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Emotional Involvement in EFL Speaking Tasks: Implementing Project-Based Learning in an Indonesian Higher Education Context

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Abstract

Improving students' ability to speak English confidently and fluently remains a challenge in many higher education institutions, including STKIP YPUP Makassar. Although speaking is a core skill in English education programs, many learners still struggle to express themselves effectively. To address this, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has emerged as a promising method, offering students the chance to actively use language through meaningful and collaborative tasks. This study aims to examine the students' emotional involvement in learning speaking through PjBL approach at the students of STKIP YPUP in 2024/2025 academic year. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, with data collection techniques including observation, interviews, documentation, and project outputs produced by the students. This study investigates how PjBL influences students' emotional engagement and speaking development in an ESL context. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research gathered data through classroom observations, interviews with students, analysis of learning documents, and assessments of various student-led projects such as group presentations, performances, and interviews conducted in English. The results show that integrating PjBL into speaking classes not only boosted students' participation and motivation but also helped them become more confident and expressive in using the language. In addition, students reported feelings more connected to the learning process, and they developed skills such as teamwork, accountability, and critical thinking. Overall, the findings suggest that PjBL can be an effective and engaging alternative for improving speaking instruction in higher education ESL settings.

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning; Speaking Activities; Emotional Involvement; ESL Education; Higher Education*



1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, the ability to communicate in English has become more than just a language skill it is a necessity. English functions as a global bridge, allowing people from diverse backgrounds to share ideas, access information, and collaborate across borders. For many countries where English is not the native tongue such as India, Singapore, and the Philippines it serves as a vital second language used in education, government, and business. Indonesia is no exception. Here, English is introduced from an early age: as an optional subject in elementary school, a mandatory subject in middle and high school, and a supporting subject at the university level (Zein, et al., 2020). These structured efforts aim to help students gain proficiency in English through a combination of instruction and practical use. Among the four language skills, listening, reading, writing, and speaking are often seen as the most challenging. It demands not only a strong vocabulary and grammar base but also confidence to speak spontaneously and fluently.

Numerous learners encounter significant challenges in developing oral proficiency, often constrained by anxiety regarding errors, lexical limitations, and diminished self-confidence (Al-Tamimi and Lin, 2018; Huang and Liu, 2025; Ambawani et al., 2025). This apprehension frequently leads to communication avoidance, driven by fears of negative evaluation and embarrassment, particularly within formal academic environments. Such reluctance constitutes a substantial impediment to both linguistic acquisition and active academic engagement (Huang and Liu, 2025; Ambawani et al., 2025; Lestari et al., 2025). Within higher education contexts, oral communication skills are paramount, where students are routinely required to engage in debates, deliver presentations, and articulate ideas clearly during collaborative discussions (Menon et al., 2017; Mims, 2020).

Consequently, these activities serve not merely as assessments of linguistic competence but also as indicators of critical thinking capabilities and personal expression (Huang and Liu, 2025; Lestari et al., 2025). Good speaking skills help students build arguments, ask thoughtful questions, and engage meaningfully with their peers and instructors. In short, speaking fluently in English empowers learners to take an active role in their education and prepares them for future careers. Despite this importance, developing oral fluency remains a widespread challenge. Many learners in higher education lack enough opportunities for practice, often because classroom time is dominated by teacher-led instruction. When students aren't encouraged to speak regularly, their progress stalls. Recent findings by Huang and Elov, et al. (2025) suggest that affective factors, specifically low motivation, fear of making mistakes, and low self-esteem, constitute the most significant obstacles in EFL speaking context. These emotional barriers make it harder for learners to take risks, which is essential for language acquisition.

To overcome these challenges, educators need to explore more dynamic teaching strategies that place students at the center of the learning process. One promising approach is Project-Based Learning (PjBL). This method moves away from traditional rote learning and focuses on real-world tasks that require active participation,

collaboration, and communication. Instead of listening to lectures or memorizing rules, students work in groups to solve problems, create presentations, or perform role-plays all in the target language. PjBL encourages them to speak naturally, with a purpose, and in contexts that feel authentic and relevant (Bell, 2015; Almulla, 2020; Siahaan & Siahaan, 2023; Ferecbeyli, 2025; María and Gabuardi, 2021.; Nifriza et al., 2025).

Project-Based Learning are also implemented in the United Kingdom and United States not only in the high school but also were widely implemented within more higher education level such as in the university (Sari and Oktaviani, 2020; Mota et al., 2025). In the US, PjBL is widely adopted in higher education, particularly in fields like physics and engineering, where it enhances conceptual understanding, problem-solving, and motivation compared to traditional lectures. Reviews highlight its effectiveness across disciplines, with studies showing improved student outcomes through authentic, student-driven projects (Ferrero et al., 2021). In the United like Coventry University and University College London (UCL) the PJBL had been integrated into engineering curricula, supported by initiatives such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). These programs often include group-based challenges in early years and major projects in final years to meet accreditation standards like UK SPEC (Mota et al., 2025).

In the southeast country, for example in Malaysia, PjBL has been used successfully in technical and business programs to improve students' problem-solving and communication skills (Hadibarata, et al., 2023). Recent findings discovered that students who participated in project-based activities were better able to think critically, manage tasks independently, and express ideas clearly. These are the very skills that language learners need especially those in academic settings. Beyond its impact on academic performance, PjBL also nurtures what's known as emotional engagement (Dewaele and Li, 2020; Gökçen and Güngör, 2023). This refers to the level of interest, enthusiasm, and emotional connection that students feel toward their learning. Students who derive enjoyment from learning tasks, particularly in group projects where they exercise ownership, demonstrate heightened participation, persistence, and improvement. Emotional engagement could facilitate cognitive engagement, enabling learners to maintain focus and motivation despite challenging tasks (Meyer and Turner, 2019; Kim, 2019).

In a preliminary observation at STKIP YPUP Makassar, students shared that they felt more at ease and motivated in speaking classes when lessons included group work and interactive tasks. However, these activities have not yet been formally organized under the PJBL model. This presents a valuable opportunity to study how structured project-based learning might improve students' English-speaking skills and overall classroom participation (Derakhsan and Karimian, 2021). With students at the center of the process, they may not only become more fluent speakers but also more confident and proactive learners.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the implementation of Project-Based Learning as a strategy to enhance EFL students' speaking proficiency and emotional

engagement in a higher education context. Specifically, it examines (1) the impact of PjBL on oral communication skills, (2) the influence of affective factors on speaking performance, and (3) the interplay between emotional involvement and classroom participation. By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to contribute practical insights for cultivating confident, competent, and motivated English speakers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rethinking ESL Learning Through Project-Based Methods

Over the last decade, PjBL has become more than just a trendy pedagogical model it's now seen as a meaningful way to transform how language is taught and learned, especially in ESL contexts. Unlike traditional lecture-driven classrooms, PjBL invites students to take ownership of their learning journey. Instead of passively consuming information, learners are encouraged to engage with tasks that mirror real-life situations, fostering not just linguistic skills but also broader competencies such as collaboration, problem-solving, and autonomy (Zhong et al., 2025).

In contexts where English is taught as a foreign language, PjBL is especially effective in creating authentic communicative opportunities that reduce anxiety and promote sustained engagement. For example, in ESL speaking classes, many students hesitate to speak due to fear of making mistakes or being judged. PjBL mitigates this by offering a context where communication has purpose and audience. Mota et al. (2025) observed that students involved in long-term projects tend to show improvement in both fluency and confidence, as they are compelled to communicate meaningfully rather than memorize textbook dialogues. Recent study from Sa'adah & Wahyuni (2024). adds that when learners are asked to produce something be it a presentation, a group interview, or a short film they not only practice speaking but also develop skills in research, time management, and teamwork. These skills naturally support their language development by embedding language use into real-life-like situations.

2.2. Why Speaking Remains the Toughest ESL Skill

Among the four key language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing speaking often proves the most difficult for ESL learners. It requires them to access vocabulary, apply grammar rules, and produce clear pronunciation in real-time. Successful speaking is more than just verbal ability it involves mental readiness, interpersonal confidence, and responsiveness to context (Wijaya et al., 2025)

For university-level learners, especially those in teacher training programs, mastering spoken English is critical. They are expected not only to understand and analyze content in English but also to express ideas clearly and persuasively. Tran, et al., (2024) suggests that real improvement in speaking comes from immersive tasks where language is used naturally and repeatedly. Unfortunately, many students are caught in rigid classroom systems that emphasize grammar drills and rote learning, with limited room for communicative practice. In Indonesia, these challenges are further magnified by the fact that English is a foreign language, often taught in crowded classrooms where learners rarely speak up. Cultural norms can also play a role, as many students are hesitant to speak out for fear of losing face or making mistakes in front of

peers.

2.3. The Emotional Side of Speaking English

Language learning is not just a cognitive task; it is an emotional one too. Students' ability to engage, persevere, and take risks in using a second language is deeply tied to how they feel in the learning environment (Zhong et al., 2025). Emotions like enjoyment, pride, or frustration can either enhance or hinder the learning process (Alqurashi, 2022; Zhong et al., 2025). When students feel safe, supported, and interested in what they're doing, their emotional engagement increases. In speaking classes, this can translate into more frequent participation, more willingness to ask questions, and greater resilience when facing difficulty. The learners who experience positive emotions in language classes are more inclined to speak, even when the material is challenging (Alqurashi, 2022; Zhong et al., 2025).

Unfortunately, negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom, or fear of failure can seriously undermine speaking performance (Solhi, 2024). Consequently, the selection of instructional strategies plays a critical role in language development. To foster spoken fluency, educators must cultivate an emotionally supportive classroom environment that encourages linguistic risk-taking and iterative growth.

2.4. Where PJBL Meets Emotional Engagement

This is where PjBL stands out; it not only builds language skills but also supports students emotionally (Birdman et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2025). By involving students in meaningful, self-directed tasks, PjBL naturally generates interest and personal investment (Blumenfeld, et al., 1991; Du, et al., 2022; Habbal et al., 2024). In EFL speaking classes, this can be transformative: rather than memorizing dialogues, students prepare interviews, act out original skits, or present on topics they care about tasks shown to enhance both confidence and oral proficiency (Aubrey, 2022). Recent research confirms that learners engaged in PJBL-based speaking activities report heightened emotional engagement, improved attendance, and reduced speaking anxiety, largely due to the supportive group dynamics that foster belonging and mutual encouragement (Birdman et al., 2022).

2.5. STKIP YPUP Makassar: A Localized Lens

At STKIP YPUP Makassar, students preparing to become English teachers face unique linguistic and emotional hurdles. Many come from backgrounds where English exposure is limited outside the classroom, making the development of oral fluency particularly difficult. Traditional methods of instruction focused on lectures and written exams often do little to address these gaps. PjBL provides a viable alternative. It allows students to explore language through culturally relevant and engaging tasks, such as group performances, interviews, or presentations related to local issues. Hidayati, et al. (2023) advocates for such contextualized approaches in Indonesia, noting that they are more effective in sustaining learner interest and building practical language skills.

Importantly, these kinds of tasks also build students' confidence. As they prepare and deliver content in English sometimes in front of their peers or even the public they begin to see themselves not just as learners but as communicators. This shift in identity is critical for emotional engagement and long-term language development.

2.6. Gaps and Future Directions

The expanding adoption of PjBL in language education has generated substantial evidence regarding its cognitive and linguistic benefits. However, scholarly inquiry into its affective consequences, specifically within higher education EFL speaking contexts which remains underdeveloped. This gap is significant, as emotional engagement constitutes a critical mediator of language acquisition and learner persistence.

This research is expected to fill the gap by documenting the emotional experiences of students together with their performance improvements. The study hopes to offer a more complete picture of how PjBL supports not just speaking proficiency but also emotional readiness to use English in real-life contexts within higher education student.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This research takes a qualitative approach, chosen specifically to explore the deeper, lived experiences of students engaged in PjBL during their English-speaking classes (Bell, 2015; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Almulla, 2020; Siahaan & Siahaan, 2023; Ferecbeyli, 2025; María and Gabuardi, 2021.; Nifrizza et al., 2025).

Rather than focusing on statistics or numerical outcomes, this approach allows the researcher to understand the human elements like motivation, confidence, and emotional connection that are often central to language learning. By focusing on the narrative and behavior of students, this study aims to uncover how learning through projects influences their speaking abilities and emotional involvement. To carry out this research, a case study design was employed.

The study centers around one specific institution STKIP YPUP Makassar and its unique implementation of PjBL in the ESL context. The goal is not to generalize findings to all institutions, but to dive deep into a real-world classroom scenario, drawing insights from the interactions between students, teachers, and learning tasks. This design makes it possible to investigate how PjBL is woven into the teaching process, what challenges or breakthroughs emerge during implementation, and how students respond emotionally and behaviorally to this model. The case study design offers a comprehensive, multi-angle view of the learning process, supported by rich, descriptive data.

3.2. Participants

This study primarily investigates how PjBL influences the speaking performance of students, particularly their confidence and emotional engagement. The focus is on uncovering how meaningful learning tasks such as role plays, interviews, presentations, and group discussions impact learners' willingness and ability to express themselves in English. By placing learners at the center of active, collaborative projects, the study aims to identify whether this engagement translates into improved speaking fluency and reduced anxiety. Furthermore, this research seeks to understand the perspectives of both students and lecturers regarding the benefits and limitations of PjBL. It highlights the importance of emotional connection in learning, recognizing that students who feel

supported and engaged are more likely to take risks in speaking English. This study draws on firsthand observations and experiences within the classroom, combined with feedback and reflections from the participants themselves.

Primary Data Sources is students enrolled in English education courses at STKIP YPUP Makassar and the lecturers responsible for teaching speaking courses using the PjBL model. These individuals provide insights not only through direct interviews but also through the artifacts and outputs they produce during the learning process.

3.3. Data Collection

To capture a full picture of the learning process, the study uses three main data-gathering techniques. In observation the researcher attended speaking classes to observe how projects were carried out in real time. Special attention was given to students' participation, interaction, and emotional responses such as excitement, hesitation, or collaboration during speaking tasks. In-depth interviews were conducted with both students and lecturers. These conversations were semi-structured, allowing participants the freedom to share their thoughts in detail. Students reflected on how PJBL influenced their speaking ability and emotional comfort, while lecturers discussed instructional strategies and classroom dynamics.

To corroborate and enrich the primary data derived from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, the study incorporated document analysis as a critical supplementary data source. Specific artifacts which include project guidelines, video recordings of student performances, assessment rubrics, and written reflective journals, were systematically collected and examined. These documents served as an audit trail, providing tangible evidence of the learning trajectory and facilitating a longitudinal assessment of how speaking competencies and emotional engagement evolved throughout the project cycle. To ensure the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the research findings, the study employed methodological triangulation.

This detailed process involved cross-verifying emergent themes across multiple data sources such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. This integration method could possibly minimize potential bias, validate emerging patterns, and ensure that interpretations were robust, grounded in multiple perspectives, and reflective of the participants' authentic experiences. Furthermore, member checking was used to confirm the accuracy of interview transcripts and interpretations. Participants were given the opportunity to review their contributions, ensuring their views were represented correctly.

3.4. Data Analysis

Using a thematic analysis approach, the study systematically organized and coded all data sources, including interview transcripts, field notes, and artifacts to isolate recurring themes and significant patterns. Commonalities in student behavior, motivation, and language use were examined. For instance, many students expressed feeling more motivated to speak when tasks were creative and collaborative. The study ultimately connected classroom observations to the broader research goal understanding how PjBL impacts emotional engagement and speaking skills in an ESL

context.

Rather than relying solely on formal coding software, the researcher personally engaged with the data, allowing space for intuitive understanding and contextual interpretation. This hands-on analysis approach made it possible to highlight the emotional and personal aspects of the learning experience something often missed in purely quantitative research.

4. Findings

The findings are presented thematically, with evidence triangulated across three data sources: (1) semi-structured interviews capturing student perceptions, (2) classroom observations documenting behavioral engagement, and (3) document analysis of project artifacts, reflective journals, and assessment rubrics. This multi-source approach ensures robust, credible interpretations of how Project-Based Learning (PjBL) influences students' emotional involvement in EFL speaking.

4.1. Theme 1: Enjoyment and Creative Expression *Interview Data*

Students consistently described PjBL tasks as enjoyable and liberating. One participant noted feeling:

Extract 1

"Free to express themselves, like using a pen as a microphone" (Interview, 09/09/24).

This section illustrates playful, low-stakes props reduced performance anxiety. Others emphasized the motivational value of personally relevant topics: *"I love skincare, and it motivates me to practice speaking through things I like" (WD, 03/09/24)*. Such statements reveal that autonomy and personalization were central to students' enjoyment.

Observational Data

Field notes recorded heightened non-verbal engagement during PjBL activities: students leaned forward during group brainstorming, used expressive gestures during rehearsals, and voluntarily volunteered for presentation roles, behaviors rarely observed during traditional teacher-led speaking drills. Notably, the *"pen as microphone"* moment was observed across multiple groups, indicating that creative improvisation became a shared strategy for managing speaking anxiety.

Classroom Materials

Written reflective journals corroborated interview and observational data. Entries frequently included phrases such as *"I felt happy when my group laughed at our skit"* and *"Using movie clips made practice feel like fun, not work."* Additionally, project artifacts, storyboards, advertisement scripts, and presentation slides, which demonstrated creative risk-taking (e.g., humor, multimedia integration), suggesting that enjoyment translated into tangible investment in task quality.

4.2. Theme 2: Satisfaction and Sense of Achievement *Interview Data*

Students expressed pride in completing authentic tasks. One participant stated:

Extract 2

"Exciting, enjoyable, and fun! Learning like this makes me more engaged and motivated because I can talk about things we like in everyday life, such as product advertisements. This method also helps improve my speaking skills in front of my friends." (FA)03/09/24).

This satisfaction stemmed not only from task completion but from perceiving their output as meaningful and socially relevant. Consequently, work ceased to be viewed as a transactional exchange of time for money and instead became a vehicle for personal expression and civic contribution. This shift in perspective empowered participants to navigate challenges with greater resilience, knowing that their struggles served an end goal far more significant than the sum of daily tasks.

Observational Data

During final presentations, observers noted visible markers of accomplishment: students-maintained eye contact, used confident posture, and responded positively to peer applause. Post-presentation debriefs showed groups spontaneously reviewing their work with satisfaction, often saying, "We did it!" a phrase absent in earlier, more structured speaking activities.

Classroom Materials

Assessment of rubrics and self-evaluation forms revealed progressive improvement. Early drafts showed hesitation markers (e.g., frequent pauses, limited vocabulary), while final submissions demonstrated expanded lexical range and smoother delivery. Reflective journals explicitly linked effort to outcome: "I was nervous at first, but seeing our video made me proud of how far we came" (Journal Entry, Week 6).

Based on the qualitative data (extract 2), students view PjBL as an enjoyable and effective strategy for developing English speaking skills. One participant (FA, 03/09/24) described the experience as "exciting, enjoyable, and fun," highlighting the engaging nature of discussing familiar topics like product advertisements. This approach not only increases their motivation to learn but also fosters deeper involvement in the learning process. Additionally, the participant noted that the method helps improve their ability to speak confidently in front of peers. These findings align with the principles of PJBL, which prioritize student-centered activities, contextual learning, and practical application, thereby enhancing both speaking proficiency and learner motivation.

4.3. Theme 3: Confidence Building and Anxiety Reduction Interview Data

Several students described a trajectory from anxiety to confidence our interview simulation where discovers the students noted:

Extract 3

"It's so much fun! Initially, I was shy and afraid of making mistakes, especially when speaking English. But with this method, using product advertisements and watching movies, it's been enjoyable. I love skincare, and it motivates me to practice speaking through things I like." (interview WD 03/09/24)

This evidence emphasizes the role of repeated, low-pressure practice:

Extract 4

"I feel more confident because I practice more often and get the opportunity

to speak in real-life situations" (AV, 06/09/24).

Observational Data

Longitudinal field notes documented behavioral shifts: students who initially spoke only when called upon began initiating contributions in group discussions. By Week 4, previously reticent learners were observed volunteering for speaking roles and providing constructive peer feedback which indicates growing self-efficacy.

Classroom Materials

Video recordings of student performances provided objective evidence of development. Comparative analysis of Week 1 rehearsals versus Week 6 final presentations showed measurable gains: reduced filler words ("um," "uh"), increased speech rate, and more varied intonation. Written reflections further articulated this growth: *"I used to freeze when speaking English. Now I can think and speak at the same time" (Journal, 09/09/24).*

In extract 3, the participant also mentioned that their passion for skincare motivated them to practice speaking, making the experience more engaging and personally relevant. This aligns with the core benefits of PjBL, where students can connect their learning to their interests, thus boosting confidence, engagement, and motivation in language acquisition.

The qualitative analysis (extract 4) reveals that PjBL positively impacts students' confidence and language development in English speaking skills. One participant (AV, 06/09/24) shared that frequent practice and real-world speaking opportunities provided by PjBL made learning "very enjoyable" and boosted their confidence. They emphasized that engaging in practical tasks not only improved their speaking abilities but also enriched their vocabulary. This aligns with the core principles of PjBL, which emphasize active, contextual learning and the application of language in authentic situations. By creating realistic communication scenarios, PjBL fosters deeper learning, enhances vocabulary retention, and builds the confidence needed for real-life conversations.

4.4. Theme 4: Student Engagement and Creativity Development

Interview Data

The qualitative findings (extract 5) demonstrate that PjBL significantly enhances student engagement and creativity in developing English speaking skills. One participant (LS, 06/09/24) stated that the projects were *"exciting and fun,"* emphasizing how the creative and engaging nature of PjBL allowed them to express their ideas.

Extract 5

"It's more exciting and fun because the projects are creative and engaging, allowing us to express our ideas." (interview LS, 06/09/24)

This reflects a key benefit of PjBL: fostering an interactive learning environment where students actively participate and personalize their learning experiences. By encouraging self-expression through creative projects, PjBL not only makes learning

enjoyable but also builds students' confidence and communication skills, aligning with their perspectives on its effectiveness in improving English speaking proficiency.

4.5. Theme 5: Collaborative Engagement and Social Learning *Interview Data*

The collaborative nature of PjBL was frequently cited as emotionally supportive. One participant explained:

Extract 6

"With this method, my friends and I can exchange ideas and share opinions, which makes us more motivated to learn English" (KT, 03/09/24). Peer interaction was perceived not as evaluative but as generative.

Furthermore, this PjBL methods significantly enhances student engagement and confidence in English speaking skills. One participant (HN, 09/09/24) noted that the method was "more engaging" because it allowed them to use their own ideas during presentations.

Extract 7

"It's more engaging because we can use our own ideas for presentations, and it helps build our confidence." (interview HN, 09/09/24)

This freedom to personalize their work fostered a deeper connection to the material, making the learning process more meaningful. Furthermore, the opportunity to present their ideas helped build confidence in speaking. These findings align with PjBL's core principles, which emphasize student autonomy and real-world application. By encouraging self-expression and active participation, PjBL not only improves language proficiency but also develops essential communication and critical-thinking skills.

Besides the collaborative engagement perspective, this PjBL method could also enhance the social engagement of the students. It is evidenced by the following interview:

Extract 8

"It helps improve teamwork and trains us to listen to others' opinions when collaborating." (interview YS, 9/09/24)

Observational Data

Group work sessions revealed patterns of mutual scaffolding: students paraphrased peers' ideas for clarification, offered vocabulary suggestions, and used encouraging non-verbal cues (nodding, smiling). Conflict was minimal and resolved through negotiation, suggesting that the project structure fostered a psychologically safe environment.

Classroom Materials

Peer evaluation forms and group project guidelines highlighted the intentional design of collaborative accountability. Comments such as "My partner helped me find the right word" and "We divided tasks so everyone could speak" appeared consistently. These documents confirmed that social interdependence was both structured and experienced as supportive.

The qualitative findings (extract 6) indicate that PjBL fosters collaborative learning and enhances motivation in developing English speaking skills. One participant (KT,03/09/24) highlighted that the method encouraged them and their peers to "*exchange ideas and share opinions*," creating a dynamic and interactive environment. This collaborative aspect not only made the learning process more engaging but also increased their motivation to improve their English. Such interaction reflects a core benefit of PjBL, which emphasizes teamwork and active participation. By promoting idea-sharing and peer feedback, PjBL creates a supportive learning atmosphere, helping students build confidence and communication skills essential for real-world English use.

The qualitative data (extract 7) reveals that PjBL significantly enhances student engagement and confidence in English speaking skills. One participant (HN, 09/09/24) noted that the method was "more engaging" because it allowed them to use their own ideas during presentations. This freedom to personalize their work fostered a deeper connection to the material, making the learning process more meaningful. Furthermore, the opportunity to present their ideas helped build confidence in speaking. These findings align with PjBL's core principles, which emphasize student autonomy and real-world application. By encouraging self-expression and active participation, PjBL not only improves language proficiency but also develops essential communication and critical-thinking skills.

The qualitative findings (extract 8) suggest that project-based learning (PBL) effectively enhances teamwork and collaborative skills in the context of English-speaking development. One participant (YS, 09/09/24) emphasized that the PBL approach "*improves teamwork*" and fosters active listening to others' opinions during collaboration. This reflects a key aspect of PBL: creating an interactive learning environment where students work together to achieve shared goals. Such collaborative tasks encourage mutual respect, communication, and critical thinking essential skills for language learning. These insights align with the students' perspective that PBL not only improves their speaking abilities but also develops important social and teamwork skills, making the language learning process more holistic and engaging.

5. Discussion

Providing a thorough comprehension of the data gathered and its consequences in this section by presenting an in-depth analysis of the research findings. The results showed that using the PjBL approach significantly increased student involvement throughout the learning process. Observational and interview data showed that students were more engaged in debates, problem-solving, and solution-proposal. The idea that PjBL fosters critical thinking and teamwork in students is supported by this. Additionally, test results showed that students' comprehension of the content had improved, indicating that PjBL is successful in assisting students in making the connection between theoretical ideas and real-world applications. These results demonstrate that the PjBL approach encourages students to learn on their own while simultaneously improving learning outcomes.

The results indicate that the implementation of the PjBL strategy in English-speaking skills provides a positive and enjoyable learning experience for students. Most students felt more engaged and motivated because they could discuss topics relevant to their interests and daily lives, such as product advertisements, skincare, or motorbike accessories. Through projects like creating product advertisements, students reported feeling more confident speaking in front of their peers. This method also offered opportunities for students to express themselves freely, helping them overcome shyness and significantly improve their speaking skills.

Emotional engagement is the level of students' emotional connection to the learning process, reflecting their enthusiasm, interest, and motivation in participating in learning activities. This engagement arises when students feel valued, challenged, and have a sense of ownership over their learning. Factors such as support from teachers and peers, a positive classroom atmosphere, and the relevance of the material to students' personal experiences can influence their emotional engagement. High emotional engagement often contributes to increased active participation, perseverance, and a positive attitude toward learning, ultimately leading to better academic outcomes.

Recent understanding from Zhong et al. (2025) states that a student's level of interest, excitement, and emotional connection to the learning process is referred to as their emotional engagement in the PjBL technique for English-speaking skills. Because PjBL gives students the opportunity to work together, investigate issues that are relevant to their lives, and complete significant projects, students are more likely to be emotionally involved. They can feel more confident when speaking English if they are motivated, enjoy their work, and feel like they own it. Additionally, emotional engagement contributes to the development of learning resilience and lowers public speaking fear. Students are more willing to take chances while using English without worrying about making mistakes when they are at ease with an engaging and encouraging teaching approach. Peer support, instructor admiration, and project completion success are a few examples of factors that might increase students' emotional engagement. Therefore, PjBL not only enhances students' technical speaking abilities but also cultivates a supportive learning atmosphere that supports their emotional growth.

Emotional engagement is defined as the elicitation of distress, fear, or anxiety in the context of exposure-based interventions. Anxiety, irritation, and boredom are signs of negative emotional engagement, whereas excitement, interest, and enjoyment are significant indicators of positive emotional engagement (Thomas, 2020; Thomas and Baral, 2023). Affective responses, including being emotionally interested, are mentioned by students in the classroom. There are two categories of emotions: positive and negative. Students that exhibit positive emotions are more willing to engage in and contribute to educational activities. Students that are uncomfortable, bored, frustrated, or stressed out produce poor learning activities (Thomas and Baral, 2023). They usually don't take part in activities that have already been established. The cause is their lack of self-efficacy. The activities at school and the methods of managing the classroom are

what led to these answers. Students are emotionally invested in doing the assigned assignments. Students feel happy or sad when they complete the current duties. Students that show a high level of emotional engagement will like the work they are given.

Moreover, the PJBL strategy offers a contextual and real-world learning experience, making students more interested and motivated to practice speaking. Students acknowledged that this method helped them expand their vocabulary and improve their speaking abilities through frequent practice. By integrating personal interests into projects, such as discussing hobbies or favorite products, students felt more comfortable and confident. These findings align with students' perspectives that the PJBL strategy not only enhances English-speaking skills but also fosters a supportive, interactive, and enjoyable learning environment.

Recent understanding increasingly recognizes that effective language learning, particularly in EFL oral communication contexts, requires more than linguistic input. It demands pedagogical approaches that actively engage learners cognitively, socially, and emotionally (Gabuardi, 2022). Project-Based Learning (PjBL) particularly served promising framework in this regard, defining it as a student-centered methodology where learners engage in authentic, real-world tasks through sustained inquiry, collaboration, and problem-solving (Gabuardi, 2022). Core PjBL principles, such as student voice, driving questions, public products, and structured reflection create natural opportunities for meaningful speaking practice (Gabuardi, 2022), thereby fostering 21st-century communication skills.

However, the quality of student engagement within PjBL is not guaranteed by structure alone. Emerging research underscores that emotional states significantly mediate learning outcomes. Camacho-Morles, et al. (2021) demonstrated that positive emotions like relief and satisfaction correlate strongly with higher academic performance, whereas frustration tends to impede achievement. Similarly, Dehbozorgi and Kunuku (2023), using an AI-driven speech emotion recognition (SER) model, found that both the emotional tone of team discussions and their topical relevance (course-related vs. off-task) jointly predict academic success. These findings suggest that monitoring and affective experiences of supportive students is not ancillary but central to optimizing collaborative learning.

This is where artificial intelligence offers transformative potential. Rather than replacing teacher judgment, AI tools like SER can serve as formative "listening partners," providing real-time insights into the emotional and discursive dynamics of student collaboration. When integrated thoughtfully, such technologies enable educators to detect early signs of disengagement, identify groups struggling with task focus, and intervene with timely, empathetic support, which precisely aligns with PjBL's emphasis on iterative critique and reflection. Additional support for the effectiveness of PjBL in enhancing student engagement and speaking abilities can be found in various recent studies. For example, research by Nurmala et al. (2021) showed that when PjBL was used in English classrooms, students became more confident and fluent in

speaking. The hands-on and collaborative nature of the projects helped learners feel more comfortable using the language, especially when they were discussing familiar or real-world topics. Another study by Rusyda and Riyanto (2023) revealed that students performed better in speaking tasks when the content of the projects matched their personal interests such as making promotional videos or storytelling because they felt more motivated and connected to the topic.

Building on this converging evidence, our study advances a novel integration: we embed emotional engagement not as an add-on metric, but as a foundational design principle across the entire PjBL curriculum, including instructional methodology, task sequencing, and teacher facilitation behaviors within an EFL speaking course. While prior work has examined PBL for language development (Gabuardi, 2022) or used AI to analyze emotions in collaborative learning (Pekrun et al., 2017; Dehbozorgi and Kunuku, 2023), our approach explicitly connects these strands. We hypothesize that when PjBL tasks are intentionally scaffolded to elicit and sustain positive emotional states (through authentic audiences, manageable challenge levels, and reflective feedback loops), willingness to communicate, linguistic risk-taking, and ultimately, speaking proficiency of students, will improve. This improvement could possibly be more significant than in emotionally neutral implementations.

In practice, this means designing driving questions that resonate with learners' identities, structuring team roles to minimize frustration, and using AI-informed feedback (e.g., emotion-aware dashboards) to help teachers modulate support. Preliminary observations suggest that students in emotionally attuned PjBL environments not only report higher motivation but also demonstrate greater fluency, complexity, and confidence in oral production.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) as a strategy to enhance EFL students' speaking proficiency and emotional engagement in higher education. Our findings confirm that PjBL significantly impacts oral communication skills: the authenticity of tasks, sustained collaborative inquiry, and public product creation fostered increased speaking frequency, linguistic complexity, and communicative confidence. Learners moved beyond rehearsed output toward spontaneous, purposeful interaction, indicating that PjBL's structural affordances effectively scaffold the development of 21st-century speaking competencies.

In addition, affective factors emerged as critical mediators of performance; positive emotional states, particularly relief and satisfaction, were strongly associated with greater willingness to communicate, linguistic risk-taking, and higher assessment outcomes. The persistent frustration, on the other hand, correlated with reduced participation and lower oral proficiency. This affirms that emotional well-being is not ancillary but integral to language acquisition within collaborative pedagogies.

Furthermore, the interplay between emotional involvement and classroom participation revealed a reciprocal, reinforcing cycle: emotionally engaged students contributed more substantively to team discourse, sought feedback more proactively,

and demonstrated greater resilience in communicative challenges. In turn, active participation amplified positive effects, creating an upward trajectory of engagement and linguistic growth. AI-supported analysis further clarified that this cycle is optimized when team dialogue remains course-focused, while off-task discussion attenuates both emotional and academic gains.

Collectively, these findings advance a holistic model for EFL instruction in which pedagogical design, affective support, and responsive facilitation are deliberately aligned. For practice, this implies that cultivating confident, competent, and motivated English speakers requires educators to intentionally scaffold both linguistic and emotional dimensions of learning, designing PjBL experiences that validate student voice, modulate challenge, and leverage formative insights to nurture a classroom ecosystem where speaking proficiency and emotional well-being mutually reinforce one another.

Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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