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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Developing Business English Learners' Communication Skills through Project-Based Learning Method**

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**| ABSTRACT**

Teaching English for specific purposes is a language teaching approach that targets students' needs. Its main objective is to provide learners with defined goals and language elements they need to function as professionals and communicate effectively in their fields of study, such as business, tourism, law, engineering, medicine, and aviation. This needs ESP teachers to use different teaching methods that encourage learners to practice the language in different authentic situations. Project-based learning, based on the review of the literature, is one of the student-centered learning methods that helps business English learners develop their communication skills. The main purpose of the present study is to explore business English students' perceptions and opinions about PBL in developing their communication skills. Eight business English participants conducted a project activity outside the classroom. The semi-structured interview was used to explore their perceptions and views about the impact of PBL on their communication skills. The findings indicate that PBL encourages business English learners to communicate in English. Therefore, it is recommended that ESP teachers should adopt PBL in their teaching practices to help learners communicate effectively in their field of study.

**| KEYWORDS**

*Teaching English for specific purposes, project-based learning, communication skills, and business English.*

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### **1. Introduction**

In today's globalization age, the interdependence of nations and countries creates a need for an international language, and no language qualifies for this better than English. The status of English on the international level is a significant factor that has contributed to increasing the importance of English language teaching in Morocco. There are several reasons why people learn English. It can be personal. For example, a learner of English wants to travel abroad for work, education, or to develop his communicative competence in his study or workplace (Elliot & Thrash, 2001). Teaching English for specific purposes is one of the language teaching approaches that equip learners with the skills they need to effectively communicate in their field of study and function as professionals. This needs educators to rely on different teaching methods that encourage learners' interaction in the target language. Project-based learning, based on the review of the literature, is one of the student-centered learning methods that helps learners develop their communication and gain different skills and knowledge through an inquiry process that is created around authentic questions and carefully designed tasks (Chafi et al., 2016). The main purpose of the present study is to explore business English students' perceptions and opinions about PBL in developing their communication skills. Therefore, the current research addresses the following research question :

- a) What are business English learners' perceptions and opinions about project-based learning in developing their communication skills?

## **2. Review**

### **2.1. Teaching English for Specific Purposes**

English for Specific Purposes is a branch of English teaching. It emphasizes practical language skills required in specialized fields such as business, law, medicine, engineering, and more. ESP has become increasingly important in the field of language teaching due to its tailored approach to learning, which focuses on meeting learners' specific needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). It is an approach to language teaching in which all the decisions about the type of the content, teaching methods and materials are based on students' needs. It aims to teach language that is relevant to specific needs, such as a profession and academic discipline. The main purpose of ESP is to help learners communicate effectively in their field of study or workplace (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). According to Dudley-Evans & St John (1998), ESP is an approach to language teaching which is guided by learners' needs, focusing on the kind of language and skills needed in specific situations. It involves designing courses that cater to these needs, often involving authentic materials and real-world tasks, such as problems to solve or projects to conduct in real environment. Here are some key reasons why ESP is essential:

#### **2.1.1. Focus on Learners' Needs**

Teaching English for specific purposes is very important because it directly targets the needs of the ESP learners, whether they are for academic or professional purposes. By focusing on these needs, ESP helps learners acquire the suitable vocabulary, skills, and communication strategies they need in their specific fields (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

#### **2.1.2. Practical and Relevant Learning**

Teaching English for specific purposes courses are designed to guarantee that learners can use English effectively in real-world contexts. This approach helps students or professionals implement what they learn in their chosen field of interest, making the learning process more motivating and collaborative. According to Dudley-Evans & St John (1998), ESP ensures that learners acquire the required knowledge and skills that can meet their needs, making their learning experience relevant and practical.

#### **2.1.3. Improved Career Prospects**

Excellence in English for specific purposes, such as business, law, tourism, banking, aviation, or medicine. is very important for professional success. ESP approach helps learners open up job opportunities by providing them with the language skills they need to communicate effectively in their field of study (Jordan, 1997).

#### **2.1.4. Support for Academic Success**

Teaching English for specific purposes is important for learners who are pursuing higher education. To explain, courses like English for Academic Purposes (EAP) focus on academic language skills, such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking, guaranteeing that students can succeed in their studies by using the language of academia. Hyland (2006) focuses attention on the importance of EAP by stating that academic English needs specific knowledge and skills for understanding and writing academic texts, engaging in discussions, and conducting research, all of which are provided by ESP programs.

#### **2.1.5. Customization of Learning Materials**

Teaching English for specific purposes is about the creation of specialized materials that ESP learners need in their field of study. This includes authentic materials, such as textbooks, articles, videos, magazines, songs, and documentaries, making learning effective. These learning materials should be related to students' field of study so that learners' engagement and memory of language knowledge can be highly enhanced (Robinson, 1991).

#### **2.1.6. Effective Communication in Multilingual Work Environments**

Teaching English for specific purposes has become crucial for effective communication in different professional situations. It supports learners overcoming cultural and professional communication barriers, which is important for international business. This is supported by Paltridge & Starfield (2013), who argue that ESP plays a significant role in fostering communication across professional contexts, especially in multinational organizations where English is a commonly used language.

## 2.2. Key Features of ESP

Teaching English for specific purposes has different characteristics, among which we find needs analysis, specialized content, and learner-centered. That is, understanding the specific language skills required by the learner in their professional or academic context is very important because it gives teachers an idea about what kind of language and skills students need. Besides, this process helps in designing suitable teaching materials and activities. In addition, ESP courses focus on subject-specific language, such as medical English for healthcare professionals or business English for business contexts. The textbook and lessons are also designed based on learners' needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

## 2.3. Categories of ESP

Teaching English for specific purposes consists of three main categories; English for occupational purposes focuses on the language required in specific professional environments. For example, English for business, tourism, banking, aviation, and medicine purposes; English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is aimed at students who are preparing for academic study. It focuses on developing students' academic language skills, and English for Specific Skills includes targeted skills training, such as academic writing, public speaking, or email communication in a business context (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013).

## 2.4. Examples of contexts of ESP

Teaching English for specific purposes is used in different contexts. For example, English for Medical Purposes focuses on the language health service professionals use. Business English focuses on the language needed in business contexts, such as commerce, international trade, banking, and insurance. Legal English is about specific courses designed to teach law students the language of legal texts, contracts, and courtroom discussions (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

## 2.5. Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning appeared as a revolutionary learning approach to the traditional teaching methods that took place on a large scale in schools in the USA (Norman & Schmidt, 1992). In medical education, students are asked to work on a case study, such as a patient who shows specific symptoms. They are asked to find a causal mechanism that led to the appearance of the symptoms. Project-based learning is an instructional method in which students learn by solving problems and reflecting on their experiences (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). Students can lead the learning process themselves to find solutions for a pragmatic case close to reality and far from teachers' dominance. They are expected to improve their communication, problem-solving skills, research skills, collaborative skills, and social skills (Brown, 2001). The significant goals of project-based learning are self-directed learning and enhancing students' interests because such intrinsic components are vital to the learning process. They encourage students' voluntary learning through their collaborative work toward finding a solution to a given project problem (Brown, 2001). In language learning, the use of project-based learning as an instructional learning method to develop language learning started in the mid-1970s but became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first educationalist to discuss project-based learning as a student-centered learning method in language learning was Kilpatrick in 1918 (Mousa, 2014). He was interested in the cognitive development of students in project work. He considered implementing project-based learning only appropriate for native speakers of a particular language (Byrne, 1992). Mousa (2014) considered the classroom a democratic place where both students and teachers participate in the learning process and share decision-making. This democratic idea means that learners are given the same opportunity to participate in the learning process and make decisions. Consequently, students become responsible for their learning process and rely on themselves to reach the desired learning goals (Chafi et al., 2014).

## 2.6. Project-Based Learning Definition

Project-based learning is defined as a student-centered method where educators help and guide learners through the process of solving problems. This includes finding a problem, developing a strategy or plan to solve it, implementing the plan, reflecting on the plan while completing the project, gathering and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, and reporting findings (Choo, 2007). This innovative learning method makes students active in their learning through a structured process aimed at solving a problem. It gives students a great chance to apply their prior knowledge to solve real-life problems (Choo, 2007). Al-Balushi & Al-Aamri (2014) consider project-based learning an inquiry-based teaching method (IBT) that offers a chance for educational reform where learners are provided with a real learning environment that contains authentic problems within real-world practices. It reflects an inclusive learning context where students use different disciplinary concepts and experiences to find

answers to authentic problems. Moreover, project-based learning is recognized as a progressive, active-learning, and student-centered method that allows students to acquire content and skills over a long or medium period and resolve a real-world problem (Wurdinger et al., 2007). It is a student-centered learning method related to problem-based learning (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). To explain, students are collaboratively encouraged to perform a shared goal because project work is a collaborative form of learning in which all learners participate in the shared outcome (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). The freedom and challenge students have to deal with to find answers to the problems that arise in putting together a plan to construct their projects drive them to be highly involved in tackling such problems (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). According to Kwon et al. (2014) and Patton (2012), projects have five critical characteristics: centrality, driving questions, constructive investigations, autonomy, and realism. Such characteristics make project-based learning a modern learning method in which learners rely on themselves to construct knowledge (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). What is most important is that learners get motivated for interaction in the target language when they conduct a project because they play an essential and active role in constructing the entire planning process for their project, whereas the teacher is just a help provider (Katz, 1994).

### **2.7. Project-Based Learning and 21-st Century Skills Development**

Today's society requires many skills for its development. They are referred to as "21st-century skills." This term refers to a broad set of knowledge and skills that are thought by teachers, employers, and others to be critically significant to success in today's world. In other words, the notion of "21st Century Skills" simply refers to the knowledge and abilities needed to succeed in the globalized, technologically advanced, collaborative, and creatively advanced world of the 21st century. This kind of world requires skilled human resources who can quickly adjust to changes (Central Board of Secondary Education, 2020). Among these skills, we find: higher-order thinking skills, metacognitive skills, autonomous learning skills, and self-determination skills (Ravitz et al., 2012).

#### **2.7.1. Higher-Order Thinking**

Higher-order thinking skills are among the soft skills that are created and flourished in a project activity (Anwer, 2019). In a project task, learners use inquisitive and innovative thinking skills. The combination of these two skills allows for the best solutions to be created (Kwietniewski, 2017). Critical, rational, reflective, metacognitive, and creative thinking are examples of higher-order thinking. When people run across unfamiliar issues, doubts, concerns, or quandaries, they become active. Successful applications of the abilities lead to justifications, judgments, performances, and outcomes that are valid in the context of the knowledge and experience at hand and that encourage the development of these and other intellectual skills. Thus, teaching higher-order thinking equips students with practical life skills while also enhancing their content knowledge, lower-order thinking, and self-esteem. Higher-order thinking abilities are based on lower-order abilities like discriminations, straightforward application and analysis, and cognitive methods, and they are linked to prior knowledge of subject matter content (King et al., 2018).

#### **2.7.2. Collaboration and Communication Skills**

As an alternative to the traditional methods of teaching and learning a foreign language, which placed a greater emphasis on grammatical explanation, memorization, and repetition, a new trend has emerged that is characterized by the following: (1) Learning is individualized; (2) learning is a natural part of growth and maturation; and (3) teachers who no longer dominate the classroom play a variety of roles determined by the needs of the students in learning a language (Kusnierek, 2015). In line with this idea, project-based learning is a method of instruction that includes more than one student. The patterns of interaction in such a learning method are pair work and group work, regardless of the number of learners participating. According to Brown (2001), group work is defined as a generic term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and communication in the target language. Richards et al. (1985) define group work as a learning activity that involves a small group of learners working together. It is a central element in project-based learning. First of all, it modifies the dynamics of classroom interactions and raises students' speaking periods (Harmer, 2014). Changing the way students interact in the classroom is crucial because it keeps them from becoming disinterested when working alone. Therefore, project-based learning is one of the learning methods that encourages collaboration and communication. It gives learners the opportunity to work in groups to solve problems in an authentic context. It fosters pair work and group work so that students can develop their communication competence.

#### **2.7.3. Autonomous Learning**

Autonomous learning is about any educational procedure, approach, or philosophy that enables a student to gain knowledge through relying on their personal efforts and develop critical thinking skills (Kwietniewski, 2017). In other words, learners

must first be able to recognize and analyze their own requirements so that they can choose and implement their own learning techniques or styles in a way that promotes effective learning (All-Ahmed & Zebari, 2020). Autonomous learning refers to the process by which students rely on themselves in the learning process. Learners can decide what to learn and how to learn (Casper et al., 2020). To explain, learners can select interesting tasks to learn and appropriate learning methods to complete those tasks. However, the teacher's role is not neglected. He is always there for students, acting as a guide and help provider.

#### **2.7.4. Self-Determination**

Self-determination is about the choices people make depending on their strengths and tendencies. It is controlled and guided by inner and outer factors that drive people's choices. To clarify, self-determination looks at the internal and external factors that increase or decrease learners' motivation. Therefore, motivation plays a crucial role in self-determination. Highly motivated learners can have high self-esteem, which makes them believe in their ability to pursue their choices without fear (Anjomshoa & Sadighi, 2015). However, those who are not motivated have low self-esteem. This negatively affects their self-reliance and makes them unable to follow their choices (Sibold, 2016).

#### **2.7.5. Metacognition**

When students develop higher-order thinking, they critically evaluate their learning processes (Bhushan, 2014). In other words, when learners are allowed to take the lead in their own educational experiences, they create their learning strategies, use the appropriate learning materials, and choose the appropriate learning activities to help them reach the desired goal (Wilson, 2014). However, students should be able to recognize their strengths and weaknesses to develop metacognitive skills (Maddux, 2002). When they know their strengths and weaknesses, they can better monitor their learning strategies according to their capabilities. This can help them know how they learn (Thomas & Thorn, 2009). Self-determination is very important to project-based method because it includes choice, motivation, and self-reliance (Kwietniewski, 2017).

In summary, ESP is crucial because it provides learners with the skills they need to effectively communicate in their field of study, whether for academic, professional, or personal purposes. The importance of ESP lies in its ability to make language learning more relevant, effective, and tailored to the unique needs of individuals, helping them develop their communicative competence in their specialized areas. This requires teachers to rely on different teaching methods in which students are the center of the learning process, such as project-based learning, because, based on the review of the literature, the latter motivates learners to communicate with each other using the target language.

### **3. Methodology**

Research methodology is about the techniques and steps a researcher follows to identify, select, process, and analyze data about a certain problem (Kothari, 1990). The present study is based on a qualitative research method to find the extent to which project-based learning improves students' communication skills.

#### **3.1. Participants**

A class of sixteen students participated in the research. They studied business English for three hours a week in a private school called ' Al Hafid' in Sidi Slimane. The institution is accredited by the ministry of education under the license number.....The courses were delivered in the evening from 6 to 7:30 every Thursday and Saturday. The participants' level in English was good because they had studied it before. Their age varies from 19 to 28 years old.

#### **3.2. Data Collection Tool**

The participants were exposed to some semi-structured interview questions to answer. The questions were about the participants' feelings and views about project-based learning in developing their communication skills. The reason behind using this research tool is to give the participants the opportunity to provide lengthy and in-depth answers from which the researcher can extrapolate large amounts of data.

#### **3.3. Data Collection Procedure**

The business English coursebook 'Market Leader,' the third edition by David Cotton, David Falvey, and Simon Kent, was used by the researcher to teach students business English. After finishing unit one, which is about 'Brands,' participants were introduced to the project-based learning. They knew what a project was, the types of activities in project-based learning, and their roles in this activity. After that, eight participants from the class were selected to conduct a project outside the classroom in one week. They were asked to collect data about two companies in the city: 'Chaabi Bank' and 'Bank of Africa' through interviewing company agents and customers to identify which one introduced the best services. The participants were advised to interact with each other in English as much as they could while conducting the project activity so that they could develop their communication skills. After finishing the project activity, they presented their final product in the classroom. Then, they were exposed to answer some semi-structured interview questions to obtain detailed information about the impact of project-based learning on students' communication skills.

#### **4. Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

The sample consists of eight interviewees. They were interviewed at Al-Hafid School. The interview questions sought the respondents' views and feelings about the project-based learning experience in developing their communication skills. The researcher and the participants agreed that participants' real names would not be included in the research. The following questions were covered in the semi-structured interview:

- a) What do you think about the project activity ?
- b) How did working on a project-based learning task help you improve your communication ?
- c) Do you feel that your ability to practice the language functions in English has improved through project-based learning ? Why or why not ?
- d) How confident are you in your communication skills after participating in a project-based learning experience ?
- e) How did PBL help you develop communication skills when working with your team members ?
- f) How did the project-based learning experience make you realize the importance of clear communication in professional settings ?

##### **4.1. Findings and Analysis**

As has been mentioned above, the semi-structured interview consists of six open-ended questions. All of them range around business English students' perceptions and views about the impact of project-based on their communication skills. Each question's findings are described below.

- a) What do you think about the project activity ?

None of the respondents denied the importance of project-based learning in motivating them to practice communication. All of them expressed feelings of happiness and excitement about the project activity because it helped them reinforce the knowledge they received in the class and communicate with each other in English outside the classroom.

- b) How did working on a project-based learning task help you improve your communication ?

Driss clarifies that "the project activity revived my inner energy for speaking." Likewise, Khadija says that "the project activity was a motivating experience for me because we could communicate with each other even though we made mistakes." This is further confirmed by Rachid, Ahmed, Atif, Nada, and Aya, who claimed that through the project activity, they could communicate in English, especially while organizing the data they collected. Concerning Rachida, she answers that "the project activity was a good experience for me because I had the chance to practice English outside the classroom." The same is expressed by Latifa, who explains that "the project activity made me happily participate in the learning process because I was allowed to solve problems with my classmates outside the school using the English language, which was a good experience."

- c) Do you feel that your ability to practice the language functions in English has improved through project-based learning ? Why or why not ?

All the interviewees declared that the project activity gave them a great opportunity to express themselves in English and practice the language functions. They could practice the language functions, such as describing, explaining, discussing, informing,

clarifying, persuading, critiquing, arguing, questioning, requesting, agreeing, and disagreeing. Based on their answers, this is due to the fact that when working in groups, students could interact with each other, which could provide the space for practicing the language functions.

d) How confident are you in your communication skills after participating in a project-based learning experience ?

The primary purpose of this question was to know whether project-based learning raised participants' confidence while communicating in English in front of others. All the interviewees (N = 8, 100%) stated that the project activity raised their self-esteem and made them believe in their inner abilities on which they had to rely to confidently and effectively communicate in English publicly. In this respect, Rachida states that "Before, I was getting nervous to express myself in English in front of my classmates, but now, I feel at ease and confident while communicating with my classmates in English. This is maybe because we did the activity outside the classroom."

e) How did PBL help you develop communication skills when working with your team members ?

Based on the participants' answers, the project is one of the activities that encourages learners to work in groups, which gives them the chance to practice English with each other without being controlled by their teacher. In this vein, Rachid, Ahmed, Atif, Nada, and Aya confirm that "working in groups motivates students to interact in English, especially when they take their learning seriously." They add that "through working in groups, we can help each other because when a student makes a mistake in terms of grammar or pronunciation, the others interfere and correct his mistake."

f) How did the project-based learning experience make you realize the importance of clear communication in professional settings ?

None of the respondents denied the importance of project-based learning in helping them implement what they learned in real situations and develop their communication skills in their field of study. All of them (N = 8, 100%) agreed that the project-based learning helped them call back the knowledge they received in the classroom, such as business content, vocabulary, and grammar, and use it to solve the project problem. Rachid explains that "the project helped me use the knowledge I received about the 'Brands' unit in the 'Market Leader' course book to solve a problem outside the classroom." He adds that "This kind of activity could enlarge his knowledge about the content they study, develop his vocabulary, and practice the language skills, especially communication.

English for specific purposes is a language teaching approach that focuses on teaching language relevant to a particular discipline, profession, or context. It emphasizes real-world implementation of English, encouraging learners to improve practical communication skills related to their field of study. This requires teachers to adopt different teaching methods that encourage learners to apply what they learn in different authentic learning situations and develop their communication skills. Project-based learning is among the teaching methods that, based on the findings of the current study, increase students' interaction and develop their communication skills in their field of study. In other words, project-based learning promotes students' communication skills because it allows them to be responsible for their learning and engages them in investigating real-world problems using the target language. To explain, project-based learning can stimulate students' interaction and develop their communicative competence in the field they are interested in because they conduct the activity outside the classroom without being controlled by their teacher; the freedom and challenge students have to deal with to find answers to the project problem drive them to be highly motivated to use the English language without feeling embarrassed when they make mistakes. Besides, a major advantage of project-based learning is its opportunity for scaffolding, which is considered the key enabler for improving communication. This is confirmed by the participants, who state that when they work in groups, they help each other when they face language or content problems. Therefore, project-based learning is one of the learning methods that fosters group work because the latter encourages learners to collaborate and help each other construct knowledge, and thus, all students can be involved in the learning process. Moreover, project-based learning is an inquiry-based learning method where business English learners are provided with a real learning environment that contains an authentic problem in which they implement the knowledge they receive in the classroom, such as business content, vocabulary, language functions, and grammar while conducting the project activity. This helps them develop their communication skills using the specialized language they need in the field of business English. Additionally, project-based learning is recognized as a progressive, active-learning, and student-centered method that motivates students to acquire knowledge and skills through collaboration using the English language. To clarify, learners are involved in constructing knowledge collaboratively and communicatively to perform a project problem because project-based learning is a learning method that encourages collaboration in which all learners are motivated to communicate and collaborate in the shared outcome. The findings of the present study are confirmed by different studies, such as Walter (2016), Zhang (2007), and Mario & Callum (2019). These

studies found that project-based learning allows students to be responsible for their learning and engages them in investigating real-world problems, which increases their interaction and communication skills.

To conclude, the integration of teaching English for specific purposes and project-based learning creates a dynamic and practical approach where ESP learners develop their communication skills. That is, by relying on real context applications, group work, and collaboration, students become more effective communicators who are prepared to excel in different professional settings. Therefore, it is recommended that ESP educators, especially those teaching business English, should adopt project-based learning in their teaching practices so that they can create an authentic learning environment where learners can effectively communicate in their field of study and function as professionals.

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