



**Integrating Informal Assessment in Project-Based Learning to
Enhance EFL Students' Speaking Motivation: A Small-Scale Action
Research Proposal**

English Language Teacher Education (HPEN7005)
Assignment 2

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1 Aims of the Investigation

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of integrating informal assessment strategies into project-based learning (PBL) to enhance students' motivation and improve their oral communication skills in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Specifically, the research seeks to:

1. Investigate how the use of informal assessments within project-based learning activities can motivate students to actively participate in speaking tasks;
2. Measure the extent to which students' speaking skills—particularly pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, accuracy, and comprehension—improve through the implementation of informal assessments in PBL;
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of informal speaking assessments as a pedagogical tool for fostering meaningful learning experiences and supporting students' language development in ESP classrooms.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Main Conceptual Themes

The role of assessment in language education has evolved significantly from traditional summative approaches to more formative and dynamic models, such as informal assessments. Summative assessments—such as standardized tests and final exams—have historically dominated the evaluation landscape, serving primarily as tools to measure learning outcomes at the end of instructional periods (Angeli and Valanides, 2009; Butler, 2023). However, such methods have been criticised for failing to address individual learning gaps, offering limited scope for instructional adjustment (Aprianoto and Haerazi, 2019; Castilla-Earls et al., 2021). These assessments often provide a static “snapshot” of student performance without contributing to ongoing learning processes (Linch, 2016; Gultom, 2016).

In contrast, informal assessment practices offer a more flexible, formative approach that emphasizes continuous feedback and reflective learning. Informal assessments include observations, interactive tasks, peer assessments, and project-based evaluations that allow teachers to monitor learning in real time and adapt instruction accordingly (Chan, 2021; Chen et al., 2022). They are

aligned with the concept of “assessment for learning,” which emphasizes the developmental aspect of evaluation, aiming to support both student progress and pedagogical decision-making (Rhamli, 2020; Ben-Jacob, 2017).

A growing body of research also supports the integration of project-based learning (PBL) with informal assessment strategies, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. PBL encourages students to engage in authentic, collaborative tasks, enhancing motivation and promoting communicative competence (Bahous and Nabhani, 2011; Armstrong, 2020). Informal assessment embedded within PBL—such as during discussions or presentations—provides opportunities for learners to demonstrate spoken proficiency while receiving immediate feedback from instructors (Tosuncuoglu, 2018). This is particularly valuable in EFL classrooms, where speaking is often underemphasized in formal testing environments (Saragih, 2016).

2.2 Literature Review Commentary and Rationale

While prior studies have underscored the benefits of formative assessment and project-based learning independently, relatively few have investigated their combined impact on speaking motivation and performance in ESP settings. The intersection of these approaches holds considerable promise, particularly for improving learners’ oral communication skills in vocational or professional English courses.

This study is therefore motivated by the need to fill this gap in the literature by examining how informal assessments, when integrated into project-based ESP tasks, can enhance student motivation and oral language development. By focusing on speaking—often the most challenging yet critical language skill—the study aligns with recent calls for more learner-centred, formative pedagogical models (Castilla-Earls et al., 2021; Chan, 2021). It seeks to generate practical insights for language educators aiming to foster more engaging and effective learning environments.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study will adopt a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to investigate the impact of integrating informal assessment strategies into project-based learning (PBL) in the context of English

for Specific Purposes (ESP). CAR is widely recognized as an effective methodological framework for practitioners aiming to improve their pedagogical practices while simultaneously generating knowledge about the learning process (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). This approach is particularly appropriate for educational interventions, as it fosters a cyclical and reflective process that allows educators to adapt instruction based on empirical observations and feedback.

The research process will follow four key stages (Figure 1): planning, action, observation, and reflection. In the planning phase, the researcher will define the objectives, develop instructional materials, and design classroom interventions that combine PBL tasks with informal assessment tools. This phase involves setting measurable learning goals, identifying potential obstacles, and outlining strategies to support students in improving their oral communication skills. The action phase involves the implementation of the planned instruction, which includes project-based speaking tasks such as role-playing, presentations, and business communication simulations.

During the observation phase, the researcher and appointed classroom observers will document student behavior, participation, and responses to instructional stimuli. This phase also involves collecting data from various instruments to understand the learning process as it unfolds. The final reflection phase requires a critical review of the collected data to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. It will also guide the refinement of instructional approaches for future cycles of the research. This systematic, iterative methodology enables educators to develop contextually relevant, evidence-based strategies for enhancing language instruction in ESP classrooms (Mertler, 2017).

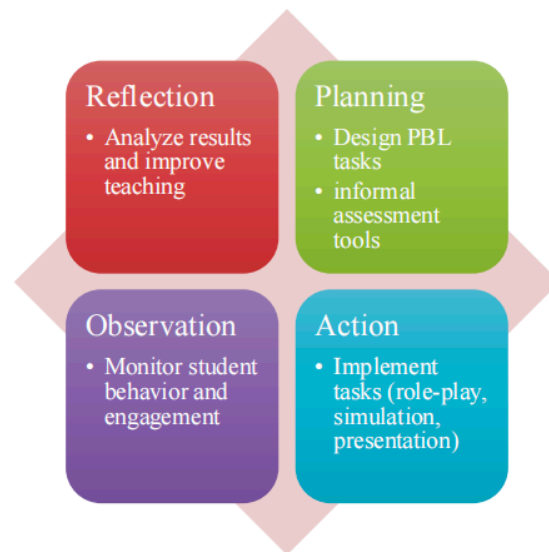


Figure1 Action Research Process

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study will be 50 undergraduate students enrolled in the third year of an ESP course at a comprehensive university in western China. These students major in business-related disciplines, such as accounting and financial management, and are taking English as part of their degree program. In the local curriculum, ESP is delivered as a compulsory course aimed at equipping students with the communicative skills necessary for professional and academic success in English-speaking contexts.

The selected students represent a typical population of ESP learners in China—students with intermediate English proficiency who require targeted practice in oral communication. The rationale for selecting this group is their immediate need to develop practical English-speaking skills relevant to their future careers. Moreover, the students are accustomed to traditional, exam-oriented teaching methods, which makes them a suitable cohort for investigating how project-based and informal assessment methods may enhance motivation and language proficiency.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

A mixed-methods approach will be employed in this study, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection strategies to provide a comprehensive view of student learning outcomes and classroom dynamics.

3.3.1 Quantitative Instruments

The primary quantitative instrument will be a set of pre-test and post-test speaking assessments. These tests will be designed around task-based speaking prompts aligned with the course objectives. Each student's performance will be evaluated using an analytic rubric covering five key domains: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The pre-test will serve as a baseline measure of each student's oral proficiency, while the post-test will reflect any improvements achieved during the intervention.

In addition to test scores, a Likert-scale questionnaire will be administered before and after the instructional cycle to measure changes in students' motivation and attitudes toward speaking English. Items will focus on confidence in speaking, enjoyment of group work, and perceptions of feedback, drawing on established instruments from language motivation research (Dörnyei, 2001).

3.3.2 Qualitative Instruments

To capture the richness of the classroom experience, the study will employ several qualitative data sources. Classroom observation sheets will be used by trained observers to systematically record student participation, peer interaction, and responsiveness during speaking tasks. Student reflective journals will be collected weekly, allowing learners to express their thoughts, struggles, and progress in relation to the speaking projects.

Moreover, teacher field notes will be maintained throughout the study to document instructional decisions, spontaneous observations, and any challenges encountered during implementation. These qualitative instruments will help triangulate the findings and offer insights into how the learning process unfolds beyond what test scores can reveal.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study will analyze both quantitative and qualitative data using rigorous, systematic techniques to ensure the reliability and validity of findings.

3.4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data from the speaking tests will be analyzed using paired sample t-tests to compare pre- and post-test mean scores. This statistical method will determine whether there is a significant improvement in students' speaking abilities as a result of the intervention. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and score distributions, will also be reported to provide a more nuanced interpretation of performance trends.

Questionnaire responses will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, with a particular focus on measuring shifts in students' motivation. Responses will be disaggregated by item to identify specific motivational domains (e.g., task interest, speaking anxiety) that may have been influenced by the instructional model.

3.4.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process will involve transcribing, coding, and categorizing the data into emerging themes related to student engagement, peer collaboration, self-perception, and perceived value of feedback. Multiple coders will be involved to improve inter-rater reliability, and member-checking techniques will be used with participants to validate interpretive findings.

By integrating the results from both strands of data, the study aims to provide a holistic understanding of how informal assessment practices embedded in PBL contribute to students' oral proficiency and engagement. This triangulated analysis will strengthen the study's internal validity and offer actionable insights for ESP practitioners and curriculum designers.

3.5 Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations are essential in conducting classroom-based research, particularly when involving human participants such as students. This study will strictly adhere to ethical guidelines to ensure the rights, privacy, and well-being of all participants are protected throughout the research process (BERA, 2018).

3.5.1 Informed Consent

Prior to participation, all students will be provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the research purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as participants. A written informed consent form will be distributed, and only those who voluntarily agree will be included in the study. For participants under 18 years of age, parental or guardian consent will also be sought in accordance with institutional and national ethical standards.

Participants will be clearly informed that their involvement is entirely voluntary, and that they have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty or academic consequence (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

3.5.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

To protect participant identity, all personal information will be treated as strictly confidential. Data will be anonymised using numeric or pseudonym codes, and all identifying features will be removed from transcripts, observation notes, and written reflections. Research data will be securely stored in encrypted digital files, accessible only to the research team.

In any dissemination of findings—whether academic publications, presentations, or internal reports—no information that could lead to the identification of individual participants or their institution will be disclosed (Wiles et al., 2008).

3.5.3 Minimising Risk and Power Imbalance

Given the classroom context, there is a risk of perceived coercion, particularly when the researcher is also the instructor. To address this, students will be assured that their academic standing will not be influenced by participation or non-participation. A third-party observer may be involved in collecting or managing some parts of the data (e.g. observations or surveys) to further reduce bias and mitigate the teacher-student power dynamic (Menter et al., 2011).

Additionally, care will be taken to avoid any emotional or psychological discomfort during reflective activities or group tasks. Participants will be encouraged to speak openly, but never pressured to share experiences beyond their comfort level.

3.5.4 Institutional Ethical Approval

Prior to the commencement of data collection, the research proposal will be submitted to the Ethics Committee of the researcher's home institution in China for formal review and approval. Only after ethical clearance is granted will recruitment and data collection begin. All procedures will comply with local and international codes of ethical research conduct.

4 Timetable

The project will be conducted over one academic year (12 months), following a structured Gantt chart:

Table 1 Timetable

Month	Activity	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Preparation	Design tasks, materials, and obtain ethical approval	X	X										
Pre-assessment	Conduct pre-task speaking and motivation questionnaire			X									
Project phase	Implement project with informal assessment				X	X							
Post-assessment	Conduct post-task, collect reflections and questionnaires					X							
Data analysis	Analyse data and identify findings						X	X					
Writing	Write up and edit report							X	X	X			
Review	Final revisions, submission, and presentation									X	X	X	X

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