

## Reinterpreting Problem-Based Learning in EFL Speaking Classrooms: Indonesian University Teachers' Pedagogical Perspectives

Devi Purmayanti<sup>1)</sup>, Muh. Azhar Kholidi<sup>2)</sup>, Riandry Fadilah Nasution<sup>3)</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>English Education Department, Social Science and Humanity Faculty, University of Ibrahimy

<sup>2</sup>International Graduate Program of Education and Human Development, National Sun Yat Sen University, Taiwan

<sup>3</sup> English Education Department, Tarbiyah and Teacher Training Faculty, UIN Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidempuan

Email Correspondence: <sup>1</sup>[devipurmayanti@gmail.com](mailto:devipurmayanti@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[azharkholidi.cendekiaedu@gmail.com](mailto:azharkholidi.cendekiaedu@gmail.com), <sup>3</sup>[riandryfadilahnst@gmail.com](mailto:riandryfadilahnst@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has gained prominence as a pedagogical approach for promoting learner autonomy, critical thinking, and communicative competence. However, little is known about how PBL is interpreted, adapted, and enacted by teachers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking classrooms, particularly in Indonesian higher education. This qualitative study examined Indonesian university EFL teachers' perceptions and enactment of PBL in speaking instruction. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five instructors from diverse institutional contexts and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that teachers did not implement PBL as a fixed instructional model but reinterpreted it as a context-sensitive, fluency-oriented pedagogy shaped by learner readiness, classroom culture, and institutional constraints. While PBL was perceived to enhance student engagement, speaking confidence, and willingness to communicate, it was primarily adapted as discussion- and task-based activities rather than sustained inquiry cycles. These adaptations reveal how teacher cognition and local educational conditions mediate global pedagogical models. By foregrounding teachers situated enactment of PBL, this study extends existing PBL theory in EFL contexts and challenges assumptions that learner-centered pedagogies transfer seamlessly across settings. The study proposes a more context-responsive understanding of PBL for EFL speaking instruction and offers implications for teacher

## 1. Introduction

The development of speaking skills remains one of the most persistent challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts such as Indonesia. Despite years of formal English education, oral proficiency is often marginalized in favor of grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension, reflecting the dominance of exam-oriented curricula and structurally constrained classroom conditions, including large class sizes and limited opportunities for authentic interaction. Consequently, many university graduates demonstrate substantial declarative knowledge of English yet struggle to mobilise this knowledge for effective spoken communication (Richards, 2008; Putra, 2022). This disconnect highlights a longstanding tension between linguistic knowledge and communicative use in EFL pedagogy.

Learners-centered approaches in higher education environments and communicative language teaching (CLT) have been more underlined in recent years. Among these creative strategies, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has attracted a lot of interest for its ability to improve not only students' language proficiency but also their critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving skills (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Tan, 2003). Originally developed in medical education, PBL has been effectively modified for many educational environments, including language instruction (Azzahra & Nurkamto, 2024). Within a PBL framework, students are required to collaboratively explore and address real-world issues, employing the target language as their primary mode of communication.

In speaking classes, project-based learning promotes active engagement of learners in meaningful interactions that reflect real-life communication scenarios. This method significantly differs from conventional rote memorization and repetition exercises, providing a more dynamic and engaging educational experience. Ngo (2024) demonstrated that PBL-based activities in blended learning environments markedly enhanced students' speaking fluency, confidence, and engagement. A study by Utami and Rismadewi (2024) indicated that Indonesian university students exhibited significant enhancements in their speaking performance through the integration of PBL strategies in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses.

Despite the encouraging results associated with PBL, teachers' roles and interpretive frameworks play a decisive role in shaping how the approach is enacted in practice. Rather than acting solely as facilitators, teachers function as pedagogical designers and cultural mediators who continuously adapt PBL principles to align with learners' proficiency levels, classroom norms, and institutional expectations. Research on teacher cognition demonstrates that educators' beliefs, prior experiences, and professional knowledge strongly influence how innovative pedagogies are interpreted, modified, or constrained in local contexts (Borg, 2015; Farrell, 2018). In Indonesian EFL settings, where students are often socialized into teacher-centered and examination-oriented learning cultures, PBL is rarely implemented in its canonical form but instead undergoes selective adaptation to maintain classroom control, ensure syllabus coverage, and manage learner anxiety

(Nguyen, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2011). Recent studies indicate that many Indonesian EFL teachers are in a transitional phase toward learner-centered instruction, yet face persistent institutional barriers such as limited professional training, rigid curricula, and assessment regimes that prioritize content coverage over communicative processes (Azzahra & Nurkamto, 2024; Lamb & Arisandy, 2020). These conditions suggest that the central gap in existing research lies not merely in whether PBL is effective, but in how teachers cognitively and culturally negotiate its implementation within structurally constrained EFL environments—an area that remains underexplored in global PBL scholarship.

Although Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has been widely discussed in global education literature, what remains insufficiently understood is how PBL is enacted and negotiated within specific EFL contexts, particularly in settings shaped by distinct cultural, institutional, and pedagogical conditions. In Indonesian university-level EFL speaking classrooms, the implementation of PBL is not merely a technical choice but is mediated by teachers' beliefs, prior teaching experiences, understandings of learner roles, and institutional expectations. Existing studies have paid limited attention to how EFL teachers interpret, adapt, and sometimes constrain PBL practices in response to these contextual realities. By foregrounding teachers' perspectives, this study seeks to illuminate the contextualized enactment of PBL, highlighting the opportunities, tensions, and adaptations that emerge when PBL is integrated into Indonesian EFL speaking instruction. Such understanding is crucial for bridging the gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice and for informing teacher education, curriculum design, and policy development.

This study aims to investigate how English-speaking Indonesian university EFL teachers see the application of the Problem-Based Learning approach. This study seeks to enhance understanding of PBL's impact on enhancing speaking instruction in Indonesian higher education by analyzing participants' experiences, perceived advantages, and challenges. Ultimately, the objective is to facilitate the development of more effective, engaging, and communicative learning environments for EFL students.

### **1.1 Research question:**

1. How do Indonesian university EFL teachers perceive the use of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in English-speaking classes?
2. What are the benefits and challenges that Indonesian university EFL teachers perceive when using Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in English-speaking classes?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 PBL as Pedagogical Theory and Instructional Practice in EFL**

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is theoretically grounded in constructivist and socio-constructivist perspectives that conceptualize learning as an active, socially mediated process of meaning construction through inquiry, collaboration, and reflection (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Jonassen, 2011; Savery, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, knowledge is co-constructed as learners engage with complex, ill-structured problems that mirror real-world situations, requiring them to mobilize cognitive, social, and linguistic resources. In EFL education, PBL aligns closely with communicative language

teaching and task-based language teaching principles, as it positions language as a mediational tool for interaction, negotiation, and problem-solving rather than as a decontextualized system of rules (Tan, 2003; Ellis, 2003; Beckett & Slater, 2005).

A substantial body of empirical research has linked PBL to positive outcomes in EFL speaking development. Studies across diverse contexts report improvements in fluency, confidence, willingness to communicate, and discourse management, particularly when learners are engaged in sustained collaborative tasks (Beckett, 2002; Hung, 2011; Ngo, 2024; Zhang & Cheng, 2021). These gains are often attributed to the meaning-focused and interaction-driven nature of PBL tasks, which require learners to negotiate meaning, manage turn-taking, and employ pragmatic strategies in extended spoken exchanges. As such, PBL has frequently been framed in the literature as a pedagogical response to the limitations of form-focused and teacher-dominated speaking instruction (Richards, 2008; Long, 2015).

However, despite this largely positive portrayal, much of the existing literature conceptualizes PBL as a relatively stable and transferable instructional model. A strong emphasis on learning outcomes has resulted in limited attention to the **processes of pedagogical enactment**, including how PBL principles are interpreted and operationalized in real classrooms (Savery, 2006; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007; Thomas, 2000; Kirschner et al., 2006). This tendency risks reifying PBL as a universally applicable method, overlooking the situated nature of teaching and the role of contextual mediation. Consequently, PBL success is often attributed to the method itself rather than to the complex interplay between pedagogical design, teacher agency, and classroom realities.

Recent scholarship has begun to problematize this assumption by foregrounding the contextualized nature of PBL implementation. Studies in EFL settings suggest that teachers frequently adapt PBL to accommodate curriculum demands, assessment regimes, classroom norms, and students' prior learning experiences (Li & Walsh, 2011; Richards, 2017; Zheng & Borg, 2014; Ellis & Shintani, 2014). In contexts where examination-oriented instruction and teacher authority remain dominant, PBL may be reshaped into more structured, teacher-guided activities, potentially diluting its inquiry-based and learner-autonomy-oriented principles. These findings point to a fundamental theoretical tension between **PBL as pedagogical theory** and **PBL as enacted classroom practice**, raising questions about how pedagogical innovation is sustained or constrained within EFL classrooms.

## 2.2 Teacher Cognition as a Mediating Force in PBL Enactment

Research on teacher cognition emphasizes that instructional practices are not straightforward applications of pedagogical methods but are deeply shaped by teachers' beliefs, experiential knowledge, and contextual interpretations (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Borg, 2015; Farrell & Bennis, 2013). From this perspective, the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in EFL classrooms cannot be understood as a neutral or technical process. Instead, PBL is enacted through teachers' evolving understandings of language learning, learner roles, and their own professional identities. Studies in second language education consistently show that teachers act as interpretive agents who filter

pedagogical innovations through prior experiences and local expectations rather than adopting them wholesale (Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2009).

Within EFL contexts, a recurring finding in the literature is the discrepancy between teachers' stated beliefs and their classroom practices. While teachers frequently express support for learner-centered principles such as autonomy, collaboration, and communicative engagement, these beliefs often coexist with concerns about syllabus completion, assessment demands, and classroom control (Nurkamto & Sarosa, 2020; Rahman & Cahyani, 2021; Farrell, 2015). This cognition–practice tension suggests that pedagogical decision-making is shaped by competing priorities rather than a lack of pedagogical awareness. As Borg (2011) argues, such tensions reflect teachers' attempts to balance ideal pedagogical visions with contextual realities, particularly in examination-driven and resource-constrained environments.

Teachers' prior pedagogical socialization further influences how PBL is interpreted and enacted. Educators who have been trained and have taught predominantly within teacher-centered instructional traditions may reinterpret PBL in ways that align with familiar classroom routines, resulting in more structured, teacher-directed implementations (Thomas, 2000; Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980; Li & Walsh, 2011). Rather than facilitating open-ended inquiry, teachers may prioritize task completion and linguistic accuracy, thereby reshaping PBL into hybrid practices. This raises an unresolved issue in the literature: whether such adaptations represent pedagogical responsiveness to context or structural limitations that constrain the transformative potential of PBL (Savery, 2006).

Professional development has been identified as a critical mediating factor in addressing these tensions. Research suggests that sustained, reflective professional learning enables teachers to reconceptualize their instructional roles and develop greater confidence in facilitating inquiry-based and student-driven learning (Suherdi, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Farrell, 2016). However, access to such professional development remains uneven, particularly in higher education contexts where pedagogical innovation is not systematically supported. Consequently, teachers often rely on individual experimentation rather than institutionally guided frameworks, leading to inconsistent enactments of PBL (Azzahra & Nurkamto, 2024; Richards, 2017).

Despite growing recognition of teacher cognition as a key factor in pedagogical change, existing PBL research has tended to treat teachers' beliefs as peripheral variables rather than as central analytical constructs. Many studies focus on learner outcomes while offering limited insight into how teachers make sense of PBL, justify their instructional choices, or negotiate tensions between pedagogical ideals and institutional constraints (Borg, 2015; Zheng & Borg, 2014; Farrell & Guz, 2019). This lack of attention to teachers' meaning-making processes represents a significant gap in the literature and underscores the need for qualitative research that foregrounds teachers' perspectives as central to understanding the contextualized enactment of PBL in EFL classrooms.

### **2.3 EFL Classroom Culture and Institutional Constraints in PBL Enactment**

The enactment of PBL in EFL classrooms is deeply embedded within broader classroom cultures and institutional structures that shape teachers' and learners'

expectations of teaching and learning. Classroom culture encompasses shared norms regarding teacher authority, student participation, knowledge transmission, and acceptable forms of interaction (Holliday, 1994; Bax, 2003). In many EFL contexts, including Indonesia, instructional traditions have historically prioritised teacher-centred pedagogy, explicit instruction, and examination preparation, positioning students as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active co-constructors of meaning (Lie, 2017; Harsono, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2012).

These cultural norms can create friction when learner-centred approaches such as PBL are introduced. Research indicates that students accustomed to highly structured instruction may experience uncertainty or resistance when required to engage in open-ended problem-solving and collaborative decision-making (Littlewood, 2007; Hu, 2002). Teachers, in turn, may perceive a tension between maintaining classroom order and allowing the ambiguity inherent in PBL tasks. As a result, PBL implementation often involves cultural negotiation, where teachers selectively adapt pedagogical principles to align with prevailing expectations of authority, participation, and achievement (Lamb, 2013; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019).

Institutional constraints further shape the possibilities for PBL enactment. Studies in Indonesian higher education consistently highlights challenges such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, rigid syllabi, and assessment systems that priorities written examinations over communicative competence (Azzahra & Nurkamto, 2024; Rahman & Cahyani, 2021; Lamb & Coleman, 2008). These structural conditions can discourage sustained spoken interaction and make the facilitation of inquiry-based group work difficult. In such environments, teachers may adopt surface-level PBL practices such as short projects or tightly controlled tasks rather than fully embracing its learner-driven orientation.

While some studies document successful PBL implementation under these constraints, they often emphasize the role of strong institutional support and collaborative professional cultures. Research suggests that when institutions provide pedagogical training, flexible curricula, and alternative assessment models, teachers are more likely to experiment with and sustain innovative practices (Suherdi, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sari, 2022). However, such enabling conditions remain unevenly distributed, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Consequently, teachers are frequently required to navigate pedagogical innovation individually, leading to varied and context-dependent enactments of PBL.

Taken together, the literature suggests that PBL implementation in EFL classrooms cannot be understood independently of classroom culture and institutional structures. Rather than viewing deviations from “ideal” PBL models as pedagogical failure, emerging research calls for attention to how teachers negotiate, hybridize, and localize PBL in response to cultural expectations and institutional realities (Holliday, 1994; Richards, 2015; Borg, 2015). This perspective underscores the need for research that examines PBL as a situated practice, shaped by dynamic interactions between pedagogical theory, teacher cognition, and contextual constraints.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Research Design and Paradigmatic Positioning**

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist research design to explore Indonesian university EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences of implementing Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in English speaking classes. An interpretivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is generated through individuals' interpretations of their experiences within specific sociocultural and institutional contexts (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This stance is particularly appropriate for examining pedagogical practices such as PBL, which are enacted differently depending on teachers' beliefs, classroom cultures, and institutional constraints. Rather than seeking generalizable causal claims, the study aimed to develop a contextualised understanding of how teachers perceive, adapt, and negotiate PBL in speaking-focused EFL instruction.

### 3.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants comprised five Indonesian university EFL teachers who had experience teaching English speaking courses and who had implemented, or were familiar with, PBL as an instructional approach. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant pedagogical knowledge and firsthand experience aligned with the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015). The teachers were drawn from both public and private universities across Indonesia, allowing the study to capture variation in institutional contexts, curricular expectations, and classroom cultures.

The sample size was determined based on data saturation, whereby no substantively new themes emerged from the later interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Given the study's narrow focus on teacher perceptions and practices within a specific pedagogical approach, a small, information-rich sample was considered sufficient to support in-depth qualitative analysis.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their perspectives in depth while providing enough structure to ensure alignment with the research questions. An interview guide was developed based on the literature on PBL, EFL speaking instruction, and teacher cognition. The interview questions explored teachers' conceptual understandings of PBL, perceived benefits for speaking development, classroom implementation strategies, challenges and constraints, and forms of institutional support. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted online via video-conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom) to accommodate participants' geographical locations and availability. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. This analytic approach was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. The analysis focused on capturing both shared and divergent perspectives regarding the

enactment of PBL in speaking classes, with particular attention to how pedagogical beliefs interacted with classroom realities and institutional constraints.

### **3.5 Ensuring Research Trustworthiness**

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed in line with qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through member checking, whereby participants reviewed interview summaries to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Dependability was ensured through a clear audit trail documenting data collection and analytic decisions. Confirmability was strengthened through researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative EFL research. Analytic triangulation was achieved by interpreting the data through multiple theoretical lenses, including teacher cognition, problem-based learning theory, and EFL speaking pedagogy, and by comparing patterns across participants. Although the findings are not statistically generalizable, thick description allows readers to assess their transferability to comparable EFL contexts.

## **4. Result**

This section integrates findings and discussion to examine how Indonesian university EFL teachers interpret, adapt, and enact Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in English speaking classes. Rather than treating PBL as a uniform instructional method, the analysis reveals that teachers enact contextually mediated versions of PBL, shaped by teacher cognition, EFL classroom culture, and institutional constraints. Three analytically connected themes emerged: (1) teachers' conceptualizations of PBL as pedagogical adaptation, (2) PBL as a fluency-oriented and engagement-driven speaking pedagogy, and (3) contextual mediation and institutional constraints shaping PBL enactment.

### **4.1 Teachers' Conceptualizations of PBL as Pedagogical Adaptation**

Rather than conceptualizing Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a standardized instructional model to be implemented in its entirety, participants in this study understood PBL as a flexible pedagogical orientation that must be adapted to the realities of Indonesian university EFL speaking classrooms. Across interviews, teachers consistently emphasized core PBL principles—authenticity, learner engagement, collaboration, and real-world relevance—suggesting broad alignment with constructivist learning theory and inquiry-based pedagogy (Barrows, 2000; Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Savery, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2011). However, their accounts also reveal that these principles are selectively enacted, resulting in context-sensitive forms of PBL that diverge from its canonical, curriculum-level implementations.

This selective enactment underscores the central role of teacher cognition in mediating pedagogical theory. Rather than applying PBL as a prescriptive method, teachers interpreted and reshaped it through their beliefs about language learning, perceptions of student readiness, institutional constraints, and cultural expectations surrounding classroom participation. Extensive research in teacher cognition demonstrates that instructional innovation is filtered through teachers' prior experiences, beliefs, and local teaching cultures (Borg, 2006, 2015; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). In this study, PBL was frequently reframed to serve immediate



instructional priorities—most notably increasing student participation and oral output—rather than fostering extended inquiry, self-directed learning, or disciplinary knowledge construction, which are often foregrounded in canonical PBL models (Barrows, 2000; Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

For instance, P1's description of PBL as *"like a debate game"* foregrounds performative speaking, argumentative interaction, and competition, positioning PBL primarily as a catalyst for oral production. While debate-based activities may incorporate problem-solving elements, this framing shifts PBL toward event-based communicative tasks rather than sustained inquiry cycles. Similarly, P3's emphasis on *"thinking first, then speaking"* reflects a hybrid pedagogy in which problem-solving functions as a cognitive scaffold for speaking tasks, rather than as the organizing principle of the curriculum. Such hybridization has been widely observed in EFL settings, where PBL is often blended with task-based language teaching or communicative language teaching to accommodate linguistic constraints and assessment expectations (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015; Butler, 2011).

These localized interpretations resonate with studies showing that PBL in Asian and EFL contexts is frequently implemented as a discussion-oriented or task-based adaptation, rather than as a comprehensive curricular reform (Lu & Bridges, 2016; Nguyen, 2013; Toe & Huong, 2022; Wang, 2017). Research in Confucian-influenced and exam-oriented education systems further suggests that learner-centered pedagogies are often recontextualized to maintain classroom order, meet curriculum coverage demands, and align with students' expectations of teacher authority (Littlewood, 2009; Hu, 2016; Jin & Cortazzi, 2017). In this study, teachers' prioritization of communicative engagement and fluency over epistemic inquiry reflects these broader sociocultural and institutional pressures.

Importantly, P2's observation that teachers may *"already do PBL without knowing it"* highlights how PBL principles can emerge implicitly and incrementally through everyday teaching practices, such as case discussions, role plays, and problem-based speaking tasks. This finding aligns with research on pedagogical change suggesting that innovation often occurs through gradual adaptation of existing practices, rather than through formal adoption of named methodologies (Cuban, 2013; Fullan, 2007; Borg & Sanchez, 2020). From this perspective, PBL in EFL classrooms may function less as a clearly bounded method and more as a pedagogical repertoire that teachers draw upon selectively.

Analytically, these findings point to what can be conceptualized as adaptive PBL enactment in Indonesian university EFL speaking classrooms. In this mode of enactment, pedagogical theory is actively reconstructed through local teaching cultures, learner profiles, assessment regimes, and institutional constraints. This challenges dominant Western models of PBL, which often assume stable institutional support, homogeneous learner readiness, extended inquiry time, and alignment between pedagogy and assessment (Savery, 2015; Yew & Goh, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2011). By foregrounding teachers' adaptive interpretations, this study contributes to PBL scholarship by reframing PBL not as a universally transferable model, but as a situated and negotiated pedagogical practice. It extends calls for more context-sensitive theorization of learner-centered pedagogies in EFL settings (Littlewood, 2009; Hu & McKay, 2012) and positions teachers

as active pedagogical agents who co-construct instructional meaning under complex cultural and institutional conditions.

#### 4.2 PBL as a Fluency-Oriented and Engagement-Driven Speaking Pedagogy

Across interviews, teachers consistently reported that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) enhanced students' willingness to speak, confidence, fluency, and overall engagement, particularly when speaking tasks were grounded in familiar social, academic, or campus-related problems. Participants repeatedly emphasized that students became more talkative, expressive, and willing to contribute ideas when they perceived the task as meaningful and relevant to their lived experiences. These observations align with findings from global PBL and task-based language teaching (TBLT) literature, which underscores the role of meaningful, problem-oriented tasks in promoting authentic language use and sustained interaction (Chun, 2010; Ellis, 2017; Long, 2015; Zhang & Yuan, 2021).

However, this study extends existing research by demonstrating that, in Indonesian university EFL speaking classrooms, PBL is enacted primarily as a fluency-oriented pedagogy, rather than as a balanced approach to linguistic development. Teachers overwhelmingly framed successful PBL implementation in terms of increased participation, spontaneity, and idea expression, while grammatical accuracy, lexical range, and discourse complexity were rarely foregrounded in their accounts. P4's remark that students "*focus on the solution, not the grammar*" exemplifies this pedagogical orientation, suggesting a deliberate shift away from form-focused evaluation toward communicative effectiveness. This finding is particularly noteworthy because it reveals how teachers strategically prioritize certain dimensions of speaking competence in response to contextual pressures.

Such prioritization reflects a broader pedagogical logic in foreign language contexts, where opportunities for authentic communication are limited and students often experience high levels of speaking anxiety. Research in EFL settings has shown that excessive emphasis on linguistic accuracy can inhibit oral participation and reinforce fear of error (Horwitz, 2010; MacIntyre, 2007; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). By contrast, fluency-oriented tasks that tolerate linguistic imperfection may foster greater willingness to communicate (WTC), especially among learners with low confidence (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Kang, 2005). In this sense, teachers' reliance on PBL as a fluency-enhancing strategy can be interpreted as a pedagogically rational response to affective barriers commonly observed in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

At the same time, this fluency-first orientation raises important theoretical and pedagogical tensions. Long (2015) cautions that meaning-focused instruction alone may not lead to comprehensive language development, particularly in foreign language environments where learners have limited access to rich input and corrective feedback. Similarly, research in TBLT has long highlighted the need to balance fluency, accuracy, and complexity in speaking instruction (Skehan, 2009; Ellis & Shintani, 2014). The absence of systematic attention to language form in teachers' PBL practices suggests that communicative gains may remain at the surface-level unless complemented by targeted scaffolding, reflection, or feedback mechanisms.

From an analytical perspective, teachers' accounts suggest that PBL creates a psychologically safe communicative space, where students are encouraged to take risks without fear of formal evaluation. This is particularly significant in the Indonesian higher education context, which is often characterized by exam-oriented assessment cultures, hierarchical teacher–student relationships, and teacher-fronted instructional norms (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Lie, 2017; Lamb & Arisandy, 2020). By shifting classroom attention from linguistic correctness to collaborative problem-solving, PBL appears to temporarily suspend these institutional and cultural pressures, enabling greater student voice and participation. This finding supports sociocultural perspectives on language learning, which emphasize the importance of affective safety and social interaction in facilitating language use (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain, 2005).

Nevertheless, the reliance on PBL as a primarily engagement-driven strategy raises critical pedagogical questions about sustainability and depth of learning. While teachers value increased confidence, autonomy, and participation, the lack of explicit form-focused instruction suggests that students may not consistently develop greater linguistic accuracy or complexity over time. This echo concerns raised in recent TESOL scholarship regarding the limitations of purely meaning-focused pedagogies in EFL contexts (Bao & Du, 2015; East, 2020; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). As such, the findings of this study lend support to calls for integrated pedagogical models that combine problem-based or task-based speaking activities with strategic form-focused feedback, reflective discussion, and assessment practices that value both communicative effectiveness and linguistic development.

Taken together, these findings suggest that PBL in Indonesian university EFL speaking classrooms functions less as a comprehensive language pedagogy and more as a contextually responsive tool for lowering affective barriers and promoting oral participation. While this adaptation yields clear benefits in terms of fluency and engagement, it also underscores the need for pedagogical designs that more explicitly address the full spectrum of speaking competence.

#### 4.3 Contextual Mediation and Institutional Constraints

Despite generally positive perceptions of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), teachers' accounts reveal that its classroom enactment is heavily mediated by contextual, cultural, and institutional constraints. Across interviews, participants repeatedly identified student readiness as a central concern, particularly in relation to low English proficiency, limited speaking confidence, and entrenched passive learning habits. Several teachers described students as hesitant to initiate discussion, reluctant to express opinions, or overly dependent on peers with stronger language skills. As P4 noted, *"Many students are not used to speaking up. They wait for instructions or copy what others say because they are afraid of making mistakes."* Similarly, P1 observed that some students *"prefer to be silent unless the teacher pushes them,"* indicating deeply rooted expectations of teacher-led interaction.

These observations reflect broader critiques of transferring student-centered pedagogies into educational contexts where learners have been socialized into hierarchical, teacher-fronted instruction (Hofstede, 2001; Littlewood, 2009; Nguyen, 2013). In Indonesian EFL classrooms, where respect for authority and examination

success often shape classroom behavior, learners may perceive open-ended discussion and peer negotiation as unfamiliar or risky (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Lie, 2017). From a sociocultural perspective, this suggests that learner passivity is not an individual deficit but a culturally and institutionally produced disposition, which complicates assumptions embedded in canonical PBL models regarding learner autonomy and self-direction (Hu & McKay, 2012; Jin & Cortazzi, 2017).

Group work—an essential component of PBL—was also frequently described as problematic. Teachers reported unequal participation, dominance by high-proficiency students, and limited collaboration skills, which undermined the intended benefits of problem-based interaction. P3 explained, *“Some students dominate the discussion, while others just agree or stay quiet.”* P5 similarly noted, *“Group work looks active, but often only one or two students actually do the speaking.”* These accounts suggest that, without explicit scaffolding, group-based PBL activities may reproduce existing participation inequities rather than democratize classroom interaction.

This finding reinforces research indicating that collaborative competence cannot be assumed, particularly in EFL and higher education contexts (Gillies, 2016; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Storch, 2013). Studies on interaction in second language learning emphasize that effective collaboration requires explicit instruction in group roles, interactional strategies, and accountability structures (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014). In the absence of such support, PBL risks becoming a superficial group activity rather than a genuinely collaborative learning process.

Time constraints and curriculum rigidity further constrained PBL enactment. Teachers consistently described tensions between the open-ended, iterative nature of PBL and institutional expectations for syllabus completion, assessment coverage, and standardized learning outcomes. As P2 remarked, *“PBL needs time—discussion, reflection, revision—but we are expected to finish the syllabus on schedule.”* P1 similarly noted that extended PBL cycles were difficult to sustain within fixed semester timelines. These tensions echo Hung’s (2011) argument that PBL often clashes with performance-driven educational systems, particularly in higher education contexts shaped by accountability, efficiency, and measurable outcomes (Biesta, 2015; Giroux, 2011).

Perhaps most critically, participants highlighted a lack of institutional and professional support for PBL implementation. Teachers described relying on self-experimentation, informal peer advice, or occasional workshops rather than sustained professional development. P3 admitted, *“We try PBL by ourselves. There is no clear guidance or follow-up training.”* P5 added, *“Sometimes we don’t know if we are doing it correctly, but there is no system to support us.”* This lack of structural support limits the depth, consistency, and sustainability of PBL practices, reinforcing earlier findings that pedagogical innovation cannot be sustained through individual effort alone (Harland, 2003; Wood, 2003; Fullan, 2007).

Taken together, these constraints suggest that PBL in Indonesian EFL speaking classes operates as a situated and negotiated practice, rather than a stable or standardized pedagogical model. Teachers continuously balance pedagogical ideals with institutional realities, cultural expectations, and learner readiness, resulting in partial, hybrid, and context-sensitive enactments of PBL. These finding challenges universalist assumptions in

PBL theory and supports calls for more contextually grounded models of pedagogical innovation in EFL and Global South educational settings (Hu & McKay, 2012; Pennycook, 2017; Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated Indonesian university EFL teachers' perceptions of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in English speaking classes, offering insight into how PBL is understood and enacted within a non-Western, examination-oriented higher education context. While teachers viewed PBL as a student-centered and meaningful approach that enhances engagement, speaking fluency, confidence, and willingness to communicate, the findings indicate that PBL is rarely implemented in its canonical form. Instead, it is selectively adapted to accommodate students' proficiency levels, classroom cultures, and institutional constraints.

The study contributes to global debates on PBL and speaking pedagogy by demonstrating that, in Indonesian EFL contexts, PBL functions primarily as a fluency-oriented and engagement-driven pedagogy, rather than as a balanced model of linguistic development. Teachers prioritized spontaneous communication and participation over grammatical accuracy, highlighting persistent tensions within communicative language teaching between fluency, accuracy, and complexity. This finding challenges assumptions in dominant PBL literature that learner-centered approaches naturally support comprehensive language development, particularly in foreign language environments.

From a teacher cognition perspective, the findings show that PBL enactment is mediated by teachers' beliefs, professional judgment, and perceptions of learner readiness. Teachers actively negotiated pedagogical ideals with contextual realities such as passive learning habits, time constraints, curriculum rigidity, and limited institutional support. These constraints resulted in partial and hybrid forms of PBL, underscoring that pedagogical innovation is a situated and adaptive process rather than a straightforward transfer of global models.

Conceptually, this study proposes a context-sensitive model of PBL for EFL speaking instruction, in which problem-based tasks are integrated with structured scaffolding, explicit support for collaborative skills, and selective form-focused feedback. Such a model positions PBL not as a wholesale pedagogical replacement but as a flexible framework that can coexist with local teaching traditions and institutional demands. This perspective has relevance beyond Indonesia, particularly for EFL contexts in Asia and the Global South where similar constraints shape classroom practice. Future research should extend this work by incorporating students' perspectives, classroom observations, and longitudinal designs to examine how PBL influences speaking development and learner autonomy over time, as well as how institutional structures enable or constrain sustainable pedagogical change.

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