: stronger students provided scaffolding for weaker peers during planning and rehearsal, while the iterative project cycles created opportunities for peer correction and reframing that no single-learner task would have produced. The development of interpersonal and leadership competencies reported in Theme 3 is therefore not separate from the language gains in Section 4.1; both arise from the same collaborative-production architecture.

The initial uncertainty captured in Theme 4 invites a complementary rather than competing interpretation. From the perspective of Vygotskian scaffolding and Self-

Determination Theory alike, productive struggle in the early phase of a complex task is expected; it marks the gap between current capability and task demand that learning must bridge. Critically, the data show this uncertainty was time-bounded: students reported adapting after the first project cycle, and the instructor systematically addressed it through the scaffolding moves reported in Section 4.3. This pattern is consistent with prior work showing that learners from Confucian-heritage backgrounds can adapt successfully to participatory pedagogies when sustained scaffolding is provided (Langen & Stamov Roßnagel, 2023; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2019), though the affective cost of the transition should not be minimized.

5.3. Instructor Experiences and Pedagogical Demands (RQ3)

The instructor's reported experience (Section 4.3) reveals an important asymmetry: while students experienced PBL primarily as an autonomy-expanding shift, the instructor experienced it as a substantial expansion of preparatory, scaffolding, and assessment workload. This asymmetry deserves explicit attention because it shapes the sustainability of PBL beyond pilot implementations.

The pedagogical demands the instructor described - staged release of project requirements, provision of genre examples, real-time monitoring of group dynamics, and integrated formative feedback across three concurrent projects - are precisely those that Stoller (2006) identified as essential to sound PBL implementation in L2 contexts, and that Condliffe et al. (2017) identified as undermined when teachers lack training, time, or curricular flexibility. The instructor in the present study had ten years of business English teaching experience and prior PBL-specific training; the success of the implementation cannot be assumed to generalize to instructors without this preparation. This observation is supported by Nguyen and Balakrishnan (2019), who identified limited instructor preparation as a recurring barrier to PBL adoption in Vietnamese EFL classrooms.

A second feature of the instructor's account is the role of structural constraints she had to work around: fixed semester pacing, limited facilitator-style classroom time, and the absence of institutional templates for multi-component project assessment. These constraints are not unique to FTU; they characterize a broad swath of Vietnamese and other East/Southeast Asian higher-education systems shaped by examination-oriented governance (Tran, 2020). The instructor's capacity to absorb these constraints through individual adaptation - rather than systemic redesign - represents both an enabling condition of the present study and a structural ceiling on PBL's scalability that deserves explicit recognition.

5.4. Implications for the Vietnamese Higher Education Context

Taken together, the study's findings contribute context-specific insights to the discussion of PBL adoption in Vietnamese higher education.

First, the data challenge the assumption that Confucian-heritage classrooms are categorically incompatible with participatory, autonomy-oriented pedagogies. While initial discomfort was reported (Theme 4), students adapted within the first project cycle and ultimately reported the experience as both motivationally engaging and professionally relevant. This adaptation aligns with Tran and Tran's (2020) findings on Vietnamese learners' broadly positive receptivity to PBL across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. However, this adaptation should be read as evidence of what is *possible* under supportive conditions, not as evidence of smooth transfer. The cultural-educational mismatch described in Section 2.4 was visible in the data as the early-stage uncertainty in Theme 4 and the scaffolding burden documented in Section 4.3.

Second, the findings align with recent trends in Vietnam's higher-education reform agenda, which has increasingly emphasized learner autonomy, soft-skill development, and English-medium instruction (Tran, 2020). PBL appears well-positioned to support these national-policy directions, particularly for graduates entering international business roles in which BELF communicative reality (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018) is normative.

Third, the instructor data caution that policy-level endorsement of student-centered pedagogies is necessary but insufficient. Without institutional investment in instructor preparation, curricular flexibility, and assessment infrastructure for multi-component performance tasks, the pedagogical demands documented in Section 5.3 will fall disproportionately on individual instructors' personal capacity-limiting scalability and equity across institutions. The findings of the present study, grounded in a single-site, single-instructor case at an internationally oriented Vietnamese public university, should therefore be read as evidence of what well-supported PBL implementation can accomplish under broadly favorable conditions, and as a baseline against which multi-site and multi-instructor replications can productively be compared.

5.5. Implications for Practice and Future Research

Three implications follow for practice. *First*, the findings provide empirical support for ESP/Business English programs at internationally oriented Vietnamese universities considering a shift toward PBL, with the qualification that early-cycle scaffolding is non-negotiable rather than optional. *Second*, the instructor data argue for institutional investment in PBL-specific professional development, since the pedagogical moves documented in Section 4.3 cannot reasonably be expected of instructors lacking targeted preparation. *Third*, the rubric design used in this study - grounded in Bachman and Palmer's (2010) framework and BELF-oriented (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018) - may offer a starting point for institutions seeking assessment templates for multi-component performance work.

Four directions for future research follow from the present case-study evidence. *First*, quasi-experimental designs with matched comparison cohorts would enable stronger causal inference about PBL's active ingredients. *Second*, the development of empirically validated parallel-form assessments would consolidate the assessment approach piloted here. *Third*, multi-site studies involving instructors at varying experience levels and institutional contexts (including regional universities with less favorable English infrastructure) would clarify the boundary conditions of PBL's effectiveness. *Fourth*, longitudinal follow-up of graduates entering international business roles would test the workforce-readiness claims that motivate PBL adoption but that single-semester studies cannot themselves evaluate.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the integration of PBL into a Business Communication course for undergraduates at FTU in Vietnam, addressing three research questions on proficiency gains, student perceptions, and instructor experiences. Quantitative analyses showed statistically significant within-subjects gains across business writing, oral presentation, and negotiation performance, with large effect sizes. Student-perception data, from both the questionnaire and focus group interviews, indicated broadly positive reception of the PBL experience across engagement, autonomy, soft-skill development, and overall valuation, while also revealing a time-bounded period of early-stage uncertainty during project onboarding. The instructor reported expanded classroom interaction and student initiative alongside substantial scaffolding demands and structural constraints inherent to the institutional setting.

Interpreted through the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2000), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the findings

offer principled accounts of why the observed engagement and proficiency profiles arose under these conditions. The study contributes context-specific evidence on PBL adoption in a Confucian-heritage higher-education setting, while acknowledging the bounded inferential scope of a single-site case-study design and outlining a research agenda for stronger causal designs, validated parallel-form assessments, multi-site replication, and longitudinal follow-up (Section 5.5).

When carefully implemented and institutionally supported, PBL offers a contextually relevant and theoretically grounded approach to aligning English instruction at Vietnamese universities with the communicative demands of internationally networked business careers.

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