



## EXPLORING PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION IN TEACHING SPEAKING TO SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Lala Vyona Amalya<sup>1</sup>, Sidik Indra Nugraha<sup>2</sup>, Hilmansyah Saefullah<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang

E-mail: <sup>1</sup> [2110631060083@student.unsika.ac.id](mailto:2110631060083@student.unsika.ac.id), <sup>2</sup> [sidik.indranugraha@staff.unsika.ac.id](mailto:sidik.indranugraha@staff.unsika.ac.id),  
<sup>3</sup> [hilmansyah.saefullah@fkip.unsika.ac.id](mailto:hilmansyah.saefullah@fkip.unsika.ac.id)

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Corresponding Author: Lala Vyona Amalya

Email Corresponding :  
2110631060083@student.unsika.ac.id

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the application of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in developing speaking skills among secondary school students, focusing on both instructional implementation and the obstacles encountered. Conducted at a public junior high school in Karawang, Indonesia, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach, utilizing classroom observations and teacher interviews as primary data sources. The study analyzes the integration of five core PBL stages: problem identification, analytical discussion, independent inquiry, synthesis of findings, and reflective evaluation. Results indicate that the teacher successfully implemented each phase, fostering greater student participation and enhanced speaking confidence. Nonetheless, several impediments such as students' low motivation, limited command of English, and insufficient learning resources posed challenges to optimal learning outcomes. The study concludes that while PBL offers considerable potential to improve oral communication skills, its success is contingent upon thorough instructional planning and robust institutional support.

***Keywords:* Problem-Based Learning, Speaking, Language, Secondary School.**

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, language education has increasingly embraced communicative and learner-centered methodologies that prioritize active engagement and authentic language use. Among these innovative pedagogical strategies is Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which encourages students to collaborate in small groups to analyze real-world issues, exchange perspectives, and formulate solutions (Saleh et al., 2022). Initially developed within the realm of medical education, PBL has since gained traction across multiple academic fields due to its proven capacity to cultivate higher-order thinking, effective problem-solving, and interpersonal communication skills (Barrows, 2019; Evensen et al., 2018; Mann et al., 2021). A recent meta-analysis conducted by Guo et al.

(2024) affirms PBL's positive influence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, demonstrating improvements in learners' academic engagement, performance outcomes, and critical thinking competencies.

In the context of English language teaching, especially in teaching speaking skills, PBL offers significant potential. Speaking is not only one of the most important language skills but also one of the most challenging to teach and learn (Rezeki & Dalimunte, 2024; Purnomo et al., 2024; Fadilah et al., 2023). Unlike grammar or vocabulary, speaking requires immediate interaction, confidence, and fluency. PBL addresses this by providing learners with authentic communicative situations in which they must express their ideas, negotiate meaning, and reflect on language use in

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collaboration with peers (Prancisca, 2023; Camelia & Maknun, 2021; Novia Indriani & Mariani, 2019). Research suggests that PBL can increase learners' motivation and improve their oral proficiency by encouraging them to speak actively in solving contextual problems (Mutammimah & Padli, 2023; Jaya et al., 2025; Almulla, 2020).

Empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of PBL in enhancing speaking skills among learners (Umar & Ko, 2022; Mutanga, 2024; Miller et al., 2021). Sutrisna and Artini (2020) found that the students exhibited better speaking performance after engaging in PBL activities. Moreover, Setia and Ratmanida (2019) found that PBL facilitated students to be more active and confident when they were encouraged to solve real-life problems using English. Another study by Oktaviani et al. (2020) at SMPN 21 Kota Serang revealed that PBL not only increased students' speaking proficiency but also positively influenced their motivation and classroom engagement.

Given the importance of speaking skills in English language learning and the growing emphasis on active learning strategies like PBL, it is essential to explore how English teachers actually implement PBL in speaking instruction. It is equally important to examine the obstacles they encounter in the process. Such insights are vital for informing teacher training programs, curriculum development, and policy support to ensure that PBL can be used effectively to enhance students' speaking skills in secondary schools. The purpose of this research is to find out how an English teacher implements Problem-Based Learning in teaching speaking and what challenges the teacher faces when implementing PBL in teaching speaking at the secondary school.

**2. METHODS**

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to examine the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in teaching speaking to secondary school students and to uncover the challenges faced by the teacher

throughout the process. Data were gathered through classroom observations and interviews to ensure the depth and reliability of the findings (Kosslyn & Miller, 2017; Van Maanen, 2025; Kvale, 2021). The participant was an English teacher at a junior high school, with data collection instruments including an observation checklist and semi-structured interview protocol. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by the six-phase framework developed by Braun & Clarke (2019) and Braun & Clarke (2022): (1) immersing in the data, (2) generating preliminary codes, (3) identifying potential themes, (4) refining and reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) compiling the final report. This systematic approach allowed the researcher to extract nuanced insights into both the pedagogical application of PBL and the contextual obstacles encountered in its execution.

**3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION****A. The Implementation of Problem-Based Learning in Teaching Speaking at Junior High School**

The researcher observed the 8th grade class for two meetings to learn how the teacher at junior high school implemented PBL in teaching speaking. An observation checklist was used to monitor the teacher's application of PBL during the speaking lessons and to support the analysis process.

The researcher directly observed the PBL implementation in the classroom from June, 2nd 2025 to June, 3rd 2025. The topic presented in this lesson is about narrative text entitled *The Ugly Duckling*. Through these observations, the researcher gained insights into how PBL was applied in speaking lessons while students engaged in speaking practice.

As previously mentioned, the researcher conducted observation and found that the teacher applied Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in teaching speaking in accordance with the appropriate stages of the PBL approach, namely problem presentation, problem analysis and activation of prior knowledge, self-directed learning, synthesis and application of information, and reflection. The following

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sections provide a detailed description and discussion of each stage based on the classroom observation.

**1. Problem Presentation**

The lesson began with the teacher presenting a relatable and emotionally engaging problem inspired by the story *The Ugly Duckling*. By connecting the theme to students' real-life experiences, such as feelings of exclusion and transformation, the teacher effectively stimulated curiosity and emotional engagement.

To structure the discussion, the teacher provided prompting questions in English, such as "What kind of situations have you experienced that are similar to the duckling's?" and "Why do people sometimes feel left out?". This aligns with Hmelo-Silver et al. (2017) view that authentic, relevant problems help drive inquiry and give students a clear purpose for learning.

**2. Problem Analysis and Activation of Prior Knowledge**

Following the initial problem presentation, the teacher guided students into the analysis phase, where they began to unpack the scenario and connect it with their own prior knowledge and experiences. Students were divided into small groups, allowing them to collaborate in a more focused and low-pressure environment. Within these groups, students were asked to discuss what they already knew about the emotional themes of *The Ugly Duckling*, such as rejection, personal growth, and acceptance, and to brainstorm how these concepts applied to their own social and school life.

To structure the discussion, the teacher provided prompting questions in English, such as "What kind of situations have you experienced that are similar to the duckling's?" and "Why do people sometimes feel left out?". This practice supports Barrows (2019) theory that activating prior knowledge is essential in promoting learner autonomy and ownership of the learning process.

**3. Self-Directed Learning**

Students were given time and freedom to research vocabulary and narrative elements. They used textbook, previous classroom materials, dictionary, and peer discussion to gather the information needed to complete their speaking tasks. During this phase, the teacher acted as a facilitator, monitoring progress and offering guidance when needed. According to Ibrahim et al. (2022), this stage is central to PBL as it encourages students to explore, make decisions, and practice critical thinking, key aspects of developing communicative competence.

**4. Synthesis and Application of Information**

Learners applied the knowledge they had gathered through speaking activities such as group presentations. This task required students to organize their ideas, use new vocabulary, and communicate their understanding in English. The interactive nature of these activities created a dynamic learning environment in which students practiced real-world language use. Peer feedback, question-and-answer exchanges, and follow-up discussions further enriched the learning experience. This aligns with Dahliana et al. (2022) assertion that synthesis and application allow students to internalize content through active communication and meaning-making.

**5. Reflection**

The final stage of the lesson focused on reflection, a key component of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) cycle that encourages learners to assess their progress, identify areas for improvement, and internalize both content and language outcomes. After completing their speaking tasks, students were invited to reflect on their learning experiences, both individually and as a group.

The teacher facilitated this phase by asking open-ended questions in English, such as "What did you learn from the story?", "How did you feel when speaking in front of the class?", and "What challenges did you face during this activity?". Paludo and Montresor (2024) emphasize that reflection helps students consolidate learning, build metacognitive

awareness, and connect their classroom experiences to broader life contexts.

### **B. Challenges in Implementing Problem-Based Learning in Teaching Speaking**

Despite the effective application of PBL stages, several challenges emerged during the process, as reported in the interview with the English teacher.

Based on the interview data, one of the primary challenges reported by the teacher was low student motivation. The teacher emphasized that students in the school were often reluctant to participate actively in class activities, especially when it came to speaking tasks. The lack of intrinsic motivation significantly hindered the success of PBL, which relies on students' active involvement and initiative to solve real-life problems through communication and collaboration. The teacher stated:

*In my school, students are very difficult to engage in activities because their motivation is extremely low.*

This finding supports Hmelo-Silver's (2017) assertion that the success of Problem-Based Learning is closely tied to learner engagement, intrinsic motivation, and a readiness to take part in inquiry-driven tasks. PBL shifts the focus of instruction from teacher-directed learning to student-centered exploration, requiring learners to take initiative, think critically, and actively contribute to the learning process. However, when students exhibit low motivation, as observed in this study, these essential conditions for PBL effectiveness are compromised. Teachers reported that many students in the school showed minimal enthusiasm or interest in participating in PBL activities. This disengagement affected their willingness to collaborate, ask questions, or fully engage in group discussions, all of which are important aspects of PBL.

In addition to motivation, the teacher identified limited English proficiency as a significant barrier to implementing PBL in teaching speaking. Many students lacked a foundational grasp of vocabulary, sentence structure, and pronunciation, which hindered their ability to engage in the kinds of real-world communication tasks central to the PBL approach. Since PBL often involves discussing

complex scenarios, negotiating solutions, and presenting outcomes orally, insufficient language skills can result in frustration and withdrawal from the task.

This issue echoes the findings of Zainuddin et al. (2020), who noted that in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings, students' linguistic limitations can negatively impact their ability to participate meaningfully in PBL activities. When learners cannot articulate their ideas or comprehend peer input, the collaborative process is disrupted, and the intended communicative benefits of PBL may not materialize. In this study, the teacher confirmed that students frequently struggled to express even basic ideas, which constrained the depth and flow of classroom discussions.

Therefore, both low motivation and limited language competence emerged as interconnected obstacles to the effective implementation of PBL in speaking practice. These findings suggest that for PBL to thrive in junior high school English classrooms, especially in public schools with limited resources, additional scaffolding, language support, and motivational strategies are needed. Interventions such as vocabulary pre-teaching, peer modeling, the use of visual aids, and structured speaking frameworks could help bridge the gap between students' current abilities and the demands of PBL. As the teacher explained:

*The second challenge is their lack of English proficiency. So, in essence, the challenges and difficulties are quite similar, low motivation and insufficient language skills.*

This finding is closely related to Borg (2018) and Macrine & Fugate (2022) theory of teacher cognition, which explains that teachers make decisions not only based on what they know and believe but also on the real conditions in their classrooms. In other words, even if a teacher understands and supports new methods like Problem-Based Learning (PBL), it can still be difficult to use these methods if there are challenges in the classroom, such as students who are not ready to use English well or who are not motivated to learn.

At SMPN 1 Rengasdengklok, the teacher was open to using Problem-Based Learning (PBL), but explained that students' basic English skills, especially vocabulary,

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grammar, and speaking fluency were not strong enough. Because of this, it was hard for students to complete speaking tasks that required them to speak for longer periods and think critically. This supports Hayes (2019) idea that how teachers teach depends not just on their knowledge, but also on their students' abilities. When students have trouble understanding instructions or expressing ideas in English, teachers may choose to use more traditional teaching methods that are easier to control.

The study also found that limited materials and school facilities were another challenge in applying PBL. Although the school gives teachers the freedom to choose how they teach, they don't always have the resources they need, such as new textbooks, videos, project tools, or digital devices. Without these, it's hard to carry out student-centered learning like PBL effectively. This matches Hmelo-Silver's (2017) idea that for PBL to work well, schools also need to provide the right environment, one that supports exploration, teamwork, and access to learning tools. According to the teacher:

*Methods like PBL are rarely implemented due to students' low motivation and the limited availability of references or facilities in our school.*

This supports what Goh and Anne (2018) said that using Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in schools with limited resources can be difficult because of practical problems like not having enough learning materials, limited class time, and a lack of classroom support. Even if teachers are trained and support student-centered methods like PBL, these challenges can still make it hard to use the method effectively. In this study, the teacher wanted to apply PBL, but was often held back by real problems in the classroom, not because of a lack of knowledge or strict school rules.

Interestingly, the teacher did not see school policies or curriculum requirements as major problems. In fact, the teacher described the school environment at SMPN 1 Rengasdengklok as open and flexible, allowing teachers to choose their own teaching methods, including PBL. This shows that the school supports modern teaching approaches and gives teachers freedom in how they teach.

However, this freedom alone was not enough to make PBL work successfully.

According to the teacher, the biggest problems came from students, many were not motivated, had low English skills, and didn't get much support at home or from classmates. These are deeper issues that cannot be fixed just by giving teachers more flexibility. Even if the school doesn't stop teachers from using new methods, students still need to be ready and schools need to have enough resources to support these approaches.

This difference between school support in theory and what actually happens in class shows a common problem in education. Giving teachers more freedom is a good step, but it's not enough. Schools also need to invest in helping students and improving classroom tools. Without this support, teachers will continue to struggle to apply the best teaching methods in real life.

**4. CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study conclude that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) can be effectively implemented in teaching speaking skills to secondary school students. All stages of the PBL process were carried out successfully, and the teacher was able to create a student-centered learning environment that promoted active engagement in collaborative and meaningful speaking activities. PBL provided opportunities for students to express their ideas, reflect on moral values, and use English in relevant and purposeful contexts. However, the effectiveness of PBL is significantly influenced by contextual factors such as students' language proficiency, learning motivation, and access to instructional resources. In classrooms where students have limited vocabulary or lack confidence in speaking, the benefits of PBL may be diminished without additional support. Institutional support, including the availability of teaching materials and teacher training, also plays a crucial role in enhancing the success of PBL implementation.

Future research is recommended to involve a broader range of participants and diverse school contexts to ensure more representative findings. Further studies may also explore effective scaffolding strategies to

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support learners with limited language skills. Additionally, future research could examine the integration of digital tools to optimize PBL in language instruction, particularly in enhancing student engagement and oral communication skills.

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