



Exploring the Effectiveness of Applying Project-Based- Learning in Teaching English Speaking Skills in Remote Learning Setting

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Abstract. Many remote learners yearly participate in online English courses at Ho Chi Minh City Open University to improve their English language skills for better English communication, job opportunity, and higher education. However, most of them seemed to be problematic in natural and fluent speaking skills at an acceptable level of a non-native speaker due to a lack of environments for English speaking practice when having non-physical and irregular contact with their peers and instructor. To help the remote learners have more environment to enhance their English-speaking skills, project-based learning (PBL) method was applied. Hence, this study aims to explore not only the effectiveness of PBL applied in learning English speaking skills online but also learners' perception towards that PBL method. To do that, a mixed research method was used. Fifty remote learners were asked to respond to a survey questionnaire for quantitative data collection, while 6 of them were interviewed for qualitative research. The finding shows that the remote learners had some definite difficulties in their online learning process, and PBL enabled remote them to improve their speaking skills because PBL helped create more learning environments for learners practicing their speaking skills autonomously, which satisfies learners satisfied with the PBL method applied.

Keywords: Remote Learners · Project-Based Learning · Speaking Skills

1 Introduction

Owing to the unpredictable development of technology and higher demand for lifelong learning [1, 2], hundreds of learners yearly participate in online learning through LMS (learning management system) at Ho Chi Minh City Open University (HCMCOU) for various individual reasons. However, in the online learning process, learners have to face diverse challenges of learning environment, speaking skill features, and learners' characteristics. First, in remote learning settings, learners have no lively classroom (due to non-physical contact and geography distance), inadequate facilities, high investment, cost, culture and education background, limitations in the ability of instructional design, planting plans, regulations, policy, management and evaluation of learning process, task analysis, instructional objectives and strategies, content sequence, designing message,

instruction advance, and instruments evaluation [3]. Second, for the speaking skill aspect, remote learners are more challenged because to speak English effectively, learners must have more conversation ability and environments for communication, and other activities displayed, including role-playing and activity stimulating [4]. Additionally, they need to have abilities of listening comprehension, sociolinguistic competence, language application and representation, skills of representing and delivering the speaker's thoughts, as well as other language matters such as pronunciation, intonation, word stress, rhythm, vocabulary, and grammar structures [5]. Third, special characteristics of remote learners greatly influence their English-speaking improvement. Most of the remote learners are adults and full-time workers and have no chance to study directly on campus as face-to-face learners [6–8], so they cannot exchange and communicate in English with their peers or classmates in a classroom context. These make learners lack environments to practice their speaking skills. Also, remote learners hardly succeed in studying English speaking skills through LMS due to the differences in learning approaches, knowledge background, cultural communication, learning conditions, and geography [9, 10].

With such challenges mentioned accompanied by the observation of remote learners in their learning speaking skills process at HCMCOU, many of them could not represent their thoughts efficiently or express their ideas clearly and naturally in an acceptable fashion of a non-native speaker. Thus, a project-based learning (PBL) method was applied with the belief that PBL enables remote learners to enhance their speaking skills when it helps to create more learning environments for learners to study autonomously, self-organize, and self-practice. Hence, this study is conducted to explore whether PBL applied is effective in teaching speaking skills online or not. It also aims to investigate learners' perceptions of this teaching method. For these purposes, three research questions concerned are:

- 1) What difficulties do the remote learners have to cope with when learning English speaking skills in remote setting?
- 2) Is it effective to apply PBL in teaching English speaking skills online? Why?
- 3) What are the perceptions of the remote learners towards PBL applied in English speaking course?

2 Literature Review

Although numerous previous studies admitted that learning a language in a remote setting is effective and advantageous thanks to the development and success of CALL (Computer-Assisted language learning) and CELLSS (Computer Enhanced Language-Learning Support System) [11]. Remote learners benefit from making knowledge actively, giving feedback, and having collaborative intelligence and metacognition, thanks to the advantages of technologies. Furthermore, remote learners are easily successful in the online learning process when freely accessing a great amount of academic information. However, for the remote learners at HCMCOU, it is hard to freely access this academic knowledge when most of them are adult learners taking charge of different roles with various responsibilities, so this may cause the limitation in capabilities of accessing, perceiving, analyzing, and evaluating that academic knowledge [11] of

remote learners. For that reason, PBL was applied with the hope that learners will have more learning environments to get involved in, to self-organize, self-practice, and self-correct their mistakes [11] to improve their limitations and help learners improve their English-speaking skills.

PBL was founded at the beginning of the 20th century and based on the theory of learning by doing of John Dewey, which reflected the nature of constructivism of many famous scientists such as Perkins, (199)1; Piaget, (1969); Vygotsky, (1978). These specialists agreed that whenever learners love to construct their own knowledge, they definitely have communication environments and their constructed knowledge relies on their knowledge backgrounds. Applying PBL is a way of creating a learning environment that enables learners to identify their own difficulties and challenges within the learning process [12–17]. PBL enables learners to develop their autonomy because they have to actively join the planned projects and take responsibility for their learning [18]. Furthermore, PBL helps learners develop various useful skills such as collaboration, social contact, and teamwork activities. It means that learners can enhance their collaborative relationship among group members and the cooperation among learners, instructors, and other members in the learning community [19] owing to applying PBL. Apparently, the final product of PBL enables learners to be more confident and independent [20], and this leads to positive attitudes of learners in their learning process [20]. Learners are more motivated and interested when the project is applied derived from learners' duties, interests and practical tasks [21]. In the language learning aspect, PBL helps create an opportunity for foreign language learners to integrate four language skills harmonized and naturally [22]. It enables learners to develop their intellectual and social knowledge, which makes learners more energetic and active in knowledge access. This leads to autonomous learning ability instead of depending on their instructors [23]. It also supports learners in terms of communicative development, problem-solving, learning-centered [24], and enhancing listening and speaking skills in language learning as well [24]. PBL enables learners to resolve complex, open-ended design problems, so teachers need not spend much time dedicating to every learner solving their own problems [25]. It means that learners play important and center roles in dealing with challenges encountered. This is appropriate for remote learners' characteristics, so applying PBL in teaching English speaking skills seems reasonable. However, to apply the PBL method effectively, the following crucial factors considered such as curriculum issues, time frame, and materials, real-world connection[16], instructors' support and enthusiasm [26] (instructors should not be enthusiastic and supportive because these may cause barriers to the learners [26]), as well as learners' challenges in "struggling with finding IT tools and authentic magazine resources, writing in magazine conventions, and collaborating with peers [26]. Besides, ten basic stages of conducting PBL need to be concerned: (1) project theme, (2) final outcome, (3) project structure, (4) & (5) demands of information gathering, (6) & (7) compile and analyze information, (8) language demands of the final activity, (9) & (10) presenting & evaluating the final product [16].

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Method

A mixed research method was applied in this study. For quantitative research, a survey questionnaire was sent to fifty remote learners participating in English-speaking courses (level 1). The survey questionnaire was designed to collect data on learners' English background and their difficulties in learning speaking skills in a remote setting, the efficiency of PBL applied in teaching speaking skills online, and learners' perspectives towards this method applied. Apparently, these collected data were described and analyzed to seek practical research findings. For the qualitative research, a semi-interview structure was conducted on six remote learners, randomly selected from 50 research participants to deeply understand whether PBL enables learners to enhance their speaking skills and whether the remote learners have positive or negative perceptions towards the project conducted. The collected data were categorized and evaluated to draw out authentic and reliable results.

3.2 Research Participants

Fifty participants were from two online English-speaking classes (level 1) at HCMCOU. All of them are English majors and aim to get a bachelor's degree for diverse purposes. Most of them are from 22 to 45 years-old and come from different parts of Vietnam. To attain an English bachelor's degree, these remote learners must complete 6 levels of speaking skills within two years. In this speaking course – level 1, they must complete four units (from unit 1 to unit 4) in the book “Q skill for success – Listening & Speaking 3”. Learning materials mainly focus on the recorded lectures on LMS of HCMCOU, and learners need to complete all the tasks distributed in each definite period. Also, learners have chances to take part in three eye-to-eye meetings with their instructors and peers through video conferences, but the time for each meeting is too short (just 1,5 h per meeting). It means that learners have insufficient environments to contact their partners to practice speaking skills, so a project is suggested to help learners have more communicative environments and practice their speaking skills.

3.3 Designing a Project to Teach English Speaking Skills Online

A project was designed and uploaded on LMS Discussion Board of HCMCOU. The project contained four discussion topics relevant to four units studied within this speaking course. The details of this project were expressed as follows:

- 1) Project theme: Discussion Board (4 discussions related to 4 sub-themes of Sociology, Nutritional Science, Psychology, and Marketing)
- 2) Outcome (final products): 4 video clips recorded
- 3) Time limit for each discussion: within two weeks
- 4) Project structures: conduct three main phases in each sub-theme:
 - Phase 1: make a script of answers for the given questions in the Discussion Board (typing the answers)

- Phase 2: record a video clip of the answers (based on the script created by learners)
- Phase 3: Upload both the script and video clip recorded to this discussion board to get further discussion from peers

5) Demands of information gathering include the following small steps:

- Step 1- Learners use their own language to answer three critical questions raised in each Discussion topic by typing their script of answers.
- Step 2- Learners read their scripts of answers many times until they are fluent in their speaking time and can memorize the main points that need to represent
- Step 3- Learners practice speaking naturally all the answers written in scripts. In the process of speaking, try to pay attention to verbal language expression and body language performance.
- Step 4 –Learners often watch their recorded video clips and self-correct the subskills of speaking skills such as pronunciation, word stress, intonation, and body language performance.
- Step 5- Upload their scripts and video clips on the LMS (in the Discussion Board part) for other peer to watch and giving comments, as well as for instructor giving marks and suggesting for learners’ correction and improvement.

- 6) Compile and analyze information: learners analyze parts of questions and then take note of the key points of their answers in each discussion to assure they have meaningful scripts and interesting video clips
- 7) Language demands of the final activity: in English
- 8) Presenting the final product: Uploading their scripts and video clips on the LMS
- 9) Evaluating the final product: based on the clear criteria Marking scheme

4 Findings and Discussions

4.1 Quantitative Data Collection

As seen in Table 1, fifty remote learners participating in this research and the number of females is higher than males (8%).

Table 2 demonstrates that almost all remote learners are from 25 to over 45 (90%). Only 5 learners at the age of 18 to 24. This shows that the remote learners are adults and at the age of working, so they may take different responsibilities and may be disadvantageous in learning English online as many previous experts presented.

Table 1. Gender

Gender	Number of participants	Percent (%)
Males	23	46
Females	27	54

Table 2. Age

Age	Number of participants	Percent (%)
18–24	5	10
25–34	35	70
35–45	8	16
Over 45	2	4
Total	50	100

Table 3. English speaking level

Age	Number of participants	Percent (%)
A 1	8	16
A 2	15	30
B 1	20	40
B 2	6	12
C1	1	2

Table 4. Challenges encountered in learning English speaking skills online

Challenges	No of learners	%
Lack of learning environments	45	90
No face- to-face communication with the instructor and peers	50	100
Less eye -to-eye contact with the instructor and peers	45	90
Insufficient conditions to practice speaking skills	43	86
Not good at representing speakers' thoughts and ideas	39	78
Problems with listening comprehension, limited vocabulary and grammar structures, inaccurate pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation	46	92

In Table 3, remote learners were asked to self-evaluate their English-speaking ability when starting the online speaking class learning course, 40% of them was in level B1 while 30% of them were in level A2, and 16% belonged to A1. Only 14% of them were in B2 & C1 and all of them expected to enhance their English skills at higher levels, thus, they join these online classes.

As observed in Table 4, the challenges encountered by learners in the process of learning English speaking skills online were presented. 92% of participants revealed that they had problems with listening comprehension, inadequate vocabulary, limited grammar structures, wrong pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation. They could not represent their

Table 5. Effectiveness of applying PBL method (1 - Totally Agree (%); 2- Quite Agree (%); 3- Agree (%); 4- Quite Disagree (%); 5- Disagree (%))

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
A project designed enables learners to:					
have more learning environments	60	0	40	0	0
have good awareness of student-driven and teacher-facilitated	64		34	2	0
improve their autonomy (due to trying to complete the project as required)	50	0	50	0	0
have opportunities to connect, discuss and learn from their peers through activities of reading scripts of video clip, watching video clips, giving comments, and correcting mistakes of language expression and performance	40	0	50	10	0
enhance their social communication and interaction	40	8	40	8	4
connect between knowing and doing	44	6	44	4	2
apply their knowledge to solve the problems encountered and attain their goals as expected	50	8	40	4	0
be more confident and independent and this leads to positive attitudes of learners in their learning process after creating their own products (recording video clips)	50	0	50	0	0
develop self-organized learning environments. It means that learners can self-decide, self-explore their learning journey, self-perceive diverse information sources, and self-engage in their learning activities	46	8	44	0	2
integrate four skills of language learning. It means that learners can enhance their listening ability, vocabulary, grammar structures, pronunciation, and intonation	50	6	40	0	4

thought or ideas in a professional way (78%). They have these barriers due to the challenges of learning English speaking skills in remote settings including lacking conditions to practice speaking skills (86%); less eye-to-eye contact with the instructor and peers (90%); no face-to-face communication with the instructor and peers (100%); inadequate learning environments (90%). These statistics demonstrate that remote learners had to face a diversity of barriers of online learning and English-speaking characteristics, as reviewed in the literature part.

Table 5 illustrates remote learners' agreements on the effectiveness of the applied project. 100% of participants believed that a project designed enables learners to have more learning environments and improve their autonomy (due to trying to complete the project as required) while 98% admitted that they have a good awareness of student-driven and teacher-facilitated [27] (learners-centered). It means that remote learners can study autonomously, so creating a learning environment for learners' self-practice is necessary [12, 13, 16, 17]. Additionally, a project designed to help learners have chances to connect, discuss, and learn from their peers [24] through activities of reading scripts of video clips, watching video clips, giving comments, and correcting mistakes in language expression and performance (90% agree but 10% quite disagree). Whereas 88% of participants agreed that the designed project enabled them to connect between knowing

Table 6. Perceptions of participants towards PBL applied (1-Very satisfied; 2-Quite satisfied; 3-Satisfied; 4- Less satisfied; 5- Not satisfied)

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
Questions raised in the project were critical and appropriate with learning program and learners' English levels	60	0	40	0	0
Time for completing each discussion topic in the project was appropriate	64	0	34	2	0
After completing the project, remote learned could improve vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, intonation, word stress, rhythm, listening skill, ways of representing their thoughts...)	50	0	50	0	0
Remote learners had more habit of speaking and more confidence in English speaking fluency thanks to steps of writing scripts, selecting ideas, vocabulary, and grammar structures	40	0	50	10	0
Practice speaking repeatedly before recording video clips helped remote learners adjust their pronunciation, word stress, intonation, rhythm...and these improve their natural speaking skills	40	8	40	8	4
Learners watched their video clips again, so they had more opportunities to self-correct their mistakes	44	6	44	4	2
Participated in the designed project in Discussion Board learners had chance to learn, draw out experience and improve their English-speaking skills	50	6	40	4	0
With clear marking criteria presented, and speedy giving mark and reflections, learners were more motivated in completing four discussion topics of the project and improved their English-speaking skills	50	0	50	0	0

and doing (94%) [28], and this made learners apply their knowledge to solve the problems encountered [25] and achieve their goals as expected (98% expressed their agreement). 100% of remote learners were more confident and independent when applying PBL [20], and this made them have positive attitudes in their learning process after creating their own products (recording video clips). Besides, 98% of participants agree that the designed project enabled them to develop self-organized learning environments [11]. It means that learners can self-decide, self-explore their learning journey, self-perceive diverse information sources, and self-engage in their learning activities. Eventually, 96% of participants recognized the designed project enabled learners to integrate four skills of language learning. It means that learners can enhance their listening ability, vocabulary, grammar structures, pronunciation, and intonation thanks to the activities required in that project.

As seen in Table 6, all participants revealed their positive perceptions towards PBL through three levels of satisfaction (very satisfied, quite satisfied, and satisfied). 98% of learners were satisfied with the duration of conducting the project and the critical questions raised in each discussion topic of the project, which was completely appropriate to learners' English levels and learning program. All of the participants (100%) were satisfied with the project applied because they could enhance their English-speaking sub-skills like vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, intonation, word stress, rhythm, listening

skill, and ways of representing their thoughts...). 90% of participants were pleased with their English-speaking confidence and having more habit of speaking thanks to various steps of writing scripts, selecting ideas, considering vocabulary and grammar structures used. Also, due to practicing speaking many times before recording video clips, learners' pronunciation, word stress, intonation, and rhythm were improved, and eventually, they could speak English naturally (96%). Besides, 94% of learners were satisfied with the activities of watching their recorded video clips again. Discussing with their friends, receiving feedback and comments from peers and instructors' evaluation with a clear marking scheme enabled learners self-correct their mistakes, drawing out experience and improve their English-speaking skills (100%). Overall, remote learners have positive perceptions on the PBL method applied because this designed project enables learners to enhance their English-speaking skills [20].

4.2 Qualitative Data Collection

Six remote learners were selected to interview in depth. All of them were asked about the challenges encountered in the online speaking course, the project content, duration, steps, and ways of conducting a project, as well as learners' perceptions and experiences while and after completing this project. Despite the fact that six interviewees responded in differently, in general, the responses were not out of the insufficient communicative and interactive environment (fewer video conferences, no face-to-face class), lack of environments for practicing speaking skills, and social contact with instructors and classmates, inadequate ideas, language competence and other matter of speaking skills (listening ability, academic vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, intonation, word stress, rhythm language function) [4, 5]. When asked about the project conducted, six of them highly appreciated its appropriateness for diverse reasons. Firstly, project content was interesting when all questions raised in the four discussion topics of the projects were critical, meaningful, and connected to the learning program. These helped learners sharpen their minds with critical thinking by seeking ideas, reasons, and examples to support their viewpoints. Secondly, conducting each step of the discussion board enables learners to enhance their English speaking skills. For instance, to write the scripts of the answers to the critical questions in the projects, learners had to search for materials to generate ideas. These helped learners take in more unfamiliar words and grammar structures. After finishing writing the script, learners read their scripts many times to grasp the main ideas and get familiar with the pronunciation of the unfamiliar words, word stress, grammar structures, intonation, and rhythm in order for they could speak naturally and fluently when recording video clips. After the video clips were recorded, learners watched their clips again and had self-correction or re-recording. These helped to improve learners' verbal language expression and non-verbal language performance. Thirdly, the duration of the project was reasonable. Learners took time to record video clips, but it deserved for them to do that because they could improve their English-speaking skills after four video clips were recorded. Fourthly, feedback from peers and instructor' assessments enabled learners to draw out experience and personal adjustments for their speaking skill development [28].

Similarly, six interviewees revealed their positive perceptions and cheerful attitude toward the project conducted. All of them admitted that their English-speaking skills

had been enhanced after meeting all requirements of the projects, and they hoped to have such projects in the next stages of learning speaking skills online. They also added that the project in this Discussion board was more useful and practical than other parts of assignments on LMS because they were more motivated to satisfy the project's demands, and these could develop their self-organization and autonomy in their online learning process [11].

5 Conclusion

Results illustrate that remote learners have various difficulties in learning English speaking skills online, including a lack of vocabulary, listening comprehension, grammar structures, and insufficient environments for practicing speaking, communicating, and interacting with their peers and instructors. Also, they have problems with inaccurate pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, and the challenge of representing their thoughts and ideas. Besides, PBL is admitted as an effective method that enables remote learners to enhance their English-speaking skills when it helps to create more environments for learners to self-practice and achieve their goals as expected. For those reasons, most of the learners revealed their positive attitude towards the project applied and hope to have more projects designed in the next stages of learning speaking skills online.

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Authors' Contributions. Research findings may contribute more to improving English teaching methods in a remote setting, developing learning materials, and doing research for the development of the Faculty of foreign languages and Online training center.

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