



***EFFECTS OF USING PROJECT-BASED ACTIVITIES ON ORAL  
COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF TERTIARY ESL LEARNERS FROM  
TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING***

**NOOR IDAYU ABU BAKAR**

**FPP 2020 11**



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By

**NOOR IDAYU ABU BAKAR**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**September 2019**

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## DEDICATION

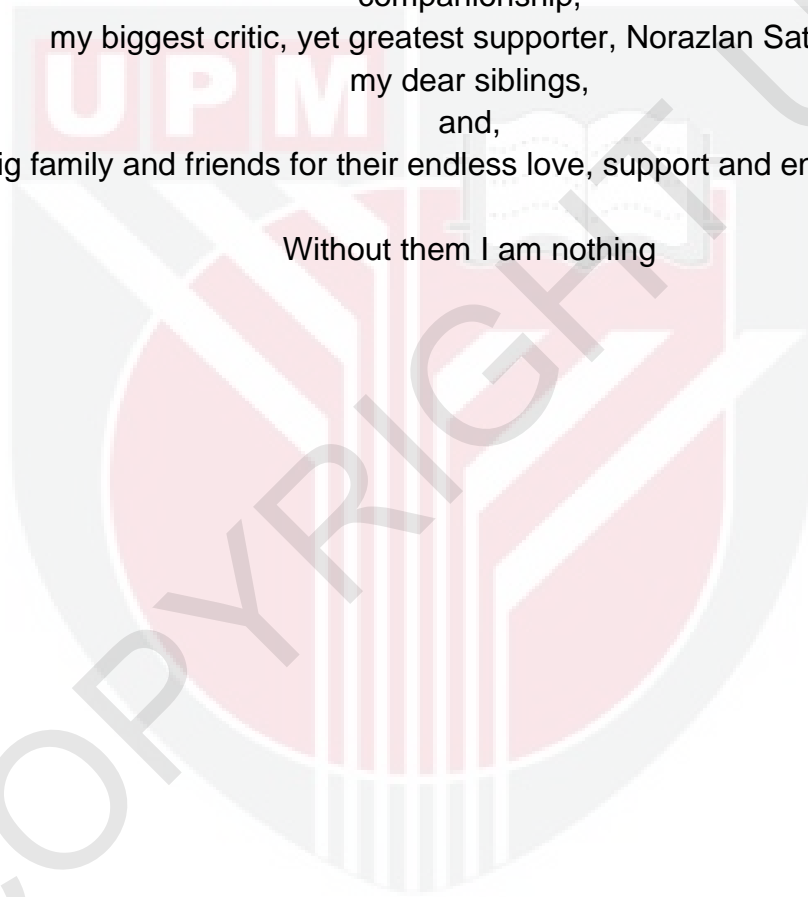
I dedicate this thesis to

my beloved parents, Haji Abu Bakar Ali and Hajah Jamilah Jalil, who are my strongest motivation,  
my faithful daughter, Nurul Syahindah Izzati Norazlan, for her patience and companionship,  
my biggest critic, yet greatest supporter, Norazlan Satiman,  
my dear siblings,  
and,  
my big family and friends for their endless love, support and encouragement.

Without them I am nothing



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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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By

**NOOR IDAYU ABU BAKAR**

**September 2019**

**Chair : Nooreen Noordin, PhD**  
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Grounded in the concept of Zone of Proximal Development in the Social Development Theory, the Communicative Competence Theory and the Gold Standard PBL model, the current study looks into the effects of using project-based learning (PjBL) activities as a teaching strategy on the oral communicative competence of ESL learners from a Malaysian TVET higher learning institution. It also investigates the perceptions of the TVET learners in relation to the effects of PjBL as a teaching strategy. A quasi-experimental design, known as non-randomised (pre-test and post-test) with control group design was employed. Forty-four students from a diploma programme at two centres of the TVET institution were purposely selected and divided into the experimental and control groups according to their intact groups. Data were collected from speaking pre and post-tests, listening pre and post-tests and a questionnaire. The study was conducted for eighteen weeks. The experimental group was taught the Communicative English course using PjBL teaching strategy as a treatment. Data from speaking and listening pre-tests and post-tests were analysed using t-tests, ANCOVA and MANOVA. The procedure began with the analysis of the pre-tests and post-tests and followed by a descriptive analysis on the data from the questionnaire. The results of t-tests showed no significant difference between groups in speaking skills ( $p=.870$ ) but found a significant difference between groups in listening skills ( $p=.027$ ). The results from MANOVA showed a significant difference between groups in the overall communicative competence ( $p=.042$ ). Meanwhile, the results of the questionnaire revealed that a majority of TVET learners in the PjBL group were moderately competent communicators (64%) who held high perceptions of the strengths of PjBL teaching strategy in the Communicative English course ( $M=4.02$ ). This study concluded that PjBL teaching strategy is more resultant than the conventional teaching strategy in

improving the English language oral communicative competence of TVET learners at the higher learning institution. This work contributes to new knowledge related to the effects of PjBL on the oral communicative competence of ESL learners from the TVET field in Malaysian context. It also reinforces the ideas presented in the theories and model used in the present study. Finally, several recommendations for further research work are also given at the end of this thesis.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**KESAN MENGGUNAKAN AKTIVITI PEMBELAJARAN BERASASKAN  
PROJEK TERHADAP KECEKAPAN KOMUNIKATIF LISAN DALAM  
KALANGAN PELAJAR ESL DARIPADA PENDIDIKAN TEKNIKAL DAN  
LATIHAN VOKASIONAL**

Oleh

**NOOR IDAYU ABU BAKAR**

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Kajian yang berlandaskan kepada Teori Pembangunan Sosial, Teori Kompetensi Komunikasi dan model Standard Pembelajaran Berasaskan Projek ini bertujuan menyiasat kesan penggunaan aktiviti pembelajaran berasaskan projek (PjBL) sebagai strategi pengajaran terhadap kecekapan komunikatif lisan dalam Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan pelajar dari sebuah institusi pengajian tinggi dalam bidang TVET di Malaysia. Ia turut menyiasat persepsi pelajar TVET terhadap kekuatan strategi pengajaran PjBL dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Reka bentuk kuasi eksperimen, iaitu ujian pra dan pasca kumpulan-kumpulan tidak seimbang beserta kumpulan kawalan telah digunakan. Empat puluh empat orang pelajar dari program diploma di dua buah cawangan institusi TVET tersebut telah dipilih melalui kaedah persampelan bertujuan dan dibahagikan kepada kumpulan eksperimen dan kumpulan kawalan mengikut kumpulan sedia ada. Data dikumpulkan dari ujian lisan pra dan pasca, ujian mendengar pra dan pasca dan soalselidik. Kajian ini dijalankan selama lapan belas minggu. Kumpulan eksperimen mempelajari kursus Communicative English menggunakan strategi pengajaran PjBL sebagai rawatan. Data daripada ujian lisan dan ujian mendengar pra dan pasca dianalisa dengan menggunakan ujian-t, ANCOVA dan MANOVA. Prosedur analisa data dimulakan dengan analisa ujian-t ke atas ujian lisan dan ujian mendengar dan diikuti oleh analisa deskriptif ke atas data soalselidik. Keputusan ujian-t menunjukkan perbezaan yang tidak signifikan antara kumpulan dalam kemahiran lisan ( $p=.870$ ) tetapi mendapati wujud perbezaan yang signifikan antara kumpulan dalam kemahiran mendengar ( $p=.027$ ). Keputusan dari ujian MANOVA menunjukkan perbezaan yang signifikan antara kumpulan dalam kecekapan berkomunikasi secara keseluruhan ( $p=.042$ ). Sementara itu, dapatan soalselidik menunjukkan bahawa majoriti pelajar TVET dalam kumpulan PjBL adalah penutur berkecekapan sederhana (64%) yang

mempunyai persepsi yang tinggi terhadap kekuatan strategi pengajaran PjBL dalam kursus Bahasa Inggeris Komunikatif (M=4.02). Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa strategi pengajaran PjBL adalah lebih berkesan daripada strategi pengajaran konvensional dalam meningkatkan kecekapan komunikatif lisan dalam Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan pelajar TVET di institusi pengajian tinggi tersebut. Dapatan ini menyumbang kepada pengetahuan baru berkaitan kesan PjBL dalam meningkatkan kecekapan berkomunikasi pelajar ESL dari bidang TVET dalam konteks Malaysia. Ia juga mengukuhkan kebenaran teori dan model yang digunakan dalam kajian ini. Akhir sekali, beberapa cadangan untuk kerja penyelidikan selanjutnya juga diberikan di akhir tesis ini.





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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEFR	Common European Framework of References for Languages
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
DOCE	Diploma of Competency in Electrical
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
EPT	English Proficiency Test
ESL	English as a Second Language
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
MARA	Majlis Amanah Rakyat
MEF	Malaysian Employers Federation
MOE	Ministry of Education
PBL	Problem-based Learning
PjBL	Project Based Learning
SPCC	Self-Perceived Communicative Competence
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
TBL	Task Based Learning
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to give an overview of the present research and justify its importance. The first part of this chapter establishes the context and background of the topic. Next, the researcher discusses the research problem and introduces the research objectives, research questions and the hypotheses of the study. It is followed by the significance of the research, its scope and limitations. Finally, several important terms in the study are defined at the end of the chapter.

#### 1.2 Background of the Study

Over the years, communicative competence has been widely accepted as the aim of contemporary English language learning (Poolsawad, Kanjanawasee, & Wudthayagorn, 2015; Eaton, 2010). This is because in the present English language learning, the focus is no longer on grammar nor memorization but rather on the competent use of the language to connect and communicate with others worldwide, in real time, and in real life communication situations (Eaton, 2010). According to Richards (2008), in countries where English is learnt as a second language (ESL), a foreign language (EFL) or other language (ESOL), the success of English language learners is often evaluated based on how they have improved in their spoken language, which makes the mastery of oral language a priority. Ulil Amri Nasiruddin (2018) also shared the same view and claimed that many foreign language teachers regarded speaking fluency as a benchmark to measure students' language competency, making speaking the most important skill to acquire. Aside from that, Myles (2009) found that in the real life of students, that is, their future careers, a great deal of oral communication was involved. It was because people speak more than they write to communicate at workplace. The aforementioned studies suggest that acquiring oral competency in English language is a yardstick and oral communication also seems to have a more significant place in real life than the written communication. To communicate effectively in English, a communicator needs to be both a competent speaker and listener at the same time; signifying the importance of acquiring not only the skills of speaking, but also listening in English language oral communication (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Ahmadi, 2016). However, speaking and listening skills are known to be most difficult to acquire (Gaibani, 2014; Walker, 2014), resulting in many English language learners worldwide having a hard time demonstrating oral competency in the English language (Nikian, Mohamad Nor, Rejab, Hassan & Zainal, 2016; Croucher, Rahmani, Sakkinen, & Hample, 2016;. Xue, 2013; Larsari, 2011; Tavit, 2010).

Meanwhile in Malaysia, speaking and listening skills are claimed to be often neglected in the ESL classrooms due to the emphasis given to reading and writing skills as a result of the country's exam-oriented education system (Choo & Melur Md Yunus, 2017; Spawa & Fauziah Hassan, 2013). The lack of attention given to these skills has led to ESL learners having fewer opportunities to communicate in English, which in turn, causes the learners to have insufficient speaking practice to develop their English language communication skills. The insufficient practice only heightens the ESL learners' fear and anxiety towards the English language, causing low self-confidence to communicate in English (Chin, Ling, & Yih, 2016; Hamedi, Akbari, Hamedi, & Hamedi, 2015; Darmi & Albion, 2014). As a consequence, the Malaysian ESL learners are often criticised for not demonstrating competency in the English language oral communication despite spending a number of years in school learning English (Nikian, Mohamad Nor, Rejab, Hassan, & Zainal, 2016; Cheah, 2015).

In the long run, the impact of having low self-confidence to communicate in English issue is reflected on the Malaysian graduates. In the recent years, the media have profoundly reported the poor state of English among Malaysian graduates, resulting in excessive concerns over the matter. It was claimed that Malaysian graduates who were seeking jobs were not on a par with foreign graduates who were better in communication skills and command of English (Ahmad Sidek, 2017). On top of that, the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) asserted that English proficiency remained problematic for many Malaysian graduates in general ("English proficiency still a big problem," 2017). The impact on the graduates from the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) field, a field that has become the main interest of the government in the recent years ("TVET empowerment committee formed," 2018; "IKM advised to uphold TVET education," 2017), is also considerably discussed in the literature, indicating the seriousness of the issue in the TVET field, too (Rd. Khairina Khirotdin, Junita Mohamed Ali, Norhidayati Nordin, & Sheikh Ezamuddin Sheikh Mohd Mustaffa, 2019; Ghazali Sulaiman & Abd Said Ambotang, 2017; Suhaily Abdullah & Faizah Abd Majid, 2013).

Acquiring language competency in English as a second language, along with the Malay language, is designated as one of the proposed attributes of a Malaysian graduate in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015 – 2025 (Higher Education) blueprint (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The introduction of the Malaysian graduates' attributes places a huge responsibility on education institutions at tertiary level as immediate providers of the workforce in general, and their English language teachers in particular, in ensuring that the aims of education in Malaysia are achieved. The responsibility applies to Malaysian TVET higher learning institutions too. In fact, their responsibility could be heavier than their counterparts' as the severity of the issue related to poor proficiency of English is said to be more intense among students from TVET field. This is because TVET field is commonly known as an alternative means of tertiary education that provides the second lane of education at



tertiary level to students who do not fulfil the requirements to further their studies at the university (E-Kemahiran, 2017). Owing to this, the entry requirements to enrol in TVET programmes are minimal, whereby some programmes do not even require passing the English subject in SPM as mandatory (E-Kemahiran, 2017). Thus, it is no news that graduates from TVET higher learning institutions are generally weak in the English language.

It is important to get to the crux of the matter in order to alleviate the problem related to lack of English language competency among Malaysian graduates. For this reason, it is critical that focus be given on improving the competency among the ESL learners from TVET higher learning institutions who are known to have generally poor grasp of English. Thus, the rationale for conducting the present study is to alleviate this problem among the TVET ESL learners. It seeks to identify a way to improve the English language oral communicative competence of the ESL learners from the field in order to prepare them for real-life communication.

Since insufficient speaking practice is believed to be the barrier in acquiring the English language among Malaysian ESL learners, providing more speaking opportunities is crucial. In much the same way, Mino and Butler (1995) once said that “to develop oral communication skills, students need to communicate orally at every opportunity” (Mino & Butler, 1995, p. 5). Their statement verifies that opportunity to communicate is indeed very much needed by English language learners to improve their oral communicative competence. This is supported by previous studies conducted by Sarah Yusoff, Rohana Yusoff and Nur Hidayah Md Noh (2017) and Azura Omar, Nor Farizah Taib and Ida Suriana Basri (2012) that have shown that less proficient English learners were able to succeed in learning when they were given ample opportunity to learn in a learning environment that matched their needs. Similarly, Nunan (1991) pointed out that an English language teaching method that is effective should provide learners ample opportunity to practise the target language. He further illustrated that the communicative approach of language learning offers a lot of opportunities to communicate in the target language in various communication situations. However, an ineffective communicative approach or instruction may not support the development of speaking skills (Aliyah Baharuddin Marji, Rafik-Galea, & Yuit, 2015). In fact, any teaching strategy that does not enhance the internalization of English language provides no support to the development of the language (Ghazali Sulaiman & Abd Said Ambotang, 2017).

This present study is also driven by the need to find an alternative to the present English language teaching strategies that is effective and matches the needs of the low proficient learners from TVET. Project Based Learning (PjBL) is deemed a teaching methodology that enhances internalization of English through its real-world projects and provides a lot of opportunities for communication during the learning process (Miller, 2016; Larmer, 2014).

However, just like any other teaching strategies, PjBL has its advantages and disadvantages (Woro Sumarni, 2015). Although there are reservations about the actual effectiveness of PjBL in enhancing student outcomes (Condliffe Quint, Visher, Bangser, Drohojowska, Saco & Nelson, 2017), there is also a potential that PjBL could be an effective alternative to the present English language teaching strategies that will enhance the oral communicative competence of ESL learners particularly from TVET. Thus, the answers to the questions and evidence to support or refute the claims could be ascertained from another empirical study on PjBL.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

There is ample evidence in the literature pointing out the weakness of TVET learners in English language oral communicative competence and its impact on the future careers of the TVET learners. In the first study, Suhaily Abdullah and Faizah Abd Majid (2013) who investigated English teaching challenges at a Malaysian polytechnic found that ESL teachers in TVET institutions were mainly challenged by the students' poor attendance, attention, attitude, participation and English competency. It shows that poor English competency was likely a problem among TVET learners. Next, in another study conducted by Farisa Jazima Mat Yusof, Nurul Ashikin Abu Bakar and Syamaizar Bilah (2018) among TVET students at MARA Higher Vocational College, it was revealed that most students felt that they had a low level of English proficiency. Besides that, the evidence of the issue among TVET graduates was also substantiated by the former Youth and Sports Minister of Malaysia ("Employers are becoming more confident...", 2017). He asserted that TVET graduates are still weak in the conversational aspects of English language for workplace communication, to fulfil the employers' needs even though they have acquired sound technical skills during their studies. Similarly, Maharam Mamat, Dayana Daiman, Rahani Mohd Musa, Nur Athirah Irham, Wong & Yong (2019) reported that the major weakness of TVET graduates was English, which resulted in challenges for employers to find employees among TVET graduates who were able to communicate competently in English.

Latisha Asmaak Shafie and Surina Nayan (2010) asserted that the employability of graduates could be enhanced if they have comprehensive knowledge and skills in the English language. This statement highlights the link between graduates' employability and English communicative ability. Similarly, TVET graduates with poor English are likely to face difficulties in securing a job. Ghazali Sulaiman and Abd Said Ambotang (2017) asserted that vocational students were low proficient in English. Siti Martini Mustapha and Ros Aizan Yahaya (2013) accentuated the relation between TVET graduates' poor English competency and TVET graduates' employability. According to them, Malaysian graduates' lack of English language competency is often associated with its impact on the employability of graduates. The claim is supported by Suhaily Abdullah and Faizah Abd Majid (2013) who stated that their study was driven by the unemployability issue among technical graduates



which was due to graduates' poor command of English. Employers anticipate graduates with the quality to work in global contexts, which includes having the oral competency in English (Norafini Zulkurnain & Kaur, 2014). This claim is substantiated by findings from a review on a tracer study report conducted by Rd. Khairina Khirotdin, Junita Mohamed Ali, Norhidayati Nordin and Sheikh Ezamuddin Sheikh Mohd Mustaffa (2019). It was found that competency in English language communication is one of the must have competencies listed by employers for a TVET graduate to find a job. In brief, competency in oral English does have an impact on the employability of Malaysian TVET graduates.

Even though Project Based Learning is deemed effective in English language learning, Condliffe, Quint, Visher, Bangser, Drohojowska, Saco and Nelson (2017) whose work updates a seminal literature review of by Thomas (2000) claimed that after 17 years, the evidence for PjBL effectiveness in improving students' outcomes is still not proven even though it is promising. This is because despite the advantages, there are reported drawbacks of PjBL in the literature that call for further investigation. Collaboration and group work are said to be problematic in PjBL (Sadrina, Ramlee Mustapha, & Muhammad Ichsan, 2018; Zhang, 2015) and its effectiveness for low English proficiency learners is questionable too (Kalabzov, 2015; Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006). Nevertheless, all these claims are inconclusive since all the studies varied in terms of their contexts. The lack of evidence could also be due to the fact that although a number of studies claimed that PjBL promotes ESL students' outcomes, including language skills such as in Aicha, 2017; Sadeghi, Biniaz, & Soleimani, 2016; Newprasit & Seepho, 2015; Kalabzov, 2015; Kavlu, 2015; Zhang, 2015; Liyana, Siti Bahirah, Bazilah Raihan, Khairul Hisyam, Johan & Siti Fariha, 2015; Umikalsom Masrom & Dahlia Syahrani Md. Yusof, 2013; Aiedah Abdul Khalek & Lee, 2012; Azura Omar, Nor Farizah Taib & Ida Suriana Basri, 2012; Poonpon, 2011), the studies that have actually measured the actual effects of PjBL using experimental design are limited to Sadeghi, Biniaz and Soleimani (2016), Newprasit and Seepho (2015) and Kavlu (2015). The first study was a quasi-experiment with pre-test and post-test control group design, that aimed at investigating the effects of PjBL on writing skills while the second study was a pre-experimental study that employed a single-group design. Thus, no control group was involved. Meanwhile, despite employing a pure experimental design with a control group, the third study was aimed at determining only the effects of PjBL on reading skills. Moreover, all the three studies were restricted by context since they were conducted among students in Iran, Thailand and Iraq correspondingly. To date, no published experimental study of PjBL has actually investigated the effects of PjBL on English language oral communicative competence from a Malaysian context, to the knowledge of the researcher.

Besides that, PjBL is also theorized to be suitable and beneficial for low proficient English language learners (Miller, 2016; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2011; Moss & Van Duzer, 1998). Then again, this claim needs to be further

authenticated with empirical evidence in order to refute an earlier claim made by Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (2006) that PjBL is only suitable for fluent English speakers. On top of that, to corroborate the strengths of PjBL, it is also crucial to find out whether ESL learners in other contexts and at different settings enjoy PjBL and find it interesting and beneficial for them in learning English, the same way as the other ESL learners felt about and perceived PjBL, as reported in Aicha (2017), Zhang (2015) and Umikalsom Masrom and Dahlia Syahrani Md. Yusof (2013).

All in all, this situation raises several questions that demand more empirical-based evidence in order to establish the effectiveness of PjBL in the literature. As concluded by Condliffe and colleagues (2017), PjBL may or may not be effective in other contexts with different participants and settings. Similarly, whether or not PjBL has any effects in improving oral communicative competence of Malaysian ESL learners from TVET tertiary institutions is still a question. Accordingly, these uncertainties and loopholes call for a new study to be conducted in the aforementioned context to substantiate or to refute the claims in the literature.

#### **1.4 Aim of the Study**

Given the motivation of the study and the problem statement, it is therefore crucial to search for an English language teaching strategy that matches the needs of these low achievers of English from TVET, which is effective in improving the TVET learners' oral communicative competence in English language for better oral communication skills in their future careers.

Therefore, the study aims at ascertaining the effects of using Project Based Learning activities as a teaching strategy (henceforth PjBL teaching strategy) on the English language oral communicative competence of tertiary level ESL learners from the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) field in Malaysia (henceforth TVET learners), in comparison to a conventional teaching strategy. It also aims at investigating the effects of using the PjBL teaching strategy in the Communicative English course from the perspectives of the TVET learners after being taught using the PjBL strategy.

#### **1.5 Research Objectives**

The research objectives of the study are presented below: -

1. To determine the effects of using PjBL teaching strategy on the English language speaking skills of TVET learners.
2. To determine the effects of using PjBL teaching strategy on the English language listening skills of TVET learners.

3. To determine the effects of using PjBL teaching strategy on the overall English language oral communicative competence of TVET learners.
4. To determine the effects of using PjBL teaching strategy on the English language oral communicative competence of TVET learners from different achievement subgroups in PjBL.
5. To investigate the perceptions of TVET learners regarding the effects of PjBL teaching strategy in enhancing English language learning.

## 1.6 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research objectives are translated into five research questions and ten null hypotheses which are statistically tested in the present study. The research questions, as well as the null hypotheses, are presented below:

1. Do the PjBL and the conventional teaching strategies have any effect on TVET learners' English language speaking skills?
  - H<sub>0</sub>1:** There is no significant difference between the speaking pre-test and post-test scores in both groups.
  - H<sub>0</sub>2:** There is no significant difference in speaking test scores between the experimental and control groups.
2. Do the PjBL and the conventional teaching strategies have any effect on TVET learners' English language listening skills?
  - H<sub>0</sub>3:** There is no significant difference between the listening pre-test and post-test scores in both groups.
  - H<sub>0</sub>4:** There is no significant difference in listening test scores between the experimental and control groups.
  - H<sub>0</sub>5:** There is no significant effect of teaching strategy on the listening skills controlling for pre-test scores.
3. Does using different teaching strategies have different effects on TVET learners' overall English language oral communicative competence?
  - H<sub>0</sub>6:** There is no significant difference in TVET learners' oral communicative competence between different teaching strategies.
4. Do different achievement PjBL subgroups (high, medium, low) differ in oral communicative competence (speaking and listening) between time (pre-test and post-test)?
  - H<sub>0</sub>7:** There is no interaction effect between time and achievement subgroups on oral communicative competence
  - H<sub>0</sub>8:** There is no significant difference in oral communicative competence between time in high achievers' group.
  - H<sub>0</sub>9:** There is no significant difference in oral communicative competence between time in medium achievers' group.

**H<sub>0</sub>10:** There is no significant difference in oral communicative competence between time in low achievers' group.

5. Do the TVET learners perceive highly of the effects of PjBL teaching strategy in enhancing English language learning?

## 1.7 Significance of the Study

The study ascertains the effects of using Project Based Learning as a teaching strategy (PjBL teaching strategy) to teach Communicative English, on the oral communicative competence of TVET learners by comparing the improvement in speaking skills, listening skills and overall oral communicative competence of the learners with a control group. The effects are also investigated by gathering the TVET learners' opinions after being taught using the PjBL teaching strategy.

This study attempts to make three major contributions to the literature. First, the study adds to the relatively small amount of research focusing on PjBL as a teaching strategy in the field of English language teaching (ELT) in Malaysia. The results of the study also offer important insights into the implementation of Project Based Learning (PjBL) at TVET higher learning institutions. Owing to the scarcity of knowledge related to PjBL applications in Malaysian ESL classrooms, the study specifically provides teachers with a detailed and structured instructional delivery process of implementing PjBL in an ESL classroom through the proposed Project Based Learning module and activities. The study gives another practical strategy to teach Communicative English, especially TVET learners at higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Besides that, the learners involved in the study may also benefit from the exposure to a new learning experience that is likely to suit their learning styles, which in turn can maximise their English language learning capabilities.

Secondly, the study gathers information related to the TVET learners' perceptions of PjBL and their perceived development of communicative competence in English based on their experience in undergoing a series of lessons using PjBL teaching strategy. Information that is related to the learners' beliefs and attitudes gives a better understanding of the investigated issue (i.e. PjBL for improving English oral communicative competence) to teachers who wish to implement PjBL in their classrooms. Knowing the learners' beliefs and attitudes helps to discover their strengths and weaknesses; and by doing so, teachers are able to identify suitable activities that will stimulate the learners' interest further. On the other hand, knowing the TVET learners' weaknesses helps to identify the factors that are holding them back and also the areas that need to be given further attention. For module writers and curriculum developers, the information will assist them in allocating the learning time in structuring their English language syllabi and choosing suitable types of activities as well as assessments to be incorporated in their English language modules and courses.



Finally, the study is significant owing to its selection of research participants and setting. The decision to conduct a study among the English language learners from the TVET field seems prudent and timely, considering the importance of upgrading TVET in the recent years ("TVET empowerment committee formed," 2018; "IKM advised to uphold TVET education," 2017; Mohamad Sattar Rasul, Zool Hilmi Mohamed Ashari, Norzaini Azman & Rose Amnah Abdul Rauf, 2015; Economic Planning Unit, 2015). As immediate providers of a high-skilled workforce, higher learning institutions from the TVET field are responsible to prepare job-ready graduate, who possess the qualities of a Malaysian graduate as prescribed in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The transformation of TVET in the study setting has also been recently announced in TVET MARA transformation roadmaps (Bahagian Kemahiran dan Teknikal MARA, 2018). Thus, after many years of focus given to university education, the present study is anticipated to give the attention needed by the TVET field as it attempts to provide readers, including scholars, teachers, practitioners, students and stakeholders, with the big picture of the English language learning environment in a TVET higher learning institution and the effort being taken to improve the quality of education of TVET learners at the tertiary level institutions in general.

### **1.8 Scope and Limitations of the Study**

A quasi-experimental design is employed in the study to investigate the effects of PjBL teaching strategy in improving the English language oral communicative competence of TVET learners after being taught using the strategy for 12 weeks. The study involves two intact groups who are purposely selected from a population of diploma level students from a TVET institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The study, which embraces all the research objectives previously mentioned in this chapter, carries two limitations as addressed below.

The first limitation of the study is related to the generalisability of the findings. Since the study employs a non-probability sampling technique, the results of the study are not to be generalised to students from other TVET higher learning institutions in Malaysia but restricted to only the students who are involved in this study. Besides that, the unavoidable use of intact groups in this study due to administrative reasons at the study setting also limits the generalisability of the results to a larger population. This limitation, however, does not undermine the importance of the results as the study itself is meant to be specifically focused on the TVET learners at the particular TVET institution.

The second limitation of the study is related to the intact group employed in the study. The study involves two intact groups totalling only 44 students due

to limited availability of the target participants. The situation is unavoidable because as a fairly new programme, the enrolment of students in the particular diploma programme is considerably low that the availability of the students for the study is limited. As a matter of fact, at each centre, the selected participants were the only group of students from the particular programme who were accessible in the particular academic semester during the commencement of the study. This situation is similar to the situation encountered by Zare (2016) who conducted a quasi-experimental study with a sample size of 32 and Bolandifar (2017) who had only 42 participants in her quasi-experimental study. In both studies, employing a small sample size was also unavoidable due to limited availability of the participants. Even though the sample size of the present study was reasonably small, according to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) in Jafary (2014), 15 participants per group is an acceptable minimum sample size to commence an experimental study. In addition, with regard to the validity of statistical tests, Winter (2013) concluded based on his research findings that there is no principal objection to employ a particular statistical test with a small sample size. The only downside of this condition is that a significant difference may fail to be detected when a small sample size is used, thus increasing the chance of making Type II error. In addition, the imbalance sample size between the experimental and the control group is also beyond the control of the researcher as intact groups are employed.

## **1.9 Definition of Terms**

In this section, seven important terms in the study are defined theoretically and operationally. These terms include the independent and dependent variables that form the study. Operationalizing the terms helps in defining how the variables are measured in the study.

### **1.9.1 Project Based Learning**

Project Based Learning (PjBL) involves a learning process that takes place around a project. Moss and Van Duzer (1998) defines PjBL as an instructional approach that scrutinizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop. According to Faridah Musa, Norlaila Mufti, Rozmel Abd Latiff and Maryam Mohamed Amin (2011), PjBL is a comprehensive instructional approach which engages students in an organized and cooperative manner to investigate and resolve certain problems. Buck Institute for Education (2014) defines PjBL as a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning through an extended inquiry process which is structured around complex authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks.

Together, the term Project Based Learning (PjBL) in this study refers to a long-term collaborative learning process that is centred on a real-world project and the activities pertaining to completing the project. PjBL is used as a teaching strategy to teach the Communicative English course in the present study. In this study, PjBL is distinguished from 'project work' in terms of its principles and implementation. The principles of PjBL aligns with the elements in the Gold Standard of PBL model by Larmer, Mergendoller and Boss (2015) and it is implemented in a long-term, requiring students to engage in the process from the very beginning. In contrast, 'project work' refers to any kind of group project prescribed by the teacher that does not follow the principles of PjBL, usually implemented in a much shorter duration, and requires students to be engaged in only part of the process.

### **1.9.2 Project-Based Activities**

'Activity' means something that is done as work or for a particular purpose (Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary). Foss, Carney, McDonalds and Rooks (2007) described Project Based Learning activities as four distinct small projects in an English programme, which is implemented to measure the effectiveness of a PjBL approach. Adzura Elier Ahmad and Li (2014) said that PjBL activities refer to the steps involved in implementing a PjBL lesson. Meanwhile, in Zhang (2015), the PjBL activities in her study are comparable to the roles of the teacher and learners in each PjBL step.

Similar to the definition by Adzura Elier Ahmad and Li (2014), the term 'Project-based activities' used in this present study refers to the eight PjBL phases (also the main PjBL activities) involved in the implementation of the PjBL teaching strategy in the study, together with a number of scaffolding activities. The eight PjBL phases in the study are the integration of elements in the Gold Standard PBL model proposed by Larmer, Mergendoller and Boss (2015). Meanwhile, the term 'project-based activities as a teaching strategy' refers to the intervention employed in the present study which is also abbreviated as PjBL teaching strategy.

### **1.9.3 TVET Learners**

According to Ministry of Education Malaysia (2019) TVET is abbreviated from Technical and Vocational Education and Training. It refers to the process of education and training that aims for employment and emphasizes on industrial practices. Meanwhile, Ghazali Sulaiman and Abd Said Ambotang (2017) define TVET as a system whose role is to form individuals who have high technical skills as desired by the industry. In the context of English language learning, Mohd Shafeirul Zaman Abd Majid, Azwin Arif Abd Rahim, Razmi Ab Rahman and Zeti Adela Zolkepli (2016) used the term TVET students to refer

to learners in a TVET higher learning institution who learn the English language at the particular institution.

Similar to Mohd Shafeirul Zaman Abd Majid and colleagues (2016), the term 'TVET learners' used in the study refers to students from a TVET higher learning institution who learn the English language as a second language. The TVET learners are also the participants of the study. They are Malaysian students from the Malay race who come from non-English speaking homes and are enrolled in the Communicative English course at the TVET higher learning institution.

#### **1.9.4 Oral Communicative Competence**

The term 'oral communicative competence' is interpreted from the concept of "communicative competence" by Canale and Swain (1980); Canale (1983) which is defined as a synthesis of knowledge and skills in four sub-competencies, namely grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic, that are needed to communicate in real-life communication situations. Tavil (2010) refers English language oral communicative competence in her study as the result of the integration of listening and speaking skills while Aliyah Baharuddin Marji, Rafik-Galea and Yuit (2015) define oral communicative competence as effective and accurate use of spoken English, in terms of comprehensibility, fluency of speech, vocabulary usage, grammar and syntax and pronunciation which is demonstrated in a group discussion.

In this present study, the term refers to the synthesis of the English language knowledge and the skills of speaking and listening, in four sub-competencies, demonstrated or performed appropriately in given situations. Similar to Tavil (2010), oral communicative competence in the present study is developed from the integration of the TVET learners' English speaking and listening skills, which are demonstrated from their performance in a speaking test and a listening test.

#### **1.9.5 Speaking Skills**

Speaking is the action of having conversation with somebody while skill is the ability to do something well (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2019). Speaking skills in real-life communications focus more on the ideas than the language. Abbaspour (2016) describes the ability to communicate in real-life situations as speaking competence while according to Kamisah, Mukhaiyar and Desamawati Radjab (2013), speaking skills involve the ability to comprehend oral texts, the ability to assemble and make sense of words orally and the acquisition of rich vocabulary to speak.



Given the understanding, the term 'speaking skills' in the present study incorporates both definitions and is interpreted as the learners' ability to speak with others appropriately and to convey messages effectively in social and workplace communication situations. The learners' English language speaking skills are determined from their performance in a speaking test. Differently, the term 'the skill of speaking' used in the study refers to speaking as one of the four language skills.

### **1.9.6 Listening Skills**

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2019), 'listen' means to pay attention to somebody or something that you can hear. Kathleen and Kitao (1996) describe listening as including a variety of skills from the lowest level such as discriminating sounds and intonation to understanding short and long listening texts. In a more recent interpretation of listening skills, listening skills range from basic discrimination of sound to deep communication (Changing Minds, 2018). Saricoban and Karakurt (2016) measure the development of listening skills by the increment of scores in the students' post-test compared to their scores in the pre-test.

In the present study, listening skills refer to the learners' ability to comprehend and evaluate information that they hear from various types of listening texts. Their improvement in the English language listening skills in the present study is measured from the listening pre-test and post-test scores of the learners. Differently, the term 'the skill of listening' used in the study refers to listening as one of the four language skills.

### **1.9.7 Learners' Perceptions**

Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary (2017) defines the term perception as "a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem". Abdulwahed Ahmed Ismail (2011) in his study described the ESL learners' perceptions as their assumptions and beliefs about a writing course they undertook.

The term 'learners' perceptions' in this study refers to TVET learners' beliefs, attitudes and opinions on the effects of the PjBL teaching strategy and also on their self-perceived communicative competence after being taught using the strategy. TVET learners' perceptions in this study are gathered from a questionnaire.

## 1.10 Summary

This chapter informs the researcher's main interest in this proposed study which is on Project Based Learning (PjBL) as a teaching strategy. The study seeks to find the answer to the leading question of whether the PjBL strategy has any effects on the oral communicative competence of tertiary level ESL learners from the TVET field. This chapter also explains the nature of the proposed research, which includes its rationale, what it tries to achieve and how it will be achieved, and finally justifies the reason the research is worthy of study. The theoretical underpinnings of the proposed study and more evidence of PjBL implementation from past studies will be presented in the following chapter.



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