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An Empirical Study on Project-based Teaching in College English Listening and Speaking Instruction Against the Background of Higher Education Internationalization

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Given the prevailing challenge of insufficient listening and speaking proficiency among non-English-major undergraduates, and informed by the international education context of the author's institution, this study explores how project-based learning improves students' practical English competence and other relevant dimensions. The results indicate that project-based teaching yields significant benefits for students' practical English proficiency, especially listening and speaking skills. This approach also effectively enhances English learning motivation and cultivates learners' teamwork, global mindset, cross-cultural communicative competence, and academic report-writing skills. Additionally, the findings highlight the necessity for teachers to reinforce management and targeted guidance on project design, group size control, and academic writing to maintain the long-term effects of this teaching method.

Keywords: higher education internationalization, project-based teaching, English listening and speaking skills, cross-cultural communication competence

Introduction

As a compulsory course for non-English major university students, College English plays an irreplaceable role in talent cultivation. Its teaching objective is to "cultivate students' practical English competence, enhance their cross-cultural communication awareness and competence, and enable students to use English appropriately and effectively in study, life, and future work, so as to meet the needs of national, social, institutional, and individual development" (National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, 2020, p. 5). Among the various application abilities of English skills, non-English major undergraduates exhibit relatively weak performance in English listening and speaking. Moreover, there exists a considerable disparity between their listening and speaking competence and the advanced objectives stipulated in the *College English Teaching Guide (2020 edition)*. Owing to constraints including limited class hours for College English courses, large class sizes, and disparities in students' proficiency levels, many College English instructors frequently reduce the time

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allocated to listening and speaking teaching to maintain the schedule of the integrated course. Hence, they have little opportunity to implement activities emphasizing oral output, such as listening skills training, extended topic discussions, debates, and group presentations. Consequently, students receive inadequate training in English listening and speaking. Furthermore, College English curriculum lacks dedicated oral English courses, and no oral assessment is incorporated into the final course evaluation. This renders oral English instruction a weak component of College English teaching at many universities. According to student feedback collected at the international program student forum hosted by the author's university, prominent challenges include limited English proficiency, weak spoken English skills, and difficulties engaging and communicating with international peers and foreign instructors. This suggests that numerous non-English majors, even those enrolled in internationalized programs, fail to achieve the foundational goal of "being able to express opinions and engage in communication about everyday topics or familiar social hot-button issues" (National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, 2020, p. 11). Nor can they satisfy national strategic requirements to "cultivate and retain a large pool of talents with global vision, international awareness, and cross-cultural communicative competence" (National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, 2020, p. 2).

At the same time, global international development trends, the mission of building a community with a shared future for mankind, and the growing number of candidates sitting for the College English Test-Band 4 (CET-4) and CET-6 spoken English tests all place higher demands on university students' English listening and speaking proficiency. Therefore, how to foster the listening and speaking proficiency of non-English majors amid the internationalization of higher education represents a practical issue requiring urgent resolution in the reform of College English teaching. However, "few domestic studies have investigated whether learners' listening and speaking proficiency has improved" (Zhao, Li, & Kang, 2014, p. 30). Therefore, how to implement project-based teaching to address the practical problem of students' insufficient English listening and speaking competence constitutes an important research topic in project-based College English teaching (H. X. Wang & W. Y. Wang, 2022, p. 9).

Project-based Teaching

In 1918, the American educator Kilpatrick first proposed the concept of "Project-based Learning" (PBL) in *The Project Method*, constructing the theoretical framework of project-based teaching. Project-based teaching is a methodology that advocates cooperative learning in context (Dooly & Masats, 2011). Its essence is to organize and carry out activities around a problem and ultimately form a product that solves the problem (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Through completing work projects, students acquire relevant knowledge and skills and develop related abilities. It can be observed that project-based teaching is highly compatible with the teaching objectives of College English course, as both seek to develop students' comprehensive English proficiency, autonomous learning capacity, research skills, and overall cultural literacy through learning practice. Project-based teaching has been adopted across various educational stages overseas for decades and has yielded substantial teaching outcomes (Beckett & Miller, 2006). By the 1980s and 1990s, this pedagogical model was widely implemented in basic education, vocational education, higher education and adult education, emerging as a key direction for educational reform worldwide.

Domestic and international research on project-based teaching mainly focuses on the theoretical foundations, teaching models, specific implementation processes and its effectiveness, resource design, and the role positioning of teachers in project-based teaching (Zhou & Hu, 2020). Among these, in terms of the specific

implementation process and its effectiveness, many scholars have confirmed the effectiveness of the PBL teaching model from different dimensions in different research contexts. For example, Malkova and Kiselyova (2014) found that this model can promote the development of learners' personal abilities, such as cultivating correct values and improving hands-on ability. Sultana and Zaki (2015) found that the PBL model can significantly improve university students' compulsory English course scores. Gu (2007) carried out a multimedia project teaching reform practice at Soochow University and found that project-based teaching can improve students' learning enthusiasm, learning motivation, teamwork, and autonomous learning ability. Gao (2010), taking College English teaching at Shandong University as an example, proposed the basic steps for applying project-based teaching in College English course and found that this teaching model can improve students' comprehensive English proficiency, critical thinking ability, practical problem-solving ability, and teamwork awareness. Yang and Han (2012) implemented a teaching reform of College English academic writing grounded in the project-based learning model. Their study revealed that this pedagogical approach helps students strengthen their practical and innovative awareness and capabilities, alongside general linguistic proficiency and academic communication skills. Yang and Chen (2021), taking specific teaching cases in the research-oriented College English course at Southeast University as examples, analyzed the role of project-based learning in cultivating and practicing socialist core values and realizing implicit moral education. Shi (2023) explored the necessity and effectiveness of implementing project-based learning in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, using the course of *News English* for English majors at Lanzhou University as a case study, and reached similar research conclusions. Yao, Yan, and Li (2024) conducted an experimental study of online-offline blended teaching in the course *Western Culture and Communication* and verified that the PBL-based Western culture teaching model yields superior teaching outcomes compared with its traditional counterpart. Despite the above-mentioned studies, there remains a scarcity of empirical research investigating the implementation of project-based teaching to improve the effectiveness of College English listening and speaking instruction and strengthen students' English proficiency.

In view of this, this study adopts PBL as its theoretical framework to develop a project-based teaching model for College English listening and speaking course. With textbook themes and diverse online resources as the medium, classroom instruction is divided into a series of project tasks to guide students to engage in project-centered learning activities. This enables students to improve their English listening and speaking skills while fostering their intercultural communication competence. The specific research questions are as follows:

(1) What major difficulties do non-English major undergraduates encounter when improving their English listening and speaking skills?

(2) What effects does the project-based teaching exert on non-English major undergraduates' English listening and speaking skills?

(3) What feedback, opinions, and suggestions do non-English major undergraduates hold concerning the implementation outcomes of the project-based teaching?

Research Design

Research Subjects and Research Context

The research subjects are 50 students from different majors across the university who took the course *College English (2)* in the second semester of their first year, including 18 male students and 32 female students. The university adopts layered teaching for College English curriculum. Specifically, upon matriculation, students

are placed into three proficiency-based groups (Classes A, B, and C) according to their English scores in the college entrance examination. The participants of this study are all students from Class A. Most of them passed the CET-4 in their first semester and are preparing for the CET-6 in the second semester. While these students possess a relatively solid overall foundation in English, their listening and speaking skills remain comparatively weak. This issue may primarily stem from limited class hours, which reduce students' opportunities for listening and speaking practice.

However, at the same time, the university also has a unique language learning environment for foreign language learners. At present, the university has 1,495 international students, and international exchange and cooperation are continuously advancing. The university has established cooperation and exchange relationships with more than 280 higher education institutions or educational organizations in more than 60 countries and regions across five continents. It has established the country's first Sino-foreign cooperative education institution focusing on education and has carried out more than 100 inter-university student exchange and study programs with more than 70 universities outside China. These favorable internationalized conditions create an excellent foreign-language learning environment for Chinese students to practice listening and speaking skills. As Shu (2011, p. 137) argues, "Internationalization should be an important direction for the future development of China's higher education." Therefore, fully leveraging the learning environment within the context of internationalized higher education to develop students' practical English proficiency, particularly listening and speaking competencies, represents an effective approach aligned with universities' development strategies.

Implementation Steps of Project-based Teaching in College English Listening and Speaking Course

This study attempts to apply project-based teaching to College English listening and speaking classroom teaching. Drawing on the basic steps of project-based teaching in College English course proposed by Gao (2010), a semester-long classroom teaching reform practice was implemented. In the planning stage, the teacher assigned project tasks, let students form groups, and discussed and determined the project topic and form. The topics were related to the theme of the textbook unit or self-selected by students themselves. The overall requirements and evaluation criteria of the project were clarified, and a project plan was completed. In the implementation stage, group members divided the work and prepared, collected materials, compiled questionnaires or interview outlines, invited international students and foreign teachers to participate in the survey and research, communicated with them face-to-face, and regularly reported progress to the teacher who provided necessary guidance. In the summary stage, each group summarized its project research findings and wrote a written investigation report. In the reporting and presentation stage, each group reported the project results to the whole class in the form of cooperative oral presentations and playing videos of on-site interviews recorded by the group members, thereby exercising and improving English listening and speaking abilities, while also cultivating cross-cultural communication awareness, teamwork ability, and basic academic writing ability.

Take Group 4 as an example, after discussion, they decided to investigate international students staying on campus during winter vacation regarding their experiences and suggestions on campus safety issues. Then they designed questionnaires and interview outlines from two aspects: food safety and traffic safety. After receiving recognition and guidance from the instructor, they revised the research instruments, and then, in pairs, invited international students or foreign teachers on campus to participate in their survey, recording the entire interview process in short videos. Next, group members divided the work of data analysis, research report writing, and making PPT slides. Upon completion of each task, students submitted their work to other group members and

the instructor for review and assessment, followed by revisions and refinements based on the feedback received. In the final class session, each group delivered an oral presentation of their research findings to the whole class. They then reflected on the research process and identified limitations of the project, and received feedback from fellow students and the instructor.

Research Methods

To address the three research questions of this study, the author employed a mixed methods research design. Data were collected using four instruments: an open-ended questionnaire investigating students' English learning needs and difficulties, a listening test, a self-assessment scale for students' English listening and speaking proficiency, and semi-structured interviews, to facilitate data triangulation. The open-ended questionnaire investigating students' English learning needs and difficulties comprises sections on participants' basic demographic information, the English skills they perceive as most challenging together with underlying reasons. It primarily aims to identify obstacles students face in improving their English listening and speaking abilities, addressing the first research question and offering guidance for subsequent classroom teaching reform practices.

The listening test paper and the student self-assessment scale of English listening and speaking abilities are intended to examine changes in students' listening proficiency and self-perceived listening and speaking abilities before and after the implementation of project-based teaching, thereby answering the second research question. Among them, the listening test paper uses the listening section of past CET-6 examination papers. The student self-assessment scale of English listening and speaking abilities is adapted with reference to the discussion of the "higher requirements" in the "Student English Ability Self-assessment/Peer Assessment Scale" in the *College English Curriculum Requirements* issued by the Ministry of Education (2007). It is divided into four levels: excellent, good, average, and poor, assigned 4, 3, 2, and 1 point respectively. The self-assessment scale was administered twice, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the semester. The end-of-semester self-assessment scale for students' English listening and speaking proficiency shares the same core content as the pre-semester version. It comprises two sections: self-assessment of listening and speaking ability, with one additional open-ended item designed to examine students' satisfaction with project-based teaching outcomes and the underlying reasons.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to further explore students' acceptance, satisfaction, opinions, and suggestions concerning the classroom reform of project-based teaching. These interviews address the third research question and offer implications for refining future practices in the reform of College English listening and speaking instruction.

Data Collection and Analysis

At the beginning of the semester, 50 copies of the open-ended questionnaire on students' English learning needs and difficulties and the student self-assessment scale of English listening and speaking abilities were distributed. Among them, 49 valid questionnaires and self-assessment scales were collected with one questionnaire and self-assessment scale invalid due to substantial missing information. Reliability test results showed that the reliability value of the entire self-assessment scale was 0.876, those of the listening ability self-assessment scale and the speaking ability self-assessment scale were 0.792 and 0.857 respectively. This indicates that the self-assessment scale has relatively high reliability and can be adopted for data collection and analysis.

At the same time, students were asked to complete a listening test paper using past CET-6 examination papers to examine their listening proficiency at the beginning of the semester. Then, a semester-long classroom reform practice based on project-based teaching was implemented. At the end of the semester, the student self-assessment scale for English listening and speaking skills was redistributed, and a posttest using the CET-6 listening section was administered to investigate whether students' listening and speaking proficiency had improved. Meanwhile, online semi-structured interviews were carried out with eight group leaders to further explore students' acceptance of project-based teaching, along with their feedback and suggestions for future pedagogical improvements.

Research Results and Discussion

Main Difficulties Students Face in Improving English Listening and Speaking Abilities

The findings from the questionnaire investigating students' needs and difficulties in English learning reveal that, among the five English skills, students ranked the skills by perceived difficulty in descending order: listening (31 students, 63.3%), speaking (24 students, 49%), translation (18 students, 36.7%), writing (10 students, 20.4%), and reading (6 students, 12.2%). This suggests that listening and speaking are regarded by most students as their weakest skills, further highlighting the necessity and urgency of College English teaching reforms designed to enhance students' English listening and speaking proficiency. In terms of listening ability, the main difficulties reported by students are: (1) insufficient vocabulary (17 students); (2) speech rate too fast (8 students); (3) too little practice (5 students); (4) inability to grasp key points or keywords (4 students); (5) poor memory (3 students); (6) lack of concentration (3 students); (7) inability to understand liaison (2 students); (8) lack of listening environment (2 students). This suggests that students perceive inadequate vocabulary as the primary factor hindering their listening comprehension. Accordingly, instructors should reinforce vocabulary instruction in regular classes and employ diverse vocabulary-teaching strategies to help students expand their lexical repertoire more effectively, thus facilitating their listening competence.

In terms of speaking ability, the main difficulties reported by students are: (1) poor vocabulary (10 students); (2) lack of opportunities for communication in daily life (10 students); (3) pronunciation, intonation, phonetic symbols, and liaison (8 students); (4) lack of practice (5 students); (5) timidity, introversion, or unwillingness to speak (5 students); (6) lack of communication environment (2 students); (7) worry about grammatical mistakes (2 students). This shows that limited vocabulary and insufficient communicative opportunities constitute the primary barriers to the development of students' English speaking proficiency. Meanwhile, issues related to pronunciation, intonation, phonetic symbols, liaison and other phonetic phenomena may also contribute to weaknesses in their spoken English. Accordingly, instructors should reinforce vocabulary instruction within classroom settings and offer students ample opportunities for oral practice. Additionally, training in micro-phonetic skills including liaison, weak forms and elision should be integrated into teaching practice to effectively facilitate the improvement of students' oral communicative competence.

The Impact of Project-based Teaching on Improving Students' English Listening and Speaking Abilities

The pre-test data from the Student English Ability Self-Assessment Scale revealed that the mean self-rated listening score was 2.79, while the post-test mean was 2.87. For speaking, the pre-test mean score was 2.81 and the post-test mean was 3.09. These results suggest that students perceived moderate improvements in their English listening and speaking abilities following one semester of project-based teaching. A paired-samples *t*-

test was conducted on the self-assessment scale's pre- and post-test data. The analysis indicated that the pre-post difference in students' self-assessed listening ability was not statistically significant ($p = 0.384$). In contrast, the pre-post difference in self-rated speaking ability reached statistical significance ($p = 0.038$). This finding demonstrates that project-based teaching exerted a significant positive effect on enhancing students' English speaking proficiency.

Nevertheless, scores from two CET-6 listening tests showed a pre-test listening mean of 72.37 and a post-test mean of 80.82. Results of the paired-samples t-test indicated that this pre-post difference was highly statistically significant ($p = 0.001$). Collectively, these outcomes show that although students did not report a statistically significant improvement in listening ability via self-assessment, objective listening test scores revealed a significant gain. This indicates that the implementation of project-based teaching also produced a meaningful and significant effect on the development of students' English listening proficiency.

Students' Feedback and Suggestions on Project-based Teaching

Data from the satisfaction survey regarding the end-of-semester student self-assessment scale for English listening and speaking proficiency reveals that all students expressed positive and supportive attitudes toward project-based teaching activities. Most of them commented that this teaching format is innovative, encourages group collaboration and cross-cultural communication skills, and is well-suited for contemporary College English instruction, indicating that it represents an innovative pedagogical approach that facilitates theme comprehension and the understanding of cross-cultural contexts. Some students further stated that this approach has boosted their learning motivation and strengthened their capabilities in oral expression, listening comprehension, and academic report writing in English. This result was also confirmed by the student interview data. Among the 8 interviewed students, all students unanimously believed that the project was meaningful and worth promoting, because this project-based teaching not only exercised their English application competence, especially listening and speaking abilities, but also exercised their group cooperation ability and cross-cultural communication ability, enhanced their understanding of the similarities and differences of diverse cultures, and broadened their international perspective. This finding is evidenced by participants' interview accounts:

> The project our group investigated was "How is winter here different from your hometown?" The process of communicating with foreign friends exercised our oral ability and communication ability and encouraged us to take a step we usually did not dare to take. It was a very meaningful experience for English learning; on the other hand, we are geography majors, and this survey content can also expand our professional knowledge and give us a deeper understanding of the climate of other countries and regions. (S1)
>
> We can meet different people, broaden our horizons, change our previous fixed thinking, and enhance understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds. (S2)
>
> This type of group investigation can comprehensively exercise our English ability and group cooperation and coordination ability. Meanwhile, it was also the first time for members of our group to have in-depth communication and exchange with international students at the university, which broadened our horizons. (S3)
>
> Group investigation can help group members have a deeper understanding of textbook knowledge and expand content beyond the textbook. The project enhanced mutual affection and cooperation ability, was conducive to improving university students' social ability, and improved mutual coordination ability. (S4)
>
> This was a very good opportunity to exercise English oral expression, writing, listening, and other abilities. In the activity, we could discover where our English abilities were insufficient. In addition, we learned more about foreign cultures and differences between China and the West. (S5)
>
> On the one hand, this survey project activity promoted mutual understanding and cultural exchange between Chinese students and international students, which is of great benefit to creating a harmonious and stable campus atmosphere. On the other hand, it also helped our personal communicative ability in English speaking and significantly helped improve oral

proficiency and broaden our horizons. (S6)

It is meaningful and worth promoting, because the form of group interviews with foreign friends can first enable students to actively communicate with foreign friends and overcome the previous difficulty of speaking caused by timidity and shyness. (S7)

As the interview content is related to textbook content, it helps us understand more easily the cultural background of relevant units. Besides, the group format can enable us to learn to divide work and cooperate. Also, because the interview also requires an investigation report, this can surely improve our writing ability. (S8)

These research findings are largely consistent with those reported in prior studies (e.g., Malkova & Kiselyova, 2014; Gu, 2007; Gao, 2010; Yang & Han, 2012; Yang & Chen, 2021; Yao, Yan, & Li, 2024). Specifically, project-based teaching can enhance students' learning enthusiasm, motivation, English practical competence, critical thinking skills, practical problem-solving capacity, awareness of teamwork, and overall academic ability.

Furthermore, the present study further validates the effectiveness of project-based teaching in improving learners' English listening and speaking proficiency, cross-cultural communication competence, teamwork skills, and academic report-writing capacity within the context of the internationalization of higher education.

At its core, project-based teaching adopts tasks as the core vehicle. It integrates curriculum content into the process of solving authentic problems via immersive, experiential social practice, fosters students' active knowledge construction, and realizes the coordinated development of linguistic competence and values. This is achieved through innovative, higher-order, and challenging learning tasks, alongside diverse forms of outcome presentation and evaluative feedback (Zhou, 2025).

At the same time, students offered opinions and suggestions regarding several challenges encountered during the implementation of the teaching approach. For instance, one participant noted:

Too many members in a group can cause free-riding and slacking among some individuals throughout the process, and compiling the final summary report consumes substantial time. If this project is to be scaled up, issues including oversized group rosters and unduly complex reporting procedures must be addressed. (S8)

Collectively, these feedback observations fall into three main categories: the one-week preparation timeline was overly compressed; some groups had an overabundance of members, which impeded task distribution and teamwork and allowed certain members to disengage from the project; and considerable challenges were encountered in drafting the written investigation report. Accordingly, in future teaching practice, instructors should refine and optimize arrangements for project task scheduling, group size management, and guidance on academic investigation report writing. These revisions will ensure that students receive timely support before, during, and after project completion (Yao, Yan, & Li, 2024).

Conclusion

Given the prevalent practical challenge that many non-English major undergraduates suffer from relatively inadequate English listening and speaking proficiency, this study adopts project-based teaching in College English instruction to enhance students' overall English communicative competence. Research findings indicate that the project-based teaching exerts a notable positive effect on improving learners' English language proficiency, particularly their listening and speaking skills. Meanwhile, this approach can effectively boost students' motivation for English learning, strengthen their capabilities in teamwork, cultivate international awareness, cross-cultural communicative competence and academic report writing skills, and further deepen their

understanding of multicultural integration and inter-civilizational exchange. Despite limitations stemming from the one-semester duration of this pedagogical reform, including areas for refinement in project task design, group size allocation, and guidance on research report writing, this innovative teaching model constitutes a valuable endeavour aligned with national strategic requirements and the internationalization trend of higher education.

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