

Exploring Teachers' and Students' Experiences in Implementing Project-Based Learning Within a Deep Learning Framework to Enhance Speaking Skills at SMP Walisongo Jepara

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Abstract

This descriptive qualitative study explored how a teacher and students at SMP Walisongo Jepara experienced implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) within a Deep Learning Framework to enhance speaking skills, and identified challenges and supporting factors involved. Preliminary observation showed speaking instruction was dominated by conventional techniques, leaving students passive and lacking confidence in spontaneous English use. Data were collected through interviews, a questionnaire for three selected students, classroom observation, and document analysis. Findings show the teacher implemented PjBL informally, adapting project design to the material rather than a dedicated module, and addressed challenges through task redistribution, individualized guidance, and sticker-based feedback instead of a formal rubric. PjBL supported engagement and enjoyment, but its effect on speaking confidence remained uneven and small-scale, constrained by the absence of a structured assessment tool and limited spontaneous English interaction, pointing to the need for a standardized rubric and more deliberate encouragement of English use.

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning, Deep Learning Framework, Speaking Skills*

Abstrak

Penelitian kualitatif deskriptif ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana guru dan siswa di SMP Walisongo Jepara mengalami penerapan Project-Based Learning (PjBL) dalam kerangka Deep Learning untuk meningkatkan keterampilan berbicara, serta mengidentifikasi tantangan dan faktor pendukungnya. Observasi awal menunjukkan pembelajaran berbicara masih didominasi teknik konvensional, sehingga siswa cenderung pasif dan kurang percaya diri berbahasa Inggris secara spontan. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, kuesioner untuk tiga siswa terpilih, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan guru menerapkan PjBL secara informal, menyesuaikan desain proyek dengan materi tanpa modul khusus, serta mengatasi kendala melalui pembagian tugas kelompok, bimbingan individual, dan umpan balik berbasis stiker menggantikan rubrik formal. PjBL mendukung keterlibatan dan kesenangan belajar siswa, namun pengaruhnya terhadap kepercayaan diri berbicara secara keseluruhan masih belum merata dan terbatas, akibat belum adanya instrumen penilaian terstruktur dan minimnya interaksi bahasa Inggris spontan, sehingga diperlukan rubrik berbicara standar dan dorongan penggunaan bahasa Inggris yang lebih terarah.

Kata kunci: *Pembelajaran Berbasis Proyek, Kerangka Deep Learning, Keterampilan Berbicara*



INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential competency in today's globalized world, shaping learners' academic achievement, professional prospects, and participation in international communication. Among the four language skills, speaking is widely regarded as the most salient indicator of communicative competence, since it requires learners to integrate pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and pragmatic awareness simultaneously and in real time Sri et al., (2025). Unlike receptive skills such as listening and reading, speaking demands spontaneous language production, which makes it one of the most challenging yet most essential skills for learners to master Putimasurai et al., (2024). In Indonesia, English is introduced formally from the early years of schooling, yet developing meaningful speaking competence remains a persistent difficulty for junior high school students Maransha Andrean & Ernati (2023), and improving students' speaking proficiency continues to be one of the central priorities of Indonesian English language education Tahir (2026).

In many Indonesian EFL classrooms, English instruction is still dominated by teacher-centered approaches that position students as passive recipients of knowledge, with limited opportunities for authentic oral interaction Siahaan & Siahaan (2023). Students frequently show reluctance to speak due to low confidence, fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and a strong tendency to rely on their first language during classroom interaction Han (2023). Reflective, meaning-focused, and metacognitively rich learning experiences, elements commonly associated with deep learning, remain uncommon in many classrooms, leaving a considerable gap between everyday instructional practice and the richer learning experiences that a more structured pedagogical framework could provide Tamsiyati et al., (2024).

This situation was directly reflected in preliminary observations and interviews conducted at SMP Walisongo Jepara prior to this study. The teaching of speaking in Class IX was found to rely heavily on conventional techniques such as reading aloud, simple dialogue practice, and text memorization. Many students appeared passive, reluctant to speak, and lacked confidence when required to use English spontaneously in the classroom. These initial findings indicated that the existing instructional approach at the school had not yet been sufficient to build students' communicative competence and speaking confidence, and pointed to the need for a pedagogical approach capable of generating more authentic and sustained opportunities for oral English use Emawati et al., (2024).

One instructional approach that has received growing attention as a response to these challenges is Project-Based Learning (PjBL). PjBL is a learner-centered approach that engages students in investigating real-world problems, collaborating with peers, and producing authentic outcomes using the target language Fadhillah et al., (2023). Grounded in constructivist theory, PjBL positions students as active constructors of knowledge who develop their speaking skills naturally through planning, discussing, and presenting projects Faqih et al., (2025). When PjBL is further integrated with the principles of deep learning, namely meaningful, mindful, and joyful engagement with learning, it has the potential to foster not only speaking development but also critical thinking, reflection, and learner autonomy, competencies that are central to twenty-first-century education Ramadana (2025).

Several previous studies provide empirical support for this pedagogical direction, although they differ substantially from the present study in focus and design. Dai et al., (2023) examined the impact of PjBL on students' engagement and performance in an English-speaking class at a senior high school in Medan using a qualitative approach involving observation, interviews, and documentation, and found that PjBL strengthened students' collaboration and social skills and encouraged them to take a more active role during speaking activities. Working at a different educational level, Asmi et al., (2025)

conducted a descriptive qualitative study of six teachers implementing PjBL to teach speaking to vocational school students and found that, through structured stages of starting, developing, reporting, and assessing, teachers were able to design authentic communicative tasks that supported students' speaking development.

Employing considerably different designs, Hamid & Maing, (2025) tested a Project-Based Deep Learning (PBDL) model with 180 undergraduate EFL students across three private Islamic higher education institutions using a multi-site quasi-experimental design, and reported substantial gains in speaking fluency and critical thinking, with students who engaged in authentic, problem-driven projects demonstrating greater confidence and reflective judgment. Similarly, Bernard et al., (2023) used a quasi-experimental pre-test post-test design with 60 first-semester university students and found that a deep-learning-oriented, project-based, and AI-assisted approach produced a statistically significant improvement in speaking ability compared to conventional instruction. In a related quantitative study, Sri et al., (2025) applied a two-way ANOVA design with 144 tenth-grade vocational students and found a significant difference in speaking skills between students taught with deep-learning-oriented PjBL and those taught conventionally, along with a significant interaction between the instructional approach and learner autonomy.

Taken together, these studies confirm that PjBL and deep learning principles, whether applied separately or in combination, tend to produce measurable improvements in students' speaking outcomes. However, most of these studies rely on quasi-experimental or descriptive designs conducted at the senior high school, vocational, or university level, with comparatively limited attention paid to the subjective, lived experiences of both teachers and students during implementation, and almost none situated in a junior high school (SMP) context Siahaan & Siahaan (2023). No previous study has specifically explored how teachers and students at SMP Walisongo Jepara experience the implementation of PjBL within a deep learning framework to enhance speaking skills, which constitutes the locational novelty of this study. Methodologically, this study also offers novelty by adopting a descriptive qualitative approach that centers participants' voices rather than a quasi-experimental design, allowing a richer and more contextualized understanding of how this pedagogical approach operates in a real junior high school classroom.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the experiences of teachers and students in implementing Project-Based Learning within a deep learning framework to enhance speaking skills at SMP Walisongo Jepara, and to identify the challenges and supporting factors encountered during its implementation. Based on this aim, the research problems addressed in this study are formulated as follows: (1) how do teachers and students experience the implementation of Project-Based Learning within a deep learning framework to enhance speaking skills at SMP Walisongo Jepara, and (2) what challenges and supporting factors are encountered by teachers and students during its implementation? The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically, by enriching the qualitative literature on PjBL and deep learning in EFL contexts, and practically, by informing English teachers and schools seeking to strengthen speaking instruction through project-based and deep-learning-oriented pedagogy.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design intended to explore, describe, and interpret the experiences of teachers and students in implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) within a deep learning framework at SMP Walisongo Jepara Dakhi et al., (2025) Rather than measuring the effectiveness of an instructional model through numerical data, this design was chosen because the study sought to understand how the learning process was carried out, how participants

perceived and made sense of the implementation, and what challenges and supporting factors emerged throughout the process.

The study was conducted at SMP Walisongo Jepara, located in Jepara Regency, Central Java. This school was selected as the research site because it had implemented English learning activities incorporating Project-Based Learning, making it a relevant setting for investigating the phenomenon under study. Research participants were determined using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are deliberately selected based on criteria relevant to the research objectives Creswell (2023). The participants consisted of one English teacher who had directly implemented PjBL activities, and three Class IX-A students who represented a range of participation experience observed during project activities and were purposively selected to provide information-dense accounts of their individual experiences.

Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and selected students. The interviews explored the implementation of PjBL, students' learning experiences, speaking confidence, participation, challenges, and perceived benefits Bouzioti (2023). The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and translated into English. Classroom observations were conducted to examine teacher activities, student participation, collaboration, and the implementation of deep learning principles Eka Sastrawati et al., (2025). Documents such as lesson plans, project worksheets, student project results, and teacher reflection notes were also analyzed to support the interview and observation data Mustofa et al., (2025).

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis proposed by Wae & Herwin (2025), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The data were coded and grouped into several themes, such as PjBL implementation, teachers' experiences, students' experiences, challenges, and supporting factors. The findings from interviews, observations, and documents were then compared to identify consistent patterns. The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability Riyadh et al., (2024). Credibility was established through data triangulation and member checking. Transferability was supported by providing a clear description of the research setting and participants. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of the research process, while confirmability was achieved by basing the findings on interview, observation, and document data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Implementation of PjBL within a Deep Learning Framework

Classroom observation and document analysis revealed that Project-Based Learning at SMP Walisongo Jepara was implemented through a structured sequence of stages: topic introduction, group planning, investigation, drafting and rehearsal, presentation, and reflection. In the project entitled "My Neighborhood, My Story," students first discussed possible topics in small groups, then gathered simple information about people, places, or activities in their surroundings, often by talking with family members or neighbors in Indonesian before translating key ideas into English. Groups then drafted short descriptive scripts, prepared simple presentation media, and rehearsed their oral delivery before presenting their projects to the class.

Document analysis of lesson plans showed that teachers explicitly designed activities intended to embed deep learning principles into the project cycle, including guiding questions intended to prompt meaningful connections between the project topic and students' daily lives, group discussion protocols intended to encourage mindful, attentive collaboration, and a closing reflection sheet in which students

recorded what they had learned, what they found difficult, and how they felt about the activity. This structure indicates that PjBL at SMP Walisongo Jepara was not implemented merely as a series of tasks, but was deliberately scaffolded to elicit meaningful, mindful, and joyful engagement, consistent with the core dimensions of deep learning described by Ramadana (2025).

2. Teachers' Experiences in Facilitating PjBL within a Deep Learning Framework

Both English teachers described their role during PjBL implementation as shifting away from that of a lecturer toward that of a facilitator who guided rather than directed students' learning. This shift was not always easy, and teachers reported an adjustment period before they became comfortable relinquishing some classroom control. "At first it felt strange because I was used to leading every part of the lesson, but slowly I learned to just guide them, ask questions, and let them find the answers themselves". (Teacher A, personal communication)

The second teacher emphasized the importance of structured reflection as a way of embedding deep learning principles into the project cycle, deliberately prompting students to think not only about English but also about their own learning process and collaboration with peers. "I always ask them to write a short reflection after each stage, not just about the language, but what was difficult, what they learned, and how they worked with their friends". (Teacher B, personal communication)

These findings are consistent with Asmi et al., (2025) who argue that effective PjBL teachers must function as facilitators, coaches, and collaborative partners rather than traditional knowledge transmitters. They also correspond with Lengkoan (2026), who reports that teachers implementing deep learning approaches commonly experience challenges related to reduced classroom control and the design of genuinely reflective tasks, and with Morgan et al., (2021), who emphasize that teachers require strong skills in formative assessment and metacognitive coaching to help students move beyond surface-level understanding. Both teachers in this study also noted that facilitating PjBL demanded considerably more preparation time than conventional instruction, particularly for designing guiding questions and monitoring multiple groups simultaneously, echoing the time and workload challenges identified by Imbaquingo & Cárdenas (2023).

3. Students' Engagement and Collaborative Experience during PjBL

Questionnaire responses from the three participating Class IX students, Khoiriyatul Luthfiyah, Muhammad Rafa Eka Putra, and Zahrotun Muna, showed a high degree of consistency on questions related to prior exposure and enjoyment. All three students confirmed that they had previously learned English through a project, had completed a project in English learning, and felt happy following project-based learning. All three also stated that they liked learning English through projects and found the activity more interesting than usual instruction, although only two of the three felt that project-based learning was genuinely different from ordinary lessons, suggesting that for some students the novelty of the approach was limited responses summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire Responses on Students' Engagement and Collaborative Experience (n = 3)

No	Item	Yes	No
1	Had previously learned English through a project	3	0
2	Had completed a project in English learning	3	0
3	Felt happy following project-based learning	3	0

4	Liked learning English through projects	3	0
5	Found the activity more interesting than usual instruction	3	0
6	Felt PjBL was genuinely different from ordinary lessons	2	1
7	Were actively involved throughout project sessions	2	1
8	Confirmed every group member received a task	3	0
9	Discussed with friends in English during the project	0	3
10	Understood how English is used in daily life through the project	3	0
11	Learned to cooperate with friends through the project	3	0
12	Carried out reflection or evaluated project results afterward	2	1

Interpretation. Table 1 shows a high degree of consistency on items related to prior exposure and enjoyment (items 1–5), all answered "yes" by all three students, although only two of three felt the approach was genuinely different from ordinary lessons (item 6), suggesting that for some students its novelty was limited. Regarding activity and collaboration, two of three students reported being actively involved throughout project sessions (item 7), while all three confirmed that every group member received a task (item 8), reflecting the teacher's deliberate strategy of dividing tasks so that less active students still receive a role and a grade. A notable and somewhat contrasting finding is that none of the three students reported discussing with friends in English during the project (item 9), indicating that, despite the English-medium task outcome, peer discussion within groups likely remained largely in Indonesian.

Regarding activity and collaboration during the project, two of the three students reported being actively involved throughout project sessions, while all three confirmed that every group member received a task, reflecting the teacher's deliberate strategy of dividing tasks so that less active students still receive a role and a grade. A notable and somewhat contrasting finding is that none of the three students reported discussing with friends in English during the project, indicating that, despite the English-medium task outcome, peer discussion within groups likely remained largely in Indonesian. This finding qualifies the more optimistic accounts of PjBL fostering sustained target-language interaction found elsewhere in the literature Faqih et al., (2025) and suggests that producing an English output does not automatically translate into English-medium process talk among junior high school learners.

On the deep learning dimensions, all three students agreed that the project helped them understand how English is used in daily life and that it taught them to cooperate with friends, corroborating the teacher's own account that the project topics were connected to students' real-world experience. However, only two of the three reported actually carrying out reflection or evaluating their project results afterward, echoing the teacher's own observation that "tidak semua, ada beberapa siswa yang sudah sadar dengan hasil pekerjaan mereka" (not all of them; only some students are already aware of the quality of their own work), which points to reflection being practiced unevenly rather than as a fully embedded routine, in partial contrast

to Ramadana (2025) portrayal of deep learning as consistently meaningful, mindful, and joyful across participants.

4. Development of Speaking Skills: Mixed and Component-Specific Gains

The questionnaire results on speaking development were more divided than the largely positive engagement results above. Only one of the three students reported a clear overall increase in speaking ability, and only one reported becoming more confident speaking English after the project. Yet all three students agreed that they perceived improvement in at least one specific component of speaking, namely pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, or fluency. This pattern, strong perceived gains in specific components but weak perceived gains in overall speaking ability and confidence, aligns closely with the teacher's own assessment, who stated that PjBL helps speaking only "terkadang" (sometimes), "karena focus ke materi" (because the focus is on the material), and identified fluency specifically as the aspect that developed the most. "Sometimes, yes, because I focus on the material". (Teacher, personal communication, on whether PjBL improves students' speaking ability)

The teacher further reported that there was some change in students' courage to speak (There has been a change) and that students were better able to express their thoughts during class discussion, but was noticeably hedged about confidence, stating that "maybe some of them, yes", and noted that students were more willing to voice ideas specifically within their small groups rather than in whole-class settings "Yeah, if it's in a group". This group-versus-whole-class distinction is consistent with prior findings that PjBL participants can feel comfortable speaking among peers while still experiencing anxiety in larger, more public speaking contexts Putimasurai et al., (2024), and it suggests that the modest, uneven gains observed at SMP Walisongo Jepara are better understood as an early-stage, informally supported shift rather than a fully realized transformation in students' speaking competence and confidence.

5. Supporting Factors in the Implementation of PjBL

The teacher's approach to assessing speaking performance relied on informal, observation-based criteria rather than a written instrument, focusing on clarity of pronunciation, fluency, gesture, and expression during presentations, and explicitly confirmed that no formal, written speaking rubric was used. Feedback to students was delivered through verbal appreciation and, notably, through a peer-assessment mechanism in which other teachers were asked to help evaluate students' work using stickers, with a higher number of stickers corresponding to a better score. "We support teachers who want to try new methods like project-based learning, as long as it still meets the learning targets in the syllabus". (Vice Principal, personal communication)

Table 2. Questionnaire Responses on Perceived Speaking Development (n = 3)

No	Item	Yes	No
1	Reported a clear overall increase in speaking ability	1	2
2	Became more confident speaking English after the project	1	2
3	Perceived improvement in at least one specific speaking component (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, or fluency)	3	0

Interview data from the teacher align closely with this pattern. When asked whether PjBL improves students' speaking ability, the teacher stated: "Sometimes,

yes, because I focus on the material" (Teacher, personal communication), and identified fluency specifically as the component that developed the most. The teacher further reported that there had been "a change" in students' courage to speak, but was noticeably hedged about confidence, stating "maybe some of them, yes," and noted that students were more willing to voice ideas specifically within their small groups rather than in whole-class settings: "Yeah, if it's in a group" (Teacher, personal communication).

While this sticker-based system lacks the rigor of a structured speaking rubric, it functioned in practice as an accessible, low-burden supporting factor that sustained student motivation and provided a visible, immediate form of recognition, complementing the group task-division strategy described earlier as a way of keeping less active students engaged and fairly assessed. Taken together with the teacher's habit of circulating among groups and the deliberate connection of project topics to students' everyday experience, these informal supporting practices align with the broader literature's emphasis on reflection, scaffolding, and self-direction as conditions that sustain deeper and more durable language learning gains Fadhillah et al. (2023), even though, in this case, they operated without the more formalized assessment infrastructure (a written rubric, a dedicated teaching module) that would likely be needed to translate students' evident enjoyment and topic-level understanding into more consistent gains in overall speaking ability and confidence.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion presented above, it can be concluded that the teacher and students at SMP Walisongo Jepara experienced the implementation of Project-Based Learning within a deep learning framework as an informal but generally welcomed shift toward more active, collaborative English learning, rather than as a fully structured or uniformly transformative pedagogical model. The teacher experienced this shift mainly as an adjustment toward facilitation, planning projects flexibly around the material at hand and circulating among groups to offer guidance, while relying on practical, everyday strategies, task redistribution, encouragement, and sticker-based appreciation, in the absence of a dedicated project module or a formal speaking rubric.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that the English teacher at SMP Walisongo Jepara, and similar junior high schools, develop a simple written speaking rubric to make assessment more consistent and transparent, and design clearer role-distribution mechanisms within groups, alongside deliberate strategies to encourage students to discuss in English during, and not only at the conclusion of, project work. Schools are encouraged to support the development of a dedicated project-based teaching module and to continue backing teachers' professional development in facilitative teaching and deep learning principles.

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