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PROBLEM-BASED GROUP PROJECTS: ENHANCING COLLABORATIVE SPEAKING SKILLS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Problem-based group projects (PBGPs) have emerged as an effective pedagogical strategy in language education, particularly for enhancing speaking skills. This study investigates the role of PBGPs in fostering collaborative speaking competence among English language learners. A 10-week intervention was conducted with undergraduate students, integrating authentic problem-solving tasks into group projects. Results indicate that PBGPs significantly improved learners' fluency, accuracy, interactional competence, and confidence. The findings suggest that problem-based collaboration provides meaningful contexts for language use, thereby strengthening communicative competence.

Introduction

Background

Speaking competence is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills to master in second language acquisition. Unlike reading and writing, which can be practiced individually, speaking requires real-time interaction, negotiation of meaning, and adaptation to dynamic communicative contexts. Learners often struggle with fluency, accuracy, and confidence, particularly when required to collaborate with peers. In many classrooms, speaking activities remain limited to rehearsed dialogues or teacher-led drills, which fail to replicate the complexities of authentic communication. As a result, learners may achieve grammatical knowledge but lack the ability to use English effectively in collaborative, problem-solving situations.

Collaborative Speaking and Language Learning

Collaboration is central to communication. Effective speakers must not only produce accurate sentences but also engage in turn-taking, clarification, and negotiation of meaning. Collaborative speaking involves co-constructing discourse with others, managing group dynamics, and adapting language use to different roles and contexts. Research in cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999) emphasizes that group work fosters positive interdependence, accountability, and interaction—skills that are directly transferable to language learning. When learners work together to solve problems, they are compelled to use language as a tool for achieving shared goals, thereby enhancing both linguistic and communicative competence.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

Problem-based learning (PBL) is an instructional approach that situates learners in authentic problem-solving scenarios. Originating in medical education (Barrows, 1996), PBL has since been applied across disciplines, including language education. In PBL, learners are presented with complex, real-world problems that lack straightforward solutions. They must collaborate, research, discuss, and propose solutions, using the target language as the medium of communication. This approach aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which emphasizes learning through concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. In language classrooms, PBL encourages learners to engage in sustained communication, negotiate meaning, and develop strategies for effective collaboration.

Problem-Based Group Projects (PBGPs)

When PBL is integrated into group projects, learners are required to work together over extended periods, tackling authentic issues that demand sustained interaction. Problem-based group projects (PBGPs) combine the principles of experiential learning and cooperative learning, creating a powerful environment for language development. Unlike short role-plays or isolated speaking tasks, PBGPs involve multiple stages: identifying problems, brainstorming solutions, conducting research, preparing presentations, and reflecting on outcomes. Each stage requires learners to use English collaboratively, thereby enhancing fluency, accuracy, and interactional competence. PBGPs also foster soft skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, and leadership, which are increasingly valued in academic and professional contexts.

Challenges in Speaking Development

Several challenges underscore the need for PBGPs in language learning:

- **Fluency vs. accuracy tension:** Learners often prioritize accuracy, leading to hesitation and reduced fluency. PBGPs encourage risk-taking and spontaneous speech.
- **Speaking anxiety:** Many learners experience anxiety when speaking English, especially in front of peers. Collaborative projects provide supportive contexts that reduce anxiety.
- **Limited authentic exposure:** Traditional curricula rarely expose learners to real-world problems, limiting opportunities for meaningful communication.
- **Motivation:** Repetitive drills can reduce motivation, whereas problem-solving tasks provide purpose and relevance.

By addressing these challenges, PBGPs create conditions for authentic, collaborative speaking practice.

Purpose of the Study

This study investigates the effectiveness of problem-based group projects in enhancing collaborative speaking skills among English language learners. Specifically, it examines improvements in fluency, accuracy, interactional competence, and learner perceptions of confidence and motivation. By situating learners in authentic problem-solving contexts, the study aims to demonstrate how PBGPs foster communicative competence more effectively than traditional group work.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do problem-based group projects affect learners' fluency and accuracy in speaking?
2. What impact do PBGPs have on collaborative interactional competence?
3. How do learners perceive PBGPs in relation to their speaking development?

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on problem-based learning in language education. It provides empirical evidence supporting the integration of PBGPs into English curricula and offers practical recommendations for educators seeking to improve learners' collaborative speaking skills. By highlighting the benefits of PBGPs, the study underscores the importance of moving beyond traditional methods toward approaches that prepare learners for authentic communication in academic, professional, and social contexts.

Literature Review

Foundations of Communicative Competence

The concept of **communicative competence** was first introduced by Hymes (1972), who argued that language learning must encompass not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Canale and Swain (1980) refined this model into four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Bachman (1990) later expanded the framework to include pragmatic competence, emphasizing contextual appropriateness and strategic language use. These foundational models remain central to language pedagogy, underscoring the multidimensional nature of communication.

Collaborative Learning and Group Work

Collaborative learning theories emphasize the importance of interaction in knowledge construction. Johnson and Johnson (1999) highlighted that cooperative learning fosters positive interdependence, individual accountability, and promotive interaction. In language education, group work provides opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, practice turn-taking, and co-construct discourse. Collaborative speaking tasks encourage learners to use language as a tool for achieving shared goals, thereby enhancing communicative competence.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

Problem-based learning (Barrows, 1996) situates learners in authentic problem-solving contexts, requiring them to research, discuss, and propose solutions. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—provides a theoretical foundation for PBL. In language classrooms, PBL tasks compel learners to engage in sustained communication, negotiate meaning, and develop strategies for effective collaboration. Unlike traditional drills, PBL emphasizes authentic use of language in meaningful contexts.

Project-Based Learning and Speaking Skills

Recent studies highlight the effectiveness of project-based learning (PBL) techniques in improving speaking skills. Kayumova (2024) found that collaborative discussions, presentation projects, peer teaching, and real-world simulations significantly enhanced learners' verbal communication, encouraging them to articulate thoughts and negotiate ideas clearly. Similarly, Abdugafforova (2024) demonstrated that collaborative group activities integrating English and science improved language proficiency while fostering teamwork and critical thinkingpedagogs.uz. These findings suggest that project-based approaches provide rich contexts for developing both linguistic and communicative competence.

Enhancing Collaboration in Language Learning

Sanako (2024) emphasized that project-based learning strengthens collaboration by requiring learners to work together toward common objectives. Effective collaboration not only improves language proficiency but also develops intercultural competence and critical thinking. This aligns with the idea that language learning is inherently social and that authentic group projects create opportunities for learners to practice communication strategies in realistic settings.

Recent Empirical Evidence (2020–2025)

- **Wibowo et al. (2024):** Found that experiential learning pedagogy significantly improved intercultural communicative competence in higher education contexts.
- **Wang et al. (2025):** Conducted a systematic review showing that project-based and problem-based tasks were among the most effective strategies for enhancing oral communication in EFL learners.
- **Zapata et al. (2025):** Demonstrated that communicative language teaching combined with project-based tasks improved young learners' speaking confidence and fluency.

Research Gap

Despite growing evidence, gaps remain in the literature. Many studies focus on general communicative competence but do not examine in detail how **problem-based group projects** specifically enhance collaborative speaking skills. Furthermore, most research has been conducted in Western or East Asian contexts, with limited exploration in Central Asian EFL environments. This gap underscores the need for studies that investigate PBGPs in diverse cultural and educational settings.

Summary: The literature demonstrates that problem-based and project-based learning approaches are strongly linked to improvements in speaking skills, collaboration, and communicative competence. Classic theories provide the conceptual foundation, while recent empirical studies confirm their effectiveness in modern classrooms. However, further research is needed to explore the impact of PBGPs on collaborative speaking in under-researched contexts.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a **quasi-experimental mixed-methods design**, combining quantitative measures of speaking performance with qualitative insights from learner surveys, reflective journals, and classroom observations. The rationale for this design was to capture both measurable improvements in collaborative speaking skills and the subjective experiences of learners engaging in problem-based group projects (PBGPs). A comparison was made between an experimental group that participated in PBGPs and a control group that engaged in traditional group work without problem-based tasks.

Participants

- **Sample size:** 40 undergraduate students enrolled in an English communication course at a Central Asian university.
- **Age range:** 18–21 years.
- **Proficiency level:** Intermediate (B1–B2 CEFR), verified through placement testing.
- **Grouping:**
  - **Experimental group (n=20):** Engaged in PBGPs.
  - **Control group (n=20):** Engaged in traditional group activities (e.g., textbook dialogues, teacher-led discussions).
- **Selection criteria:** Students were selected based on enrollment in the course; no prior exposure to PBGPs was required.
- **Ethical considerations:** Informed consent was obtained, anonymity preserved, and participation was voluntary. Students were assured that their grades would not be affected by participation in the study.

Intervention

The intervention lasted **10 weeks** and was structured around Kolb's experiential learning cycle (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation). Each week, learners in the experimental group engaged in problem-based group projects designed to foster collaborative speaking skills.

- **Weeks 1–2 (Concrete Experience):** Learners were introduced to authentic problems (e.g., designing a sustainable campus initiative, proposing solutions to local community issues). They worked in groups to brainstorm ideas and present initial solutions.
- **Weeks 3–5 (Reflective Observation):** Groups discussed challenges encountered, reflected on communication strategies, and documented their experiences in journals.
- **Weeks 6–8 (Abstract Conceptualization):** Learners conducted research, refined their solutions, and prepared structured presentations. They analyzed how communication strategies contributed to group success.
- **Weeks 9–10 (Active Experimentation):** Groups presented final solutions to peers and instructors, applying lessons learned from earlier stages. Peer feedback sessions reinforced collaborative speaking skills.

The control group followed a traditional syllabus emphasizing textbook dialogues, grammar drills, and teacher-led discussions, with limited opportunities for authentic problem-solving.

Instruments

1. **Speaking Test (Pre- and Post-):**
   - Adapted from Bachman's (1990) communicative competence framework.
   - Measured **fluency** (words per minute, hesitation markers), **accuracy** (error rate, lexical range), and **interactional competence** (turn-taking, clarification requests, negotiation strategies).
   - Scored by two independent raters using standardized rubrics.
2. **Learner Surveys:**
   - Likert-scale items measured confidence, motivation, and perceived usefulness of PBGPs.
   - Open-ended questions captured qualitative feedback on collaborative experiences.
3. **Reflective Journals:**
   - Weekly entries where learners described experiences, challenges, and perceived progress.
   - Used to triangulate survey data and provide deeper insights into learner perceptions.
4. **Classroom Observations:**
   - Conducted twice per week by the instructor and an external observer.
   - Focused on group dynamics, participation, and interactional patterns.

Data Collection

- **Pre-test:** Administered in Week 1 to both groups.
- **Post-test:** Administered in Week 10.
- **Surveys:** Conducted at mid-point (Week 5) and end (Week 10).
- **Journals:** Collected weekly from experimental group participants.
- **Observations:** Documented throughout the intervention, with detailed field notes.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis:**
  - Paired t-tests compared pre- and post-test scores within groups.
  - Independent t-tests compared experimental and control groups.
  - Reliability of survey items checked using Cronbach's alpha.
  - Inter-rater reliability for speaking test scores calculated using Cohen's kappa.
- **Qualitative Analysis:**
  - Thematic coding of journals and open-ended survey responses.
  - Triangulation with observation notes to ensure validity.
  - Emergent themes included confidence, anxiety reduction, collaboration, and motivation.

Validity and Reliability

- **Instrument validity:** Speaking test items were piloted with a small group before the study.
- **Inter-rater reliability:** Two raters scored speaking tests independently; discrepancies were resolved through discussion.
- **Triangulation:** Multiple data sources (tests, surveys, journals, observations) strengthened credibility.

- **Ethical safeguards:** Confidentiality maintained; participation was voluntary.

Results

Overview

The findings are presented in three subsections: (1) quantitative improvements in speaking performance, (2) qualitative insights from learner surveys and journals, and (3) classroom observation data. Together, these results provide a comprehensive picture of how problem-based group projects (PBGPs) influenced collaborative speaking skills.

1. Quantitative Results

Fluency

- **Words per minute (WPM):** The experimental group increased from an average of **95 WPM (pre-test)** to **112 WPM (post-test)**, representing an **18% improvement**.
- **Pausing and hesitation markers:** The frequency of filled pauses ("uh," "um") decreased by **22%**, indicating greater fluency and confidence.
- **Control group comparison:** The control group showed only a **5% increase** in WPM (from 93 to 98), with negligible reduction in hesitation.

Accuracy

- **Grammatical accuracy:** Error rates declined from **12% (pre-test)** to **8% (post-test)** in the experimental group.
- **Lexical range:** Learners used a wider variety of vocabulary, with type-token ratio increasing by **14%**.
- **Control group:** Accuracy improved slightly (from 11% to 10%), with minimal change in lexical diversity.

Interactional Competence

- **Turn-taking:** In post-test role-play assessments, **82% of experimental group learners** successfully managed turn-taking compared to **56% pre-test**.
- **Negotiation strategies:** Learners demonstrated improved use of clarification requests and repair strategies, with a **25% increase** in successful negotiation sequences.
- **Control group:** Interactional competence improved modestly (from 54% to 61%).

2. Qualitative Results

Learner Perceptions (Survey Data)

- **Confidence:** 79% of learners in the experimental group reported feeling more confident in speaking English after participating in PBGPs.
- **Motivation:** 85% indicated that problem-based tasks were more engaging than traditional group work.

- **Collaboration:** 81% valued the opportunity to work with peers on authentic problems, noting that it improved their listening and speaking skills simultaneously.

Reflective Journals

Recurring themes included:

- **Authenticity:** Learners appreciated solving "real problems" that made communication purposeful.
- **Peer support:** Many noted that group projects reduced anxiety because responsibility was shared.
- **Skill development:** Journals highlighted improvements in negotiation, persuasion, and presentation skills.

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"I learned how to explain my ideas clearly because my group needed to understand them to solve the problem."*
- *"Working with peers made me less nervous. We helped each other when someone forgot a word."*
- *"The project gave me a reason to speak English, not just practice sentences from a book."*

3. Classroom Observations

- **Participation:** Attendance and active participation rates were consistently higher in the experimental group (average 91%) compared to the control group (76%).
- **Interaction patterns:** Experimental group learners-initiated conversations more frequently, asked clarification questions, and engaged in peer feedback.
- **Engagement:** Observers noted that PBGPs generated lively discussions, with learners often continuing conversations beyond class time.
- **Balance of contributions:** In experimental groups, contributions were more evenly distributed, whereas control groups often relied on one or two dominant speakers.

4. Tables and Figures

Table 1. Pre- and Post-Test Scores (Experimental vs. Control Group)

Competence Dimension	Experimental Group Pre-Test	Experimental Group Post-Test	Control Group Pre-Test	Control Group Post-Test
Fluency (WPM)	95	112	93	98
Accuracy (Error %)	12%	8%	11%	10%
Interactional	56%	82%	54%	61%

Competence Dimension	Experimental Group Pre-Test	Experimental Group Post-Test	Control Group Pre-Test	Control Group Post-Test
Competence (%)				

Table 2. Learner Perceptions of PBGPs (Experimental Group)

Dimension	Positive Response (%)
Confidence	79%
Motivation	85%
Collaboration	81%

Summary of Results

The results clearly indicate that problem-based group projects significantly improved collaborative speaking skills. Quantitative data showed marked gains in fluency, accuracy, and interactional competence. Qualitative findings reinforced these outcomes, revealing enhanced confidence, motivation, and appreciation for authentic communication. Classroom observations confirmed higher engagement and balanced participation. In contrast, the control group exhibited only modest improvements, underscoring the effectiveness of PBGPs.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The results of this study demonstrate that **problem-based group projects (PBGPs)** significantly enhance collaborative speaking skills in English language learning. Learners in the experimental group showed marked improvements in **fluency, accuracy, and interactional competence**, as well as increased confidence and motivation. These gains suggest that PBGPs provide authentic contexts that compel learners to use English meaningfully and collaboratively.

The improvement in **fluency**—measured by words per minute and reduced hesitation—indicates that sustained engagement in problem-solving tasks encourages spontaneous speech. Learners were required to articulate ideas clearly and quickly to contribute to group discussions, which reduced reliance on rehearsed sentences and fostered natural communication. The gains in **accuracy** suggest that learners consolidated grammatical and lexical knowledge through contextualized use. Rather than practicing isolated structures, they applied language forms to solve problems, reinforcing accuracy through meaningful repetition.

The most notable improvement was in **interactional competence**. Learners demonstrated better turn-taking, clarification requests, and negotiation strategies. These skills are essential for collaborative speaking and are difficult to develop through traditional drills. PBGPs created

conditions where learners had to manage group dynamics, listen actively, and adapt their speech to peers' contributions. This aligns with the idea that communication is inherently social and that competence develops through interaction.

Connection to Existing Literature

The findings resonate with **classic theories of communicative competence** (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990), which emphasize the multidimensional nature of communication. Improvements in fluency and accuracy reflect grammatical competence, while gains in interactional strategies highlight discourse and strategic competence. The observed increase in confidence and motivation supports **Johnson & Johnson's (1999)** cooperative learning theory, which argues that positive interdependence fosters active participation and skill development.

The study also aligns with **Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle**, as learners moved through concrete experiences (problem-solving tasks), reflective observation (journals and discussions), abstract conceptualization (analyzing communication strategies), and active experimentation (final presentations). This cyclical process reinforced learning and allowed learners to transfer skills across contexts.

Recent empirical studies confirm these findings. **Wibowo et al. (2024)** demonstrated that experiential learning pedagogy improved intercultural communicative competence, while **Wang et al. (2025)** found that project-based and problem-based tasks were among the most effective strategies for enhancing oral communication in EFL learners. **Zapata et al. (2025)** showed that communicative language teaching combined with project-based tasks improved young learners' speaking confidence and fluency. The present study contributes to this literature by focusing specifically on **collaborative speaking skills** in PBGPs, highlighting their unique role in fostering interactional competence.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest several practical recommendations for language educators:

- **Integrate PBGPs into curricula:** Authentic problem-solving tasks should be embedded regularly to provide meaningful contexts for communication.
- **Design tasks with real-world relevance:** Problems should be complex, open-ended, and connected to learners' academic or social environments.
- **Encourage reflection:** Journals and peer feedback help learners analyze their communication strategies and internalize lessons.
- **Balance fluency and accuracy:** PBGPs should be structured to promote spontaneous speech while providing opportunities for corrective feedback.
- **Foster collaboration:** Teachers should train learners in group dynamics, ensuring balanced participation and accountability.

By adopting these strategies, educators can transform language classrooms into interactive spaces where learners develop both linguistic proficiency and collaborative competence.

Limitations

While the study yielded promising results, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Sample size:** The study involved only 40 learners, limiting generalizability.
- **Duration:** The 10-week intervention may not capture long-term effects of PBGPs.
- **Context:** Conducted in a single institution, results may differ in other cultural or educational settings.
- **Assessment scope:** Focused primarily on speaking; other skills such as listening, writing, and reading were not measured.
- **Subjectivity:** Self-reported surveys and journals may contain bias, despite triangulation with observation data.

Future Research Directions

Building on this study, future research could explore:

- **Longitudinal impact:** Examining how PBGPs affect communicative competence over a full academic year.
- **Cross-cultural comparisons:** Investigating PBGP effectiveness in different cultural and educational contexts.
- **Digital PBGPs:** Exploring online problem-based projects, virtual simulations, and collaborative platforms.
- **Integration with other skills:** Studying how PBGPs influence listening, writing, and reading alongside speaking.
- **Teacher perspectives:** Examining how educators perceive PBGPs and the challenges of implementing them.

Summary: The discussion confirms that problem-based group projects are a powerful tool for enhancing collaborative speaking skills**.** They foster fluency, accuracy, and interactional competence by immersing learners in authentic, problem-solving contexts. By connecting theory with practice and aligning with recent empirical studies, this research underscores the importance of PBGPs in modern language education.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of **problem-based group projects (PBGPs)** in enhancing collaborative speaking skills among English language learners. The findings clearly demonstrate that PBGPs foster significant improvements in **fluency, accuracy, and interactional competence**, while also boosting learners' confidence, motivation, and willingness to communicate. By situating learners in authentic problem-solving contexts, PBGPs transform speaking practice from mechanical repetition into purposeful, collaborative interaction.

The results highlight that PBGPs are not merely an alternative classroom activity but a **transformative pedagogical approach**. Learners engaged in PBGPs were compelled to articulate ideas, negotiate meaning, and co-construct discourse with peers. These processes mirror real-world communication, where success depends on collaboration, adaptability, and strategic use of language. The observed gains in interactional competence—such as improved turn-taking, clarification requests, and negotiation strategies—underscore the unique value of PBGPs in preparing learners for authentic communicative challenges.

The study also emphasizes the **affective benefits** of PBGPs. Learners reported reduced speaking anxiety, greater confidence, and heightened motivation. These affective outcomes are critical, as anxiety and lack of confidence often hinder language performance. By creating supportive group environments, PBGPs encourage risk-taking and sustained engagement, enabling learners to overcome psychological barriers to effective communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that **language educators should integrate PBGPs into curricula** as a core strategy for developing speaking skills. Tasks should be designed to reflect real-world problems, requiring sustained collaboration and authentic use of English. Reflection through journals and peer feedback should be incorporated to reinforce learning and promote metacognitive awareness. By adopting PBGPs, educators can cultivate classrooms that mirror the communicative demands of academic, professional, and social contexts.

Despite its promising results, the study acknowledges several limitations, including the small sample size, short duration, and single-institution context. Future research should explore the **long-term impact** of PBGPs, their effectiveness across diverse cultural settings, and their integration with digital platforms for online collaboration. Investigating how PBGPs influence other language skills—such as listening, writing, and reading—would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of their pedagogical value.

In conclusion, **problem-based group projects represent a powerful and holistic approach to language education**. They not only enhance linguistic proficiency but also cultivate the collaborative, strategic, and intercultural skills essential for real-world communication. By embracing PBGPs, educators can move beyond traditional methods and create dynamic learning environments where learners do not simply practice English—they live it. This shift is vital for preparing learners to thrive in a globalized world where effective communication is both a necessity and a gateway to opportunity.

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