

# IMPROVING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS BY APPLYING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING FOR THE SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

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## ABSTRACT

*In an effort to improve English speaking skills for students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry by applying Project-Based Learning, this research solved two questions: (1) the attitude of students toward the use of Project Based Learning in their English lessons; (2) the effects of applying Project-Based Learning for students' English speaking skills. There were two tests, observation and questionnaires for the students as the tools for data collection and analysis of the study. Researching finding presented that the students taking part in lessons applied Project-Based Learning had positive attitudes. Besides, it was exposed the advantages of Project-Based Learning which offered benefits to improvement in the students' speaking English skills. According to the findings, there would be some implications to be given for the teachers as well as the students. With all these data, this research is expected to be effective in helping both teachers and students in teaching and learning English speaking skills.*

**Key words:** *Improving, English speaking skills, Project-Based Learning, second-year students, Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry.*

## INTRODUCTION

Of all the languages today, English as a global language is the most widely spoken language. It is the means of communication between the people of different nations. English continues to be the medium of instruction in colleges and universities, and it is also the language in administration. The importance of English has been fully realized by the administrators and educators of different countries. Speaking a language is especially difficult for foreign language learners because effective oral communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions. Diversity in interaction involves not only verbal communication but also paralinguistic elements of speech such as pitch, stress, and intonation. In addition, non-linguistic elements such as gestures and body language/posture, facial expression, and so on may accompany speech or convey messages directly without any accompanying speech. In addition, "there is tremendous variation cross- culturally and cross-linguistically in the specific interpretations of gestures and body language" [1]. Furthermore, different cultural

assumptions about the purposes of particular interactions and expected outcomes of encounters also affect communication.

However, English Language Teaching in Vietnam is still far from being satisfactory, and unable to suit the needs of the political and economic development of the country. The causes of such situation are many, one of which is that they are not given enough time and opportunities to practice speaking English in class, so they either are not used to speaking in English or do not know how to communicate effectively using appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions. Moreover, they used to study traditional grammar-based courses so they were structurally competent but communicatively incompetent. Teaching speaking now might be considered the most important thing to do. Speech is related largely to feeling, understanding and mood. Language learners are required to develop the ability to know not only when, where and how to use the language, but also to what kind of people they might talk and when they should and when they should not say certain things. Apparently, the knowledge of language and the use of language are not the same thing, in which the use of language should be the target of teaching. To hit the target, the language has to be taught in communication situations. Language knowledge must be transformed into language skill by means of vast amount of practice. And with more practice of various kinds, skills will be developed into communicative competence.

Methodology used in teaching second language has experienced many changes for decades, however there is no single best method, and no one method that is best for a particular classroom. Each classroom has distinct goals and learners, therefore there are lots of foreign language teaching methods are applied with different approaches and different purposes. As a result, the best language teaching methods depends on learning styles, particular contexts, stages of teaching, learning process and the goals of learning [2]. Among the numerous methods based on communicative language teaching, Project-Based Learning has been considered to be an effective method in enhancing learners' motivation [3]. This method lets students explore actively, creates authentic language and uses language in real life situations. The method also encourages student-centered classes that focus on developing skills for lifelong learning and collaboration among students working on either small groups or as a class. Some researches were conducted that in this study PBL improves the students' speaking skill. It was improved by the improvement of speaking aspect that is used as the framework of this study. Speaking aspects proposed that are improved through PBL are comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and pronunciation [4].

The Ministry of Education and Training sets the goal for students in English proficiency to reach Level 3 according to the 6-level foreign language competence framework for Vietnam, which means that students are able to communicate in everyday situations with commonly-used expressions and elementary vocabulary. However, teachers' and students' remarkable difficulties, such as: no integration of the four skills in teaching and learning, insufficient practice time allowed, teachers' lack of training in the practical skills of teaching to English as foreign language learners, students' poor practice skills and low confidence or inadequate teaching equipment and facilities, and etc. Hence, it is vital to apply a new and effective technique to improve students' English learning, particularly enhance their speaking skills. Based on the explanation above, the author was engrossed in conducting the action research entitled: "Improving English speaking skills by applying Project-Based Learning for the second-year students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry" to stimulate English speaking skills for students at TUAUF.

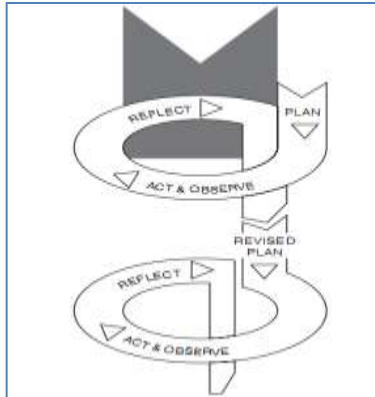
## **SUBJECTS AND RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Subjects of the Study**

The participants selected in this study were students from class K53 of Faculty of Agricultural Economy including 37 students. The current text book was New Cutting Edge (Pre-Intermediate). Those students were of the same age, same class, yet different English proficiency levels. These participants are chosen because they were in class that the researcher was teaching at that time. All of them have been learning English since they were in primary schools and the English language proficiency of these students was from average to above.

### **Research methods**

Since the primary purpose of this study was to explore the effects of Project-Based Learning on improvement English speaking skills, action research with mixed methods for data collection was adopted. Action research has number of cycles, each cycle of an action research often involves the planning of a change, the acting and observation of the process and the consequences of the change, and the reflection on these processes and consequences. After a cycle ends, the new cycle begins, following the same steps. An illustration of action research's cycles is presented in the following figures [5].



The figure outlines four steps in action, the transition from one essential phase to another and how the progress can be done through the system. It can be clearly seen that in an action research study, the researcher does not stop after receiving the results from his actions. He must evaluate the effectiveness of his actions as well as the limitations of the methods. After that, he should modify the plan, make some changes and do it again for better results. These stages are inseparable but embedded in action and reflection. In this study, the researcher underwent the following action research framework: Planning the action; Implementing the action and observing the action.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Analysis of the information collected from pretest and posttest

#### 1.1. Distribution of Pre-test Scores

**Table 1: Distribution of Pre-test Scores**

Scores	Frequency	Percent
4	4	10.8%
5	12	32.4%
6	11	29.8%
7	6	16.2%
8	4	10.8%
9	0	0%
<b>Average mark: 5.7</b>	<b>Total: 37</b>	<b>Total: 100%</b>

In the table 1, there were only 4 out of the students (10.8%) were considered quite good at speaking skill got mark 8, while 6 out of 37 students (16.2%) got mark 7. The number of the students who got mark 5 was 12 (32.4) and 6 was 11 students (29.8%). The remainders who got mark below the average were 4 students (accounting 10.8%). It is not surprising because most students are not good at English speaking skills.

#### 1.2. Distribution of Post-test Scores

**Table 2: Distribution of Post-test Scores**

Scores	Frequency	Percent
5	5	13.5%
6	10	27%

7	13	35.1%
8	5	13.5%
9	4	10.9%
<b>Average mark:</b>	<b>Total: 37</b>	<b>Total: 100%</b>

As we see in the table 2 above, after applying Project-Based Learning to the students, everything seemed to be better in the post-test. It can be seen that students' results in the post-test were partly improved. Surprisingly, the lowest score was 5 with only 5 students (13.5%), and there were no students who got mark 4 compared with the pre-test results. 10 out of 37 students got mark 6, which accounted for 27%. The number of students gaining mark 7 increased from 6 to 13 (35.1%), which proved the benefits of using Project-Based Learning in speaking lesson. The number of the students who got mark 8 and 9 increased to 9 students (24.4%) compared with 4 students (10.8%) in the pretest.

### 1.3. Comparison of Data on the Pre-test and Post-test Scores of the Students

**Table 3: Test of Difference between the Pre-test and Post-test Scores of the students**

Students	Mean Average Scores	Mean Difference	t <sub>computed</sub>	t <sub>tabulated</sub>	Remarks
<b>Pre-test</b>	5.72	1.09	11.1	2.03	Significant
<b>Post-test</b>	6.81				

Table 3 shows the comparison of the mean score of students in the pre-test and post-test. The difference of the means in pre-test and post-test using the group work is significant when tested at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . The computed value of t is equal to 11.1 which is higher than the tabulated t-value which is equal to 2.03. Therefore, with 95% level of confidence, it can be implied that the mean score of students in the pre-test is lower than the post-test using Project-Based Learning or there is a significant difference between mean scores of students in the pre-test and post-test using the group work  $\alpha = 0.05$ . This indicates that the students have gained mastery of the subject matter when exposed to this modern instruction.

The increased level of performance of the students in the post-test scores also shows that there are improvements in the amount of learning and retention. The concepts of verbs were not only re-learned, moreover, using this method, the students were able to practice and rehearse the application of the principles through the drill activities employed Project-Based Learning. In this method, the students relearned the principles, acquired information and learned the application of the concepts of verbs, thus, an increase in the level of language performance.

## 2. Analysis of the information collected from class observation

### 2.1. Meeting 1: 6/1/2022

Before applying Project-Based Learning in speaking lessons, English lessons seemed quiet and passive. Most students didn't pay attention to the teacher's explanation, and they only volunteered to speak when being requested by the teacher. Some even felt sleepy during the lesson, which made the class quieter and quieter. Sadly, students showed their shyness when being forced to talk to their friends. Students did not want to work in groups, did not want to discuss with their friends. All of them have hindered students' creativity. Compared to other skills, during class speaking, students must speak as much as possible instead of just hearing the teacher's explanation. All of the speaking lesson became more and more boring and had no motivation to students. The worst thing was that even better students had no chance to practice, communicate and show their own ability.

### 2.2. Meeting 2: 24/ 3 /2022



When applying Project-Based Learning in the speaking lessons, everything seemed to be different from before applying it. Through class observation, the teacher could realize the changes in her class's atmosphere and her students' participation after she divided the class into groups and asked them to discuss the issue. The students really paid attention to the teacher's explanations as well as their friends' explanations. They listened to all of the sharing attentively and quickly took notes if necessary. The most interesting thing is that they were more active and felt happy during the lesson. There was much noise in each group. They discussed with their friends eagerly and wanted to contribute to their topic's discussion enthusiastically. Once a student began to speak, the others also wanted to raise their voice, share their ideas and thoughts. Especially, they felt bored with English speaking lessons, they all had to participate in the group's activities because each of them was given a task for their presentation. When she came to each group, she tried to listen and encouraged quiet students with some provoking questions. It took much time of hers, however, she felt quite satisfied because the reserved students could break the ice and became more active and enthusiastic.

As a result, the students erased their inferiority complex, shyness and brave to ask questions if they needed to. Even when she drew her students' attention because the time is up, they were still attentively and continuously discussed the issue. At the end of the semester, she could see the improvement in students' speaking skills, especially in terms of fluency and confidence. Most of the students could speak more fluently and confidently. They knew how to open and end the discussions and conversations naturally or to use some common structures to express their feelings or some strategies to keep the conversations going on. Some hard-working students were also better at producing more grammatically correct sentences. To conclude, from her point of view, Project- Based Learning greatly contributes to improve her students' speaking skills.

### 3. Students' evaluation of the application of Project-Based Learning

#### 3.1. Students' attitude towards Project-Based Learning

When collecting students' opinion on the application of Project-Based Learning in noncompulsory lessons, the author gave four suggestions to describe the students' choice, respectively: very interesting, somewhat interesting, neutral and uninteresting. The answers of students selected to participate were shown in the table below:

**Table 4: Students' attitude towards Project-Based Learning**

<b>Question 1: What do you think about the noncompulsory lessons in which Project-Based Learning was applied? Choose ONE option that best describes your choice.</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
a. Very interesting	23	62.2%
b. Interesting	10	27%
c. Uninteresting	4	10.8%
d. No opinion	0	0%

From the table 4, it is obvious that all 37 students taking part in doing the questionnaires were appreciated their attitudes towards Project-Based Learning. The 1<sup>st</sup> question gets students to show degree of collaborating in groups that they have experienced in Project-Based Learning. The result indicates that 23 students corresponding to 62.2% found Project-Based Learning interesting, 10 students (27%) said that this method was interesting, and only 4 students (10.8%) thought it was uninteresting.

Thus, the inclusion of Project-Based Learning in optional lessons has partly attracted students' excitement. Once this method attracts the interest of students, it means that students pay more attention to these classes, which stimulate the students' curiosity, making them eager to participate in the activities of the lesson.

#### 3.2. Students' ideas on the advantages of Project-Based Learning

Besides, students were required to make their opinions about the advantages of Project-Based Learning in their studying in general and their learning speaking in particular. Table 5 disclosed the findings for question 2. Because some students' responses included more than one option, they were coded and counted in more than one category.

**Table 5: Students' ideas on the advantages of Project-Based Learning**

<b>Question 2: The advantage(s) of Project-Based Learning applied in English speaking lessons is/are... Circle any letter that suits you.</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
a. Students find lessons more fun and become more motivated.	31	83.8%
b. Students can widen their background knowledge through research work.	22	59.5%
c. Students can improve their soft skills, namely team work,	25	67.6%

presentation, and communication.		
d. Students can experience and encourage how to deal with real-life situations.	28	75.7%

In general, the advantages of Project-Based Learning are significant. Of four advantages listed in the question, the biggest one was that students could find lessons more fun and become more motivated which corresponded to 83.8%, this means that 31 out of 37 students gave this answer. Meanwhile 59.5% of the students equivalent to 22 students insisted that they could widen their background knowledge through research work, and 67.6% of them, which is equal to 25 students could improve their soft skills, namely team work, presentation, communication and communication. The remaining 75.7% of the students (corresponding to 28 students) said that they could experience and be encourages how to deal with real-life situations. In summary, the responses of the students in the questionnaire demonstrated and reasserted the advantages of Project-Based Learning in teaching and learning.

### 3.3. Students' ideas on the advantages of Project-Based Learning in Learning Speaking Skills

When considering the advantages of Project-Based Learning in learning speaking skills, the researcher proposed 5 criteria in evaluating speaking skills, they were: message content, vocabulary and grammar range, pronunciation, fluency and coherence and interactive communication. The responses of the students participating in the survey were presented in the table below.

**Table 6: Students' ideas on the advantages of Project-Based Learning in learning speaking skills**

<b>Question 3: Which criterion/ criteria of your speaking skills has/ have been enhanced when the projects are fulfilled? Circle any letter that suits you.</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
a. Discourse management	29	78.4%
b. Vocabulary	32	86.5%
c. Pronunciation	24	64.9%
d. Fluency	22	59.5%
e. Grammar	31	83.8%

In the table 6, all the features of speaking skills are enhanced. Through the implementation of projects, students could improve their discourse management greatly and 78.4% of the students confirmed this advantage. Students also could enrich their vocabulary which meant that 86.5% of students. The students' fluency also followed with 59.5%. 64.9% of the students thought that their pronunciation could be improved. And students also could enrich their grammar which meant that 83.8% of students confirmed this advantage during the Project-Based Learning application.

### 3.4. Students' opinion on the difficulties when implementing Project-Based Learning

In addition to the advantages that the author could see when asking students to take part in Project-Based Learning, the author also found that there were many difficulties students encountered in the applied Project-Based Learning classes. The researcher selected some difficulties to propose in the questionnaire, these difficulties focus on the following issues: time and energy consumption, inefficient team work, restricted access to necessary materials and technology and deficiency in teacher's instructions and guidance.

**Table 7: Students' difficulties when implementing Project-Based Learning**

<b>Question 4: When implementing the project, I myself had some difficulties such as .... Circle any letter that suits you.</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
a. Time and energy consumption	12	32.4%
b. Inefficient team work	9	24.3%
c. Restricted access to necessary materials and technology	8	21.6%
d. Deficiency in the teacher's instructions and guidance	2	5.4%
e. Other (Plases specify)	0	0%

When asked about the difficulties that the students met during the implementations of the projects, 12 students (32.4%) complained that they had to spend much time and energy on the projects. 9 students corresponding to 24.3% said that their team work was ineffective. There were 8 students who had restricted access to necessary

materials and technology. Impressively, only 2 students, which is equal to 5.4% pointed that they needed more instructions and guidance from the instructor.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

This action research concentrated on the use of project work in teaching English as a Foreign Language and employs different types of research instruments namely pre-test and post-test, observation and questionnaires. The study has successfully accomplished its major objectives set out at the introductory stage and the researcher has found out the satisfactory answers for the research questions. The study has pointed out the enormous benefits of project work to both students using English as a Foreign Language.

The first and foremost benefit is maybe students' motivation which comes from their personal investment in the project. This motivation can be upheld and increased as the project progresses and results in other benefits. Firstly, it supplies students with the opportunity to practice both in and out of the classroom the language that they themselves have seen the needs. Secondly, students are encouraged to use the target language in real situations and thus they can improve necessary life skills for their future work. Moreover, this motivation provides support to strengthen personal relationship between teachers and students and among the students themselves. On the whole, the result of the study demonstrates that Project-Based Learning can be successfully implemented at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry and the use of project work can make students well-prepared for their future work.

### Recommendations

First of all, the teacher should be willing and ready to move their role from knowledge providers to become facilitators guiding students in their own learning. In other words, the teacher had better be aware of the profound change in his belief from traditional to a more learner-centered approach. After that it is essential that the teachers equip themselves with adequate background knowledge about the field of study as well as the Project-Based Learning, more particularly the crucial issues in Project-Based Learning such as necessary stages for developing a project in English as a Foreign Language classroom, techniques in assessing the projects, etc. Besides, the teacher ought to do more preparation before a project is carried out. It also takes teachers much time to introduce script sample to students. Therefore, the teacher should give more guidance in writing and reading skills to analyze information. Moreover, it is vital that the teacher motivate and engage students in learning.

As Project-Based Learning is a learner-centered approach, students need to change their attitudes and their learning habits. They should become active learners and be willing to work with other students in different groups, willing to take initiative. They should also be trained and provided with numerous important skills for carrying out a scientific study such as initiating inquiry or generating meaningful research questions, managing complexity and time, analyzing data and developing a logical argument to support claims. In addition, the students should also focus on Research skills and teamwork skills.

The university board should develop a more positive and flexible attitude towards educational activities, covering classroom and out-of-class activities, the teachers' and students' roles, etc..., in order to encourage and enhance the teaching and learning process which emphasizes on learner-centered activities. Additionally, library resources and other modern technological resources should be made more accessible to students. Equally important, teachers should be provided with encouragement by means of spiritual and financial support.

The researcher has offered some suggestions for the study in the future. Firstly, further studies had better enlarge the research scale with larger and more different groups of partakers particularly with weaker students at English. Secondly, Project-Based Learning could be widely applied on other language skills such as reading, listening and writing as well as other life skills of the people. Finally, as shown in the findings, the students have to deal with a number of problems in doing projects. Consequently, the other researcher should pay attention to carry out more studies on techniques for improving Project-Based Learning technique and the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning lessons.

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