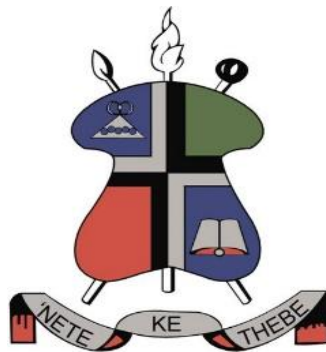


**EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN
ENHANCING PROFICIENCY IN PRODUCTIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS
AMONG ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) GRADE 9
LEARNERS IN MASERU**

By

LEHLOHONOLO DANIEL LESOMA (201904423)

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION IN
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SUPERVISOR: Dr. MAHAO MAHAO

JULY 2025

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation titled “**Exploring the Impact of Project-Based Learning in Enhancing Proficiency in Productive Language Skills Among English as a Second Language Grade 9 Learners in Maseru**” is my own work, and that all sources have been duly referenced. It has not been submitted before; to any other university for any other degree or examination.

Student: Lehlohonolo Daniel Lesoma



Date: 30 July 2025

Supervisor:



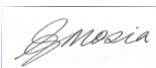
Date: 06 November 2025

Head of Department:



Date: 06 November 2025

Dean – Faculty of Education:



Date: 06 November 2025

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to myself in appreciation of the diligence, commitment and intellectual rigor that have been essential to its completion. This document serves as evidence of my perseverance, personal development, and unwavering dedication to academic success. I have worked to overcome obstacles and consistently pursue more knowledge and success via perseverance and self-control.

ABSTRACT

The present study explored the impact of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing proficiency in productive language skills among Grade 9 ESL learners in Maseru. Grounded in the theoretical framework of social constructivism, the research emphasised the role of interactive and learner-centred learning environments in language learning. The study adopted a mixed method approach and employed exploratory research design; this design sought to uncover challenges that learners in the English language classroom. Data were collected through classroom observations, pre-tests and post-tests targeting productive language skills, and focus group interviews explored learners' experiences. In addition, data was analysed through SPSS, and thematically, relatively. The school was purposively selected to reach a targeted group of both girls and boys. Moreover, convenient sampling was utilised to use any available grade 9 ESL learners. Twenty (20) learners participated in this study. The findings reveal that PBL significantly boosts learners' autonomy and collaborative skills, contributing to improved speaking and writing skills. The study highlights PBL as an effective instructional strategy to foster active engagement and meaningful language use in ESL contexts. Implications for teaching practices and future research in ESL education are discussed; it is suggested the need for further research that would explore the impact of PBL in enhancing receptive language skills (listening and reading).

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning, English as a Second Language, productive language skills*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study explores the impact of project-based learning (PBL) in enhancing proficiency in productive language skills among English as a Second Language (ESL) grade 9 learners. In this chapter, the key concepts that serve as a foundation in this study are stated and defined; English as a second language, proficiency in language skill and Project-Based learning. Furthermore, this chapter examines the background to the study, statement of the problem, the purpose of the study and the significance of the study.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

English is the language of accessing bread and butter issues and its popularity is growing rapidly. It is the language of trade, science, technology, literature, research and many other crucial activities. In addition, it helps people communicate emotions, thoughts, feelings, and so on (Lin et al., 2018). Subsequently, English language is the window to see the world properly. It is essential for keeping pace with the advancement in different fields and to excel in professional fields. Again, English, as the third most spoken language globally, after Mandarin and Spanish, serves as the official language in 67 countries, including the United States, Australia, Britain, Canada and South Africa, and a second (L2) language in 27 others, such as the Philippines (Ntabwoba & Sikubwabo, 2024).

As means to conveying thoughts and emotions, Zarate (2022) affirms that communication is essential for overcoming obstacles in life and adjusting to various situations. As a result, students should be proficient communicators. Thus, it is important to support learners in improving their speaking, listening, writing and reading abilities (MoET,2009). The capacity to use the language is referred to as language proficiency: the notion of proficiency in a second or foreign language is widely acknowledged to include both the ability to use the language (knowing how) and the knowledge of it (knowing what), Muhamad et al. (2024). Furthermore, Eslit and Valderama (2023) argue that for one to be proficient in a language, language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) should be mastered. The degree to which a learner can utilise a language, including their skills to read, write, speak and comprehend it, is known as English language proficiency (Rahmawati et al., 2023). In addition, English language proficiency describes a

learner's proficiency in using English language for academic or professional purposes. Emphatically, the focus in this study's context is proficiency in English productive skills (speaking and writing).

In consequence, learners with low English language proficiency face several challenges that hinder their academic success. Along similar lines, Zhou and Thompson (2023) highlight that these challenges include difficulties in understanding lectures, grasping content, and participating in discussions, which can lead to frustration and anxiety. Limited vocabulary and the influence of their first language further complicate their ability to express themselves and comprehend materials (Misbah et al., 2017). Additionally, internal factors such as lack of confidence and negative attitudes towards English can exacerbate these difficulties. These challenges collectively impact learners' ability to engage effectively with academic content, ultimately affecting their overall performance.

People who are proficient in English have access to a wealth of opportunities in both their personal and professional lives (Guilherme, 2007). Educational institutions and language learning centres have been concentrating on creating techniques to improve students' English language ability since they understand how important this skill is. In an educational setting, speaking English is just as important as learning written English because written English is full of examples, and pedagogy must allow students to practice creating sentences in a specific language while they are learning written models. For one to be proficient in spoken English, they must first practice pronouncing English sounds (Aimen & Khadim, 2024).

English is the commonly used language in the business sector, and proficiency in the language has grown to be one of the most crucial employability skills. The capacity to construct grammatically sound sentences is simply one aspect of proper English. Arochman et al. (2024) highlight that writing is a high-demand skill. Activities such as report writing, emails, resumes and written business communication are essential in the process of business field and cannot be ignored. Learners need to be able to practice such activities with the proper skills and competence to enhance their careers. Moreover, other associated abilities for successful communication include presenting skills, persuasive and negotiating skills, and interpersonal English proficiency (Ne'matullah et al., 2023). As a result of the worldwide market, English proficiency is expected to grow annually, making it difficult for workers to advance in their careers if they do not speak the

language well. According to Clement and Murugavel (2018), numerous studies carried out in different Asian nations have found that English enhances job performance and increases opportunities for advancement. Moreover, poor English language skills slow down flow of effective communication, causes misinterpretation, create frustration and create barriers among the employees.

Lesotho's educational system strives to help learners develop the communication skills necessary for speaking, listening, reading and writing in both Sesotho and English, and using them in daily situations (MoET, 2019). After Lesotho gained independence in 1966, both Sesotho and English were made official languages through legislation (MoET, 2009). However, despite being the second official language, English remains a dominant language. Observing Lesotho's language policy, MoET (2019) reveals that it acknowledges the nation's diversity and the presence of other languages in addition to the two official ones, Sesotho and English. In addition, this policy unequivocally stipulates that up until Grade 3 (resources allowing), instruction will be in the learners' mother tongue; thereafter, instruction will be in English (Matlosa, 2010). In Lesotho, Sesotho is not the only mother tongue for Basotho, there are other minority languages such as siXhosa, Ndebele and siPhuthi (Kolobe and Matsoso, 2020). In addition, it is important to note that Sesotho is the dominant spoken language in Lesotho. Hassan et al. (2025) highlights that mother tongue interference has a negative impact on students' proficiency in speaking and writing.

Furthermore, the English proficiency gap is mostly caused by the current state of the language in Lesotho (Khati & Khati, 2009). About 75% of people do not speak English fluently, despite the fact that it is the second official language and medium of instruction starting in Grade 4 (Hala-Hala, 2021). For learners who have not had enough exposure to or practice with English, the sudden transition to the language presents difficulties. Teachers in English language classrooms however employ code-switching to mitigate the situation. Consequently, an excessive dependence on Sesotho impedes the growth of fluency and precise English usage, which may lead to challenges in contexts where English is utilised. In Geography, Khalema and Raselimo (2024) point out that poor English proficiency has an impact on understanding of material in other academic topics.

Studies were done around the globe on learners' poor English language proficiency in secondary schools; in Asia, Saudi Arabia, a study was conducted with the intention to find the challenges that ESL learners face in English language classroom. The discovery was that students faced grammar,

oral and comprehension challenges related the English language use. Moreover, the recommendation was that activities including acting and oral presentation would improve learners' proficiency in the language; the schools must engage their learners in such educational activities (Albeshri, 2023). Along the same lines, Aranda (2022) conducted a study in Philippines on learning challenges in the new senior high school English curriculum in the Philippines. Among the challenges, communication issues were one of the difficulties that senior high school learners in the Philippines face. It is revealed that four language skills are not being mastered by learners. Consequently, this becomes an issue since all topics except Filipino are taught in English in the Philippines. The study highlights that understanding these challenges of learners may help improve teachers' teaching approaches. In Africa, a study conducted in Rwanda aiming to discover the challenges of learning English as a second language in secondary schools; found that low English proficiency, anxiety during instruction, and fear of embarrassment for making grammatical mistakes are among the difficulties secondary learners encounter when learning English as a second language. Thus, the study suggests that teachers should be trained to handle learners and create a conducive learning environment for ESL learners (Hategekimana et al., 2024).

It seems there is limited literature on proficiency in English productive skills particularly in Lesotho's secondary schools, studies conducted in Lesotho focused on tertiary level of education. It is important for proficiency challenges to be addressed earlier in educational institutions to prevent future struggles among students at tertiary level. Lekhetho (2021) highlights that Lesotho's poor quality of secondary education can be linked to weak primary education; the effects of weak primary education are carried over to secondary schools, as prior achievement strongly influences students' later achievement. To validate this notion, Ekanjume-Ilongo (2015) conducted a study on the teaching of English as a Second language at the National University of Lesotho (NUL). The study found that students admitted at NUL appear to be unprepared with the content, concepts, and skills they are taught. This is likely a result of their weak high school preparation. Furthermore, the purpose of a teacher of English is to inspire learners to study, read, write and comprehend English. Learners struggle to read and express themselves in speech and writing using English language. One of the main causes of the difficulties NUL lecturers experience in teaching English is the level of proficiency in English language skills that high school graduates bring to NUL.

Against this backdrop, establishing an immersive language learning environment is crucial, students' proficiency in productive skills could be greatly enhanced through immersion programmes or activities that actively use English in authentic contexts (Lan, 2020). Learners can practice speaking and writing in English with these programmes. Additionally, learners can engage with native or fluent English speakers in a supportive setting through language exchange programmes, English-speaking clubs and language camps, which can strengthen their language abilities and increase their self-confidence (Budiman et al., 2023).

Moreover, Nkhi and Lebona (2023) discovered that traditional language teaching methods do not improve learners' communicative competence. Their research revealed that learners may become even less communicatively proficient if they are not exposed to the language because there are few engaging activities in the classroom. This indicates that an intervention is required, and the feasibility of Project-Based Learning (PBL) to address this challenge is explored. Kemalglu-Er and Sahin (2022) conducted a study on PBL in English language teaching. The results suggest that PBL improved the learners' interest and confidence in using English language increased, and their English language proficiency. In addition, learners were found to have developed their real-life related skills such as time management, creativity and oral presentation. Thus, according to the results of the study, PBL was seen to affect students' progress in multidimensional ways by improving academic performance, higher-order thinking skills, motivation and collaboration abilities.

Moreover, Jacques et al. (2016) argue that Project-Based learning requires learners to work either independently or in groups to enhance their knowledge and abilities in assessing various cases or issues that arise in their daily lives. These ideas lead us to the conclusion that project-based learning is an instructional approach that involves learners working on individual or group projects to enhance their knowledge and abilities in response to situations or issues they may encounter in their everyday lives or in their professional activity. Additionally, Dharmayanti and Joni (2021) highlight that it is important to provide a complex question, problem or challenge to be investigated by learners collaboratively to promote active learning, engaging students and allowing for higher order thinking. Again, activities in PBL, such as analysing problems, discussions in groups, and doing projects in groups, can equip learners with 21st century skills that are critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity skills (4Cs) (Puspitasari, 2020).

In the context of employing PBL in ESL classrooms, Shalaan (2020) conducted a study aiming to investigate the effectiveness of integrating PBL strategies to develop vocabulary ESL learners. As a result, the study revealed that PBL is an innovative teaching strategy that improved learners' self-autonomy, creativity, critical thinking and problem solving. Kilic (2019) emphasises that vocabulary is an important factor in enhancing proficiency in English productive skills. Thus, the current study focuses on enhancing proficiency in English productive skills among secondary school ESL learners through Project-Based Learning.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Lesotho is facing a decaying performance challenge in English language. The Examination Council of Lesotho (ECOL) further underscores the problem, revealing persistent issues in learners' writing skills; common errors include poor sentence construction, lack of creativity and inaccurate punctuation (Ecol, 2023). English Language performance declined in 2023, showing a drop of 6.3% compared to 2022 in writing skills. Writing skills are part of productive skills along with speaking skills, these two skills are interconnected. In support, Akki and Larouz (2021) assert that "writing depends on speech" (p.2). It seems to imply that writing is the representation of speech hence the challenge that learners face is low proficiency in productive skills.

Against this background, Moea (2022) highlights that these difficulties stem from foundational gaps in primary school, where learners are unfamiliar with English as the medium of instruction. This lack of familiarity hinders learners from mastering essential language skills, leaving content inadequately addressed. Existing studies have yet to provide effective solutions to this issue. For example, Matee (2019) explored challenges and opportunities in the pilot implementation of an integrated curriculum for teaching English however did not focus on proposing interventions targeting productive skills looking at the nature of that study.

The Lesotho Basic Curriculum Policy, aims at developing learners' linguistic skills, proving practical and creative skills that aims to improve healthy living styles of learners (MoET, 2021). Among teaching strategies that are suitable in this current policy, traditional methods of teaching seem to be incompatible. Aldobekhe and Abahussain (2024) state that traditional methods limit learners' development of productive skills. In this case, PBL seem to be the appropriate strategy to tackle this problem. Productive skills are practical skills; however, learners face significant

challenges in achieving proficiency across these skills. Ecol (2024, p. 2) states, “The 2024 performance of candidates is generally similar to that of 2023,” emphasising the need for immediate intervention.

Given the identified gaps in methodology and performance, this study seeks to address the problem by exploring the impact of project-based learning in enhancing proficiency in productive skills among English as a second language grade 9 learners. PBL offers an engaging, learner-centred approach that encourages active learning, collaboration and practical application of language skills.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.3.1 Main Research question:

- What is the impact of Project-Based Learning on proficiency in productive skills among ESL Grade 9 learners?

1.3.2 Research Questions:

- What challenges do ESL Grade 9 learners encounter with productive skills?
- How do ESL Grade 9 learners whose learning is informed by project-based learning behave in relation to proficiency in productive skills?
- Why do learners who have been exposed to Project-Based Learning behave the way they do?

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary goal of this study is to investigate how PBL approaches can enhance proficiency in productive skills among Grade 9 ESL learners. This research recognises the growing importance of active, authentic learning experiences in second language learning and seeks to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of PBL methodologies specifically for adolescent English language learners.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to enhance proficiency in productive skills in ESL learners. The Grade 9 English language curriculum emphasises the development of learners' language skills, making this a critical area of focus. The significance of this research lies in its potential to provide a comprehensive understanding of the problem through the collection of rich data from multiple sources. By analysing this data, the study seeks to gain in-depth insights into the challenges faced by learners and identify effective strategies to address them. The findings and recommendations may offer teachers practical interventions that align with the learners' abilities and needs, emphasising active learning through doing and interacting.

Furthermore, this study seeks to encourage English Language teachers to transit from traditional, teacher-centred methods to a learner-centred approach, recognising the importance of engaging learners in their educational journey. Through this paradigm shift, teachers would support the development of learners' communicative competence and overall language proficiency. PBL is proposed as an intervention to enhance learners' proficiency in productive skills. This approach is tailored to address the specific needs of learners while promoting a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment.

1.6 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study is delimited to exploring the impact of PBL on the improvement of English productive skills (speaking and writing) among Grade 9 ESL learners in selected public secondary school within Maseru, Lesotho. The research focuses solely on learners enrolled in one Grade 9 class during the 2025 academic year and excludes learners from other Grade 9 classes, grades or private schools. Moreover, the study is confined to a single school term (approximately 8 weeks) to assess the short-term effects of PBL on English language proficiency. Additionally, the research excludes receptive language skills such as reading and listening.

1.7 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

This study is structured into five chapters to explore the impact of Project-Based Learning in enhancing proficiency in productive language skills among grade 9 ESL learners in Maseru. Below is a build-up of each chapter.

Chapter 1: Background, and Rationale of the study

This chapter introduces the context of ESL education in Maseru, outlines the problem statement; highlighting the identified gaps. The research questions which guide this study are specified. Moreover, this chapter further highlights the significance and the purpose of the study; also explains the delimitations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter highlights the underpinning theory, social constructivism; discussing its relevance to project-based learning (PBL) and language learning. Furthermore, the chapter then engages in conceptual review where essential concepts such as project-based learning and productive language skills are defined, alongside theoretical perspectives on language proficiency development. The principles and practical implementation of PBL in ESL contexts are reviewed. Lastly, the chapter concludes with empirical review of previous studies focusing on the effects of PBL on production language skills, identifying the research gaps that the current study aims to address.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the research design and approach, the study setting in Maseru and the targeted population. In the same lines, details about sampling methods and sample size are provided; alongside with the data collection instruments, including information on their validation. Moreover, the chapter proceeds to explain the data collection procedures and ethical considerations that were followed. Data analysis methods employed are also clarified.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis, Presentation and Interpretation

The chapter demonstrates data presentation and interpretations of both qualitative and quantitative data collected. This chapter interprets the results by highlighting the key findings relevant to research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Finding, Conclusion and Recommendations

Chapter 5 presents the discussing of the findings, linking them to the literature and the study's research questions. Additionally, this chapter elaborates on the implication of the findings to ESL teaching and the use of PBL. On the other hand, the chapter addresses the limitations encountered in the study by providing the conclusion. Recommendations are made for ESL practitioners, policymakers, and areas for future research are stated.

1.8 SUMMARY

This chapter introduced the whole research by highlighting background of the study, problem statement and the research questions that served as a guide in this current study. In addition, the chapter also delved into outlining the significance of the study, its purpose and the delimitations of the study. The structure of the study is also outlined. Following that, the next chapter reviews the literature.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the related literature. A literature review is a thorough summary of earlier studies on a subject. The literature review examines scholarly books, journals and other sources that are pertinent to a particular field of study. The review lists, describes, sums up, critically assesses and explains related-prior research (Fink, 2014). The literature review in this chapter features theoretical framework and the review of related literature; this chapter explores the Project-based learning (PBL) and its integration in the ESL classroom to enhance English productive skills.

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1.1 Social constructivism

Social constructivism is the pertinent theory in this work, and its tenets serve as its cornerstone. Social Constructivism was first presented by Lev Vygotsky in 1978. This theory holds the notion that people experience, communicate and understand reality through language and culture. Vygotsky (1978) believed that people's perceptions of their surroundings and intellectual development were influenced by language and culture. Learning concepts are perceived and absorbed by experience and cultural context as a function of language transmission (Saleem et al., 2021). According to this view, knowledge is socially created and co-constructed since it necessitates a group of individuals who speak the same language and have similar cultural norms. Further, Taylor (2018) asserts that Vygotsky held a notion that learners built their knowledge through engagement and dialogue with teachers as well as with one another. In the context of ESL learning through PBL, knowledge about language is not merely transmitted from a teacher to a learner but is constructed through meaningful social interactions. Grade 9 ESL learners construct their understanding of English through collaborative project work that necessitates authentic communication. Further, Vygotsky (1978) believed that when learners collaborated to finish assignments and were encouraged to debate them in class, they gained a deeper comprehension of their subjects (Kapur, 2018).

The learner-centred approach places emphasises on the learners rather than the teacher; as one of the tenets of this ideology. This suggests that learners are encouraged to take an active role in their own education. They have the freedom to generate their own concepts, questions, definitions and makeup (Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020). Additionally, the theory is collaborative in nature, emphasising social interaction as a means of learning. Learners are forced to solve problems, research, and examine subjects or circumstances in groups to reach conclusions. In this way, they independently find or create knowledge. In social constructivist classrooms, for example, collaborative learning is a teacher-mediated and teacher-structured process of peer interaction. The introduction and clarification of concepts and information, the use of well-directed questions and references to previously learnt material are ways to keep discussion that could be sparked by the presentation of some concepts, situations or scenarios (Singh & Yaduvanshi, 2015).

In the same vein, the concept of social interaction is emphasised by Kapur (2018), who argues that while a person's social interactions are crucial for knowledge acquisition, a person's attitudes, emotions, values and behaviour are also significant. Thus, all features of an individual are interconnected, including the body, human behaviour, ethics, pleasure, knowledge and aesthetics. Again, Piaget (1932) attests that social interactions are an important factor in children's development of moral understanding. In addition, Piaget stresses that children are not passive recipients of knowledge but explorers who learn through interactions with the environment. Grade 9 ESL learners can engage in interactive activities that enhance their language skills development. Unlike other constructivist approaches where learning follows development, social constructivism views learning as leading development (Saleem et al., 2021). For Grade 9 ESL learners, this suggests that well-designed PBL experiences can lead their language development rather than merely responding to existing developmental levels.

The requirements of individuals for knowledge, awareness and recognition of the social nature of learning all point to inclusive and equitable learning communities. Learning community inclusivity was highlighted by Dewey and Piaget, who also helped students acquire a sense of dignity and to express their ideas, thoughts, conceptions, impressions, opinions, attitudes, and way of life

(Rannikmäe et al., 2020). Institutions ought to value everyone's individuality and provide a basis for individuals to create reality as they see it.

Similarly, Vanderburg and Trotter (2021) list several factors that the teacher should consider. This includes creating a socially constructivist classroom environment that would increase group interaction; discourage competition while promoting collaboration and experience sharing among learners. Again, Zhang (2019) states that the theory value learners' opinions and contributions regardless of their correctness. It provides the tools and direction needed to encourage learners to construct their knowledge in the desired direction, making sure that learners feel comfortable asking or answering questions whilst interacting with one another (Laskar & Bhattacharjee, 2022). At the same time participating freely in group discussions and ensuring that learners of all skill levels benefit from one another. Equally important, it offers scaffolding support at the appropriate level.

Scaffolding method of teaching, which is working with a teacher or someone else who is more knowledgeable about the subject, helps learners comprehend academic information (Arkadiy, 2020). In consequent, learners gain more information when they collaborate with experts who are more knowledgeable than they are. Bruner (1978) suggests that when learners start to learn new concepts, they need help from teachers or other adults in the form of active support. In the process, content is broken down into manageable chunks by the instructors or more knowledgeable learners so that learners could comprehend it more thoroughly than they otherwise would.

When employed in the classroom, the process of scaffolding entails a teacher or able learner assisting a student within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). As soon as the learner and the teacher start working together, the teacher models most the work while discussing how and why they do things to aid in the learners' comprehension of the material (Shvarts & Bakker, 2019). The teacher's support decreases as the learner gains familiarity with the content, and the learner does more of the work independently. Until the learner has mastered the material and no longer requires scaffolding, the scaffolding gradually decreases.

Further, Wood et al. (1976) developed a concept 'scaffolding' as a metaphor for the way a teacher can support a young child' progress and achievement through a relatively difficult task. Subsequently, by gradually moving the focus of learning from the teacher to the learner, teachers

employ scaffolding to support students' learning. What is more, Taber (2018) posits that the teacher models a new concept, then offers learners the opportunity to collaborate with the teacher and in small groups before releasing them to work alone. This progressive release is a frequent technique for scaffolding in the classroom. Contextually, I will have to provide varying degrees of support according to how well the learner is doing on the task or with the new learning, for scaffolding a learner does not mean clarifying the task or concept during the learning experience or event. In accordance with the above, Brunner (1978) states that teachers should provide cognitive support to draw the learners towards reaching the higher level of understanding.

ZPD refers to the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner (Eun, 2017). Thus, the term "proximal" refers to those skills that the learner is "close" to mastering. As well, Sincero (2011) adds that, ZPD is the zone where instruction is the most beneficial, as it is when the task is just beyond the individual's capabilities. The zone of proximal development was developed by Soviet psychologist and social constructivist Vygotsky (1978).

The great potential that English language learners (ELLs) and multilingual learners (MLLs) bring to the classrooms is made up of their ready-to-be-developed intellectual, linguistic and creative strengths (Arkadiy, 2020). To assist learners to fulfil their full development, teachers must give them the proper learning opportunities and support. The purpose of instruction is to develop the independence of our ELLs/MLLs and their capacity to participate in activities that allow them to adapt and apply what they have learnt to other contexts (Eun, 2017). A moving target is the zone of proximal development: as a teacher I enhanced the learning process by assigning learners activities that they cannot completely complete on their own and offering them the support they need to do so. Margolis (2020) highlights that among activities that the teacher should assign to learners; research should form part of the activities, knowing what, where and how to search for information. In this case, the teacher acts as More Knowledgeable Other (MKO).

2.1.2 More Knowledgeable Other

The MKO is someone who, with respect to the task, process, or subject in question, is more skilled or knowledgeable than the learner. An MKO is typically thought of as an older person, a teacher, or an authority figure (Sincero, 2011). For instance, a learner learns how to pronounce vowel and consonant sounds because of his or her tutor's effective instruction. According to Eun (2017), a

learner can complete a task with the help of a skilled instructor, who may be a parent, a teacher, another adult, or a peer, even though they might not yet be able to do it on their own. Again, the MKO is implied to be a teacher or an older adult, however this is not always the case. Often, those with more knowledge or experience are a learner's peers or an adult's offspring. In this study, an MKO assisted the grade 9 ESL learners to get in the right path, by providing them with a task to do in class whether individually or in groups. In this process, the teacher became a facilitator who guided the learners during the learning process.

2.1.3 Mediation

The theory of learning developed by Vygotsky is where the idea of mediation first emerged. This theory contends that the development of cognition always moves from the external (social) to the internal (mental) environment (Kozulin, 2018). According to Arkadiy (2020), mediating concepts refers to the process of facilitating access to knowledge and concepts, relevant to the topic studied in the lesson. As mediators of concepts, teachers and learners are asked to construct, co-construct, and elaborate on the topics studied. Moreover, learners are efficient mediators when they can; relay specific information in speech and in writing, explain data in speech and in writing, process and translate texts, take notes and express a personal response to creative texts.

Beyond language learning, mediating concepts is a crucial talent to master because it allows learners to recognise patterns, investigate correlational relationships and form conclusions. As they discuss the given concept, they gain ability to jointly generate its characteristics, thereby improve their linguistic abilities (Shvarts & Bakker, 2019). Additionally, mediation is more than simply a catchphrase in English language teaching; it is a necessity driven by practical requirements. Building relationships, empathising and comprehending gain increasing significance in the marketplace and our interactions outside of our work life (as contemporary) demands to refigure the skill combinations we require. Devices that improve a person's interaction with the outside world are known as mediation tools. Mediation tools refer to a broader category that includes both physical and semiotic instruments used for various forms of mediation (Cheng & Cheng, 2012).

2.1.4 Semiotic mediation

Mediation through semiotics in English Language Teaching (ELT) aids learners in honing their language skills: speaking and writing (Semiotic Approach). Teachers employ body language, authentic resources and visual aids to give English language learners an excellent teaching and

learning experience (Kozulin, 2018). Learners in grade 9 ESL classes could participate in activities such as listening to native speakers on a live radio broadcast, and they could discuss the topic the native speakers are discussing to enhance their speaking proficiency. Additionally, learners engaging in a task to write a paragraph about the topic, their writing skills can be enhanced. This procedure can be carried out by utilising both the visuals and the real materials.

Additionally, Şenel (2007) emphasises that throughout class activities, learners are encouraged to employ their senses of hearing, seeing, touching and feeling. Teachers that employ the semiotic approach use body language to draw students in and use maps, drawings, graphs and charts to encourage learners to adopt the target language (Perry et al., 2014). In order to help them retain what they learn in their long-term memory, they are also invited to take part in activities such as role-plays and dialogues that allow them to use their body language.

It is crucial to reiterate that the proposed intervention is Project-Based Learning (PBL) which serves as a suitable teaching strategy that can be utilised in Social Constructivism a classroom. Akpan et al. (2020) point out that a variety of teaching strategies could be used to implement social constructivism in the classroom. Social constructivism has elements which align with PBL. In that regard, Kilpatrick (1933) defines PBL as a set of meaningful activities in a social environment that focus on specific content or on a theme. As such, PBL focuses on learning by doing, experimenting, problem solving, teamwork, social skills, understanding, collaboration and partnership and taking responsibility. As the pioneer of social constructivist theory, Vygotsky (1978) plays a role in advancing project-based learning in schools. Social constructivist theory suggests that when taking part in educational projects, learners are given the opportunity to interact with their peers, exchange ideas, and ask questions, which helps them to develop their skills and gain new knowledge (Bell, 2010). In the case of this study, targeted skills to be enhanced in ESL classroom are speaking and writing.

2.2 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

2.2.1 Project-Based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) has emerged as a prominent instructional approach in the field of education, emphasising learner-centred, inquiry-based learning experiences that are grounded in

real-world contexts (Zhang & Ma, 2023). In recent years, PBL has gained traction in various educational disciplines, including English language teaching (ELT), due to its potential to enhance learners' engagement, critical thinking skills and application of knowledge. When utilised to teach and study languages, particularly English as a second or foreign language, at various levels and circumstances, PBL is believed to have a high chance of success.

The social constructivist theory states that PBL teaches language as a dynamic, social process that involves learner participation (Dharmayanti & Joni, 2021). This interaction takes place when learners collaborate in groups to assess and discuss the issue as well as to plan and develop the project. Language proficiency is integrated into PBL when learners use the language to negotiate real-world problems and communicate to solve them in groups. According to Kemalglu-Er and Sahin (2022), PBL has a strong potential to increase learners' attention since it provides them with opportunities to actively participate in the learning process, establish preferences, and bring their interests to the learning environment.

In an ESL classroom, the key principles of PBL that are particularly relevant according to Sedubun and Nurhayati (2024) include authentic tasks (real-world situations), collaborative learning (working in groups), Learners' choice, inquiry-based learning (information seeking), reflection, and meaningful assessment. All these principles aimed at fostering deep language comprehension and active engagement through practical application of English language skills.

To adopt PBL, several steps must be followed. According to Thapaliya et al. (2024), the learners and the teachers first decide on the project's topic or issue and the approach to problem-solving. Second, learners research the project's topic, goal, and other pertinent details to create the project. Thirdly, to solve the difficulties or assignments, the learners need to gather, assess and arrange data. Using the knowledge they acquire through the process of inquiry, they develop the project. Fourthly, the learners schedule the presenting style and specify the project's main idea. Fifthly, by assessing and gathering the most important project information, the learners create the presentation. After that, the learners use their communication skills to showcase their project and assess their learning in the end. Among the activities that can be produced in an ESL school are speeches and debates.

Subsequently, learners are then taught these PBL processes to become active and creative thinkers and participate in group projects through collaborative learning. Learners' oral and written skills are among the 21st century talents they would be building when they participate in the social components of PBL. The PBL method activates learners' communication skills throughout (Karyamati & Ashadi, 2018). By exchanging information, debating the project, assigning tasks to each group member, writing essays or presentations, presenting the project's outcome, and so on, the learners' communication skills are specifically enhanced.

2.2.2 Productive Language Skills

Language skills include speaking, writing, listening and reading. They are ways that language is used: receptive and productive skills are the categories into which these skills fall. Receptive skills include reading and listening, whereas productive skills include speaking and writing. Oral and written skills are classified as productive skills, meaning that learners must use language to produce information rather than consume it (Astawa et al., 2017). Through speaking and writing exercises, learners are exposed to the target language (in this context, English) in a language learning environment. They are urged to use suitable written or spoken language to convey meaning. Speaking is the ability of learners to use a combination of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, supra-segmental elements and meaning to communicate in the target language in a fluent and acceptable manner (Osama, 2021). Speaking is an interactive process of creating meaning that entails generating, receiving, and processing information (EINaggar, 2019). Speaking demands that learners that do not only comprehend how to pronounce words correctly or use vocabulary, but also when, where, why, and how to use language.

Speaking is thought to be the most crucial of the four essential language abilities for learning a foreign or second language. Speaking is the ability in which learners would be evaluated the most in real-world scenarios; their ability to communicate effectively would be assessed based on their utterances (Rao, 2019). Despite its significance, teaching speaking skills has received little attention, and most ESL teachers continue to teach speaking skills only as drill or dialogue memorisation. However, the modern world requires learners who possess an ability to communicate, and English teachers should impart these skills for learners to become proficient

speakers, and function well in everyday situations (Huy, 2024). Furthermore, the major goal of teaching speaking is to provide learners with the chance to practice speaking in authentic situations while staying secure in the classroom, which can engage them and activate their passively stored language components. According to Sirisrimangkorn (2021), one of the important factors to consider when teaching speaking is incorporating cultural aspects of the target language into instructional materials: this is done for the development of pragmatic comprehension ability in the context of English as a foreign language. Speaking is the act of interacting with people or influencing someone by saying anything that could change their perspective or way of thinking.

Writing, then, is the process of encoding a message in a graphical format: it involves having, arranging and sharing ideas. This suggests that learners should go beyond just writing about concepts; they should be able to organise and articulate their ideas. Furthermore, syntax, spelling and punctuation are all essential when it comes to writing abilities (Dana & Dharmatanti, 2021). According to Bora (2023), writing involves many decisions and considerations pertaining to "lower-level skills," such as punctuation, word selection, and grammatical structures, as well as "higher level skills," including content, structure and organisation. Moreover, a learner can record their thoughts and build their creative and critical thinking skills through writing.

Durga and Rao (2019) add that writing makes it possible to keep records, which guarantees documentation. As a result, this helps the learner retrieve or review their thoughts by reviving long-forgotten memories for application in the present. In contrast to speaking, writing enables the learner to generate ideas and, with sufficient effort, produce words and sentences. It gives one's thoughts shape and allows them to be presented in an organised manner (Suastra & Meggo, 2020). A learner can use coherence, compose sentences correctly, select appropriate terminology, and fully convey ideas when writing. According to Dana and Dharmatanti (2021), the teacher's participation is essential throughout the writing process. This simplifies the learners' attempt to produce written work.

Additionally, writing as a skill requires continuous practice on the part of the learner to develop. It is well known that teaching writing skills is one of the complex tasks for any English language teachers. Likewise, learners find it challenging to get good command of writing skills because of

their complexity in spelling, grammatical structure, usage, coherence, organisation and so on. Furthermore, Rao (2019) emphasise that the teachers should understand the level of the learners and try to adopt relevant teaching strategies of improving their writing skills that are more suitable for them.

2.2.2 Factors influencing learners' productive language skills

According to Bhattacharya (2017), linguistic factors encompass a variety of characteristics, including vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Additionally, grammatical proficiency can aid learners in accurately applying and understanding the English language's structure, which can eventually lead to fluency. Additionally, it has been shown that learners struggle to apply proper language when speaking. The issue of mother tongue interference should be brought up. Non-native speakers make faults in language fundamentals, such as speaking, due to interference from their mother tongue. The speech of non-native speakers is deteriorated by interference language (Fadzilah, 2018). Irene et al. (2023) state that when all learners speak the same mother tongue, they are more likely to use it than the target language. Code switching is the effect of this. The causes could be poor sentence construction abilities and limited vocabulary.

Vocabulary serves as a bridge for learners to convey their ideas and thoughts in the target language, and it is suggested that it plays a significant role in determining the end outputs of learners in writing (Shah et al., 2023). Writing may suffer from limited vocabulary or from using it incorrectly. Writing requires vocabulary since authors want to prevent misconceptions in their work (Mansoor et al., 2023). Writing is a skill that requires regular practice and education. This implies that learners need to invest time in producing and reading a range of texts to develop their writing abilities.

Speaking effectively also requires accurate pronunciation; mispronouncing a single sound or using the incorrect stresses and intonations can lead to misconceptions. Incorrect pronunciation causes misunderstandings between the speaker and the listener. Even with excellent vocabulary and grammar, communication can be hindered by unclear pronunciation (Ikhsan, 2017). According to Hoque et al. (2024), speaking requires exposure to a wide range of languages. Frequently, the ESL learners are bound to identify a word that fits the context or subject matter: they find it difficult to

put their "receptive vocabulary knowledge into productive use" because of their restricted receptive vocabulary.

The teacher, the teaching style, classroom management, and the size of the class are some of the elements that affect learners' ability to be productive in the classroom. Teachers are crucial, and some language teachers are more adept than others at giving their learners relevant and productive learning opportunities in the classroom (Akan, 2018). Regardless of the size of the class, the teacher should also possess strong classroom management abilities. For language development and instruction to be successful, class sizes are crucial. Researchers have discovered that when a class size is lowered to less than 20 learners, language achievement occurs; because pupils are generally happier and more active in a small class (Fenyi & Owusu, 2022).

Furthermore, Akan (2018) assert that a supportive and cooperative setting is beneficial for learners; hence, a high learner-teacher ratio lowers learners' involvement and engagement in speaking exercises. Additionally, writing skills necessitate an engaging session with multiple opportunities for interaction between the teacher and learners, which is not feasible in a classroom that is overcrowded (Shah et al., 2023). Another element that impedes language acquisition in large classrooms is that the strong and rapid learners are frequently perceived as controlling the weaker learners in these classrooms.

Furthermore, teacher-centred (conventional) education techniques frequently deprive secondary school learners of opportunities to practice speaking and interacting with others (Hussein, 2018). Learners do not have enough opportunities to practice speaking English in authentic settings when using the traditional teaching style. Zargoun (2024) asserts that one of the biggest things preventing people from speaking English fluently is a lack of practice. Language proficiency must be developed and strengthened via consistent practice.

One of the elements that affects whether a language learner succeeds or fails, especially while learning a second or foreign language, is motivation. Furthermore, Sumbul et al. (2024) emphasise that motivation refers to the willingness of the learners to act. It has a big impact on language proficiency. Higher motivation levels would result in learners working harder and persevering longer. Conversely, learners who lack motivation would be less effective at learning and may not learn anything at all. Although making mistakes is a normal part of learning a language, it can be dangerous for one's self-esteem (Hayat, 2020). These dangers deter learners from speaking

English. Learners think that mastering the language or becoming fluent is impossible. According to Akan (2018), this lack of confidence keeps individuals from mastering speaking techniques. Conversely, when a speaker is experiencing anxiety, it would be difficult for them to process information during a conversation, which would also hinder language production. Confidence would generate high motivation and will to practice and improve English learning ability and fluency in using English in communication (Tam & Duc, 2024).

Emotional factors, including high anxiousness, cannot have a good effect on learner's capacity to communicate in English. According to Nakhalah (2016), anxiety is the affective element that hinders learning the most. Learners' speaking performance is destroyed when they worry about being 'wrong, stupid, or incomprehensible.' According to Bhattacharya (2017), most ESL learners experience anxiety in the classroom, particularly when requested to speak in front of the class before being prepared. Additionally, excessive anxiety causes learners to become speechless or unable to speak, which has a negative impact on their performance in foreign and second language classes.

2.2.3 Project-based learning in the ESL classroom

English teachers integrate the English language skills and improve the indicators of each skill using PBL, which is considered a significant indicator of integrative learning (Sutomo et al., 2021). In this instance, stating the speech's main idea, giving details to support the topic, expressing the idea with suitable words, phrases, or utterances, using a specific language system (grammar) to create well-formed utterances, and pronouncing words correctly to convey understandable utterances are all indicators of speaking proficiency (Wijaya, 2022). Finally, stating the text's main idea, providing details to support the topic or idea, expressing the idea with appropriate words and phrases, using a specific language system (grammar) to form well-formed sentences, using appropriate cohesive devices to create a well-organised text, and using appropriate mechanics (spelling, punctuation, and capitalisation) to achieve the writing goal are all indicators of writing proficiency (Roberts et al., 2017).

Learners' language skills are developed through PBL activities in such a manner that the teacher asks learners to design a project challenge. Project challenge can be a report to the principal on

current events in the school. For instance, a fight broke out at the school canteen during recess, a learner could write a report on the incident and present it to the school principal in a written form and orally, in this case, both speaking and writing skills are being developed. The PBL method activates learners' communication skills throughout (Karyamati & Ashadi, 2018). The above seems to imply that exchanging information, debating the project, assigning tasks to each group member, writing essays or presentations, presenting the project's outcome, and so on, the learners' communication skills are specifically enhanced.

It is important to highlight the progress of learners in language proficiency when evaluating projects related to language instruction, so the emphasis of the evaluation should be more on relevance. In this case, the teacher learns how the learner's project makes good use of language skills and language components (Kavlu, 2015). In reiteration, the focus of this study is on productive language skills. The goal of the suggested intervention (PBL) is to improve these skills because of the low performance in the English language classroom.

Assessment of PBL in English language class can be different and even challenging compared to assessment of a traditional English language class. Learners in PBL are assessed by various means, such as observation, self-assessment and peer assessment and teacher's feedback is also needed (Zaidi, 2024). Feedback can be given in various ways, including verbal and non-verbal expressions such as facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. Personalised feedback not only helps learners improve their language skills but also shows them that their efforts are recognised and valued, which can be a great motivation for them to continue learning and achieve their goals. Therefore, teachers should take the time to provide individual feedback to each student (Budiman, 2023).

Since formative assessment may be incorporated into this integrated learning strategy, it becomes imperative to PBL. Additionally, formative assessment might incorporate peer and self-evaluation. While peer evaluation gives group members the chance to review their own work, progress and areas for improvement, self-assessment enables learners to evaluate their own work and growth (Hanardi, 2015).

Rubrics can also be used as an assessment tool, nonetheless the teacher must carefully craft them to match the project's aims and the class's instructional objectives. Three components should be included in rubrics. According to Olson and Krysiak (2021), a list of characteristics of a product or performance, a scale with numerical scores characterising each performance level, and criteria with indications for assessing the quality of a product or performance. Additionally, learners can use rubrics to assess and prepare their final presentations in terms of; time management, body language, vocabulary, content, and speaking clarity.

While implementing PBL offers benefits, it also presents several challenges. Common issues include time constraints within the curriculum, difficulties in assessing project outcomes and varying levels of teacher readiness and expertise in PBL methodologies (Sedubun & Nurhayati, 2024). Moreover, Kemaloglu-Er and Sahin (2022) point out that because academic material, teaching strategies and educational programmes are rarely compatible with learners' rural lifestyles or habits, it may be challenging to use cutting-edge teaching techniques such as PBL in less privileged geographic contexts. Therefore, to successfully adopt PBL, teachers in rural areas must hone their professional abilities by modifying materials, making the content relevant and creating connections between the courses and learners' prior experiences. The durability and efficacy of PBL programmes in language classrooms may be impacted by these issues.

However, maximising its advantages requires resolving implementation issues. Developing thorough training programmes to give teachers the abilities and information required to plan and carry out PBL projects successfully is one of the recommendations. To measure the learners' learning outcomes effectively, it is important to investigate innovative assessment techniques that correspond with PBL objectives (Wang & Qi, 2022). This could use formative assessment strategies that prioritise ongoing reflection and feedback. Finally, Zhang et al. (2021) contend that PBL ought to be thoughtfully incorporated into ELT curriculum to guarantee conformity with standards and learning objectives while meeting the needs of a variety of learners.

2.3 EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Several studies were done in English classes for various reasons. Kemaloglu-Er and Sahin (2022) conducted a case study that aimed to devise a PBL model for the English classes at a rural school and investigate the effects of PBL on the development of linguistic and non-linguistic

competencies as well as the benefits and challenges of the process along with suggested solutions. The data were collected, according to the results, PBL was seen to affect learners' progress in multidimensional ways. The data suggest that owing to PBL, the learners' interest and confidence in using English increased, and their English language proficiency improved. Besides, the learners were found to have developed their real-life related skills like time management, creativity, autonomous decision-making, oral presentation, and computer use. However, PBL was also defined to be a challenging process requiring full devotion and a heavy workload.

The study conducted by Rambe and Suganda (2023) sought to examine the application of project-based learning in English classrooms at two schools designated as "Sekolah Penggerak," which adhere to the Merdeka Curriculum mandated by the government; one institution is private, while the other is public. Both are the first and pioneer schools who chose to implement the curriculum. Project-based learning is a fundamental approach which underlies the basis of the curriculum; thus, projects are being heavily imposed. The research puts emphasis on project-based learning implementation inside English classroom under newest curriculum in terms of learners and teachers' perception. Mixed-method case study was used, the findings stated that project-based learning is used based on its own context and characteristics of schools. Students held favourable opinions regarding both the execution of project-based learning and their teachers' facilitation of it within the English classroom of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Similarly, Sutomo et al. (2021), found that the PBL model is feasible for the teacher to teach English and for the learners to study and develop their four English skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing). It implies that project-based learning can be used by the English teachers to teach English to develop the students' four English skills. Astawa et al. (2017) used mixed-method design to determine the effect of Project-Based Learning on students' English Productive Skills before and after being taught using PBL and how the activities influence teaching and learning process in a public junior high school in Bali-Indonesia. The results of this study revealed that according to learners' perspective, PBL was found to improve enthusiasm, confidence, creativity, self-directed learning and collaborative learning skills. Moreover, teachers also stated that PBL promotes teaching motivation and satisfaction.

2.4 SUMMARY

A thorough analysis of the theoretical and practical underpinnings pertinent to the investigation was provided in this chapter. Social constructivism was established as the guiding theoretical framework at the outset, with a focus on the importance of social interaction and teamwork in learning. The chapter went on to discuss project-based learning (PBL) and how it may be included in Grade 9 ESL classes, emphasising how it encourages meaningful language use and active participation. It also described the development of productive language abilities in ESL learners, including speaking and writing, and the several elements that affect these skills. These components worked well together and provided a strong foundation for comprehending how PBL might improve productive language abilities in a socially built learning environment.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.0 INTRODUCTION

A research methodology serves as a technique of outlining an investigator's intended course of action. It is a logical, systematic approach to a research problem. A methodology describes the steps a researcher would take to ensure that the study is valid, accurate, and achieves its aims and objectives (Rehman & Khalid, 2016). Moreover, it contains information on the data they plan to collect, where to obtain it, how to collect it and how to analyse it. The methodology of the current investigation is explained in this chapter. It includes paradigm, research design, research approach, data collection, sampling, data analysis and ethical consideration.

3.1 PARADIGM

The research paradigm used in this study is pragmatism. According to Liu (2022), the nature of the research questions and objectives determines the research paradigm. For the purposes of this study, pragmatism is appropriate since the research questions focus on the perceptions and lived experiences of participants in evaluating and addressing the problem under inquiry. Pragmatism is result-driven and concerned with figuring out what things mean or concentrating on the research's output. It is distinguished by a focus on shared meaning-making and communication to develop workable answers to societal issues. Morgan (2007). In the case of this current study, the researcher studied challenges that ESL grade 9 learners face, then the researcher introduced a suitable practical solution. The practical solution is project-based learning; learners learnt through projects.

Following that, according to Shannon-Baker (2016), a pragmatic researcher gives the study findings' application in resolving the issue at hand priority. It is crucial to emphasise that pragmatism is linked to the mixed-methods approach, which is the methodology used in this investigation. According to Foster (2024), pragmatist researchers can gain a thorough grasp of the issue in its context by integrating quantitative and qualitative methods. Additionally, this paradigm promotes a non-singular reality ontology (that there is no single reality and that each person has their own distinct interpretation of reality), a relational epistemology (relationships in research are best determined by what the researcher deems appropriate for that particular study), and a value-laden axiology (conducting research that benefits people) (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

3.2.1 Mixed-Methods Approach

This study adopted mixed-methods research approach. A mixed-methods approach involves gathering and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data for one study (Creswell, 2015). To investigate different viewpoints and find connections between the many layers of multiple research concerns, researchers often use a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques. A mixed-methods methodology mixes post-positivism and interpretivism, interweaving qualitative and quantitative data in such a way that research concerns are effectively explained offering several advantages to tackling complex research issues. Additionally, it provides a logical foundation, methodological adaptability, and a thorough comprehension of smaller cases (Maxwell, 2016).

Put it another way, the use of mixed-methods enables researchers to respond to study questions in a suitable depth and breadth and aids in generalising findings and implications of the studied topics to the entire population (Enosh et al., 2014). For instance, a quantitative approach enables a researcher to gather data from a big number of participants, increasing the likelihood that the results can be generalised to a larger population. The quantitative approach involves the use of structured instruments to collect numerical data, which is subsequently analysed using statistical methods (Bhandari, 2023). This approach helped in terms of evaluating the impact of project-based learning on ESL grade 9 learners.

Furthermore, the qualitative approach honours the voices of its participants and offers a better knowledge of the problem under investigation (Tenny et al., 2020). According to Moser and Korstjens (2017), qualitative approach is a kind of research methodology that focuses on exploring and comprehending difficult events and the interpretations that people or groups ascribe to them. In the qualitative phase, challenges that ESL learners face were investigated to acquire a better knowledge of the problem. In other words, qualitative data added depth to the study while quantitative data gave it breadth. Additionally, qualitative and quantitative data can be cross-validated. Through the convergence of data from several sources, triangulation, as a qualitative research strategy, enables the development of a thorough understanding of a study problem or the testing of validity (Dawadi et al., 2021).

However, the process of combining approaches within a single study might make conducting research more challenging. As multidisciplinary research teams must become familiar with numerous research paradigms and various approaches to sample selection, data collection, data analysis, and data synthesis or integration; it frequently necessitates extra resources (time and staff) as well as more research training (Fetters, 2016).

Various types of mixed methods research designs include convergent parallel, explanatory sequential, exploratory sequential, embedded, and a strategy known as transformative mixed methods (Creswell, 2014). This study adopted exploratory sequential design; its goal is to use both qualitative and quantitative data to obtain a thorough knowledge of a phenomenon. After identifying the issue, it is critical to address a real-world issue in a particular setting by proactively adopting adjustments and gathering information to support those changes (Pardede, 2018). Therefore, in this study, pre-experimental design embedded in exploratory sequential design was adopted in alignment with the said approach.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The current study utilised exploration sequential design. Exploratory sequential design is the technique that involves the initial collection of qualitative data, and the findings are used to guide the design and development of quantitative data collection tools (Berman, 2017). Additionally, the quantitative and qualitative data are then integrated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This method is useful when developing and testing a new instrument (Dawadi et al., 2021). Shama et al. (2023) highlight that the purposes of exploratory design are first to explore the variables, theories, hypotheses that are not known, develop an instrument or typology that is not available and assess whether the results could be generalised to a population or not.

Qualitative exploration stage is where focus groups, or observations are used to deeply understand the research problem and generate insights. In the context of this study, participants in the problem-affected school were observed by the researcher during this phase. The goal was to discover what difficulties ESL learners in grade 9 have with their English language skills. Thus, the researcher in this case identified the problem and came up with a solution. These findings then informed the design of an intervention or treatment tailored to the specific context or population. In order to

collect the quantitative data, in this stage the researcher used pre-experimental design (one group pre-test and post-test)

Figure 1: Pre-experimental (one group pre-test post-test) design



In reiteration, this exploratory research applied a pre-experimental design (one group pre-test and post-test); this design involved one group that is pre-test (O1), expose to treatment (X) and post-test (O2). In the quantitative phase, a one-group pre-test post-test design was implemented to identify productive language skills challenges that the grade ESL learners encountered, then measured the effectiveness of this intervention. Participants were assessed before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the intervention, using standardised measures that allowed for the quantification of changes attributable to the treatment (Zubair, 2023). The design aimed at knowing whether there was significant development before and after using project-based learning and to establish if using project-based learning could improve ESL grade 9 learners' English language skills.

In the integration of qualitative and quantitative data occurs during analysis, where qualitative insights provide context and explanations for the patterns observed in the pretest-posttest results, enriching the interpretation of the findings. Cano and Lomibao (2023) assert that this sequential, mixed methods approach ensures that the intervention is grounded in participants' experiences while also providing measurable evidence of its impact, offering a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The researcher carried out an experiment with PBL as an innovative method of instruction in an ESL classroom as part of this study, which was carefully planned for. Following the implementation of the treatment, I had to evaluate whether the intervention worked or not. Participants were interviewed in their categories; there were those who reacted well to the treatment and those who did not respond well to the treatment. Thus, I had to understand their behaviour. In the section that follows, the sampling strategy used in the study is covered.

3.4 SAMPLING

Sampling is a technique that spares researchers from having to examine every single person in a population by allowing them to draw conclusions about the population using data from a subset of the population (Onwuegbuziem & Collins, 2007). Suresh and Srinivasan (2017) highlight the merits of sampling as follows; it saves time and money and gives faster results as the sample size is smaller than the whole population. sampling provides more accurate results as it is performed by trained and experienced investigators, it enables for estimation of the sampling errors. Hence, it assists in getting information concerning about some characteristics of the population (Elfil & Negida, 2017).

The targeted population was all the high schools in Maseru district. However, this research sampled one (1) high school; and was delimited to one (1) ESL grade 9 class of twenty (20) learners (boys and girls). Choosing different genders is often done to ensure representative sample and to avoid biases that could arise from focusing solely on one gender (Omair, 2014).

3.4.1 Sampling Techniques

Among other sampling techniques, purposive sampling and convenient sampling were found suitable and employed in this study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method for obtaining a sample where researchers use their expertise to choose specific participants that would help the study meet its goals (Carter et al., 2014). According to Radhakrishnan (2014), purposive sampling involves the researchers' selecting a population sample based on their judgement, knowing they can find a representative sample to conduct their research. These subjects should have particular characteristics that the researchers need to evaluate their research question. In other words, the researchers pick the participants "on purpose." Furthermore, researchers can extract a lot of information from the data they have gathered by using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2015). In the current context, the researcher employed purposive sampling to reach a group of both girls and boys in an ESL classroom setting.

Convenience sampling, on the other hand, chooses participants based on their frequent availability. Compared to other sampling methods, convenience sampling is usually preferred by the researchers since it is less expensive and simpler (Taherdoost, 2016). Convenience sampling frequently aids in overcoming several research-related constraints. Depending on their availability, the researcher utilised any ESL grade 9 class. Financial constraints made the researcher select a

reachable school where less money and effort would be required to access it. According to Golzar et al. (2022), convenience sampling is employed because of its affordability and practicality. In order to generate qualitative data, there were two categories used. Firstly, the researcher used convenient sampling to understand challenges that ESL grade 9 learners encounter with productive language skills. Thus, the researcher observed available learners in that one targeted classroom. However, after the implementation of PBL in the ESL grade 9 classroom, learners who engaged in focus group interview were purposively selected. Learners who failed the tests and learners who passed the tests were selected in order to uncover their experience with the implementation of PBL.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

In this research qualitative data was generated through the use observations, focus group discussion, and pre- and post-tests.

3.5.1 Observation

Observation is defined as one of the traditional methods of generating qualitative data. It is used by researchers to gather descriptive analysis data by observing people and their behaviour at events or in their natural settings (Zevalkink, 2021). In this method, the researcher is completely immersed in watching people by taking a participatory stance to take down notes. There are two main types of observation; **covert** (the observer is concealed without letting anyone know that they are being observed) and **overt** (everyone is aware that they are being watched) (Kawulich, 2012). In this study, covert approach was used by the researcher during classroom activities with the intention to discover the challenges that grade 9 ESL learners encounter with productive language skills in the English language classroom. Moreover, covert approach was designed in a form of unstructured observation by the researcher.

Unstructured observation is a more flexible and open-ended approach to data generation. It involves observing and recording behaviour or events without predefined categories or criteria (Fetters & Rubinstein, 2019). The researcher simply observes and records any relevant information without imposing any specific structure. Chauhan et al. (2024) add that it allows researchers to immerse themselves in natural settings, capturing rich, contextual details and emergent themes through holistic documentation. This approach is particularly valuable in exploratory studies where the researcher aims to understand complex social phenomena as they organically unfold. In

this exploratory study, the researcher observed grade 9 ESL learners in their classroom during lessons to understand what challenges they encounter with both speaking and writing skills.

Furthermore, overt approach was employed for testing speaking skills before and after the intervention. In addition, the researcher used structured observation among grade 9 ESL learners in order observe; pronunciation, grammar and syntax, vocabulary, response to stimuli and fluency (see appendix 4). In this kind of observation, the researcher organises everything to give the observation of an object, event or phenomenon a direction or structure. Smritirekha (2023) asserts that structured observations are methodical and structured in their processing because they assist researchers in determining in advance what would be observed, how it would be observed, and how the data would be documented and managed. To record what is being seen, the researcher should utilise additional carefully-thought tools such as rating scales, checklists and rubrics. Contextually, rubrics were deemed appropriate. Similar to checklists, rubrics provide certain rules and criteria for evaluating certain behaviours (Seah et al., 2024).

In reiteration, rubric as a structured observation tool was used in this study, this helped the researcher to award grade 9 ESL learners marks accordingly. The tool provided the researcher with a clear guide on which components were crucial, in the context of this study.

3.5.2 Focus group interview

A focused group interview is a sort of qualitative research technique in which a moderator leads a small group of participants, the conversation, nudges everyone to participate, and assists in getting specific answers from each person in a discussion about a particular subject (Creswell, 2015). Focused group interviews are comparatively narrowly focused than standard focus groups, which cover a wide range of topics. This method facilitates in-depth debate and investigation of the selected subject through group engagement.

Focus groups, according to Gill and Baillie (2018), are conversations in which five to twelve participants share their experiences and opinions about topics that are directly related to the research question(s). The focus group data gathering method works best for research where it is necessary to get opinions from different people about the same issue. Focus groups have the advantage of providing primary data via both verbal and nonverbal channels, as well as allowing researchers to approach the topic from several angles.

The focus group interview was conducted with five participants, purposively selected to provide diverse perspectives relevant to the research topic. Participants shared their experience with PBL. Thus, the researcher aimed at discovering the change in behaviour after the implementation of the treatment. Participants who were not affected positively by the treatment, who did not show improvement and those who were affected positively by the treatment were interviewed to share their different experiences. Additionally, the researcher asked the pre-determined questions, which did not limit participants from mentioning other challenges they face. Evidently, this method unearthed unanticipated data. To ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data collected, the entire session was audio-recorded. This recording allowed the researcher to capture every detail of the discussion, including nuances in tone, pauses and emphasis, which could have otherwise been missed if the researcher only relied on notetaking. By recording the interview, the researcher was able to review the conversation multiple times, ensuring a thorough analysis and minimising the risk of overlooking important information.

During the focus group, the researcher made a conscious effort to provide each participant with ample opportunity to express their views. The researcher facilitated the discussion by encouraging quieter members to share their thoughts and by managing dominant voices to maintain a balanced dialogue. This approach fostered an inclusive environment where all participants felt valued and heard. Each response was given careful consideration, allowing the researcher to capture a rich variety of insights and to understand the depth and breadth of opinions within the group.

3.5.3 Pre- and Post-tests

Pre- and post-tests in research refer to a study design where measurements are taken before and after an intervention or treatment (Stratton, 2019). Additionally, pre-and post-test designs can be used in both experimental and quasi-experimental research and may or may not include control groups. For this study, pre-experimental research was employed in a sense that there was only a treatment group. All learners in a grade 9 ESL class took a pre-test. The researcher then introduced learners to the PBL as a treatment to their identified challenges regarding productive language skills. Moreover, the researcher used project-based learning teaching technique for four weeks and administered a post-test of similar difficulty. The main purpose of pre- and post-tests was to assess the impact of the intervention by comparing the outcomes before and after the intervention. Then, the researcher analysed the differences between the pre-test and post-test scores to see if the teaching technique had a significant effect on scores.

Table 1: Data collection process

RESEARCH QUESTION	DATA COLLECTION METHODS
1. What challenges do ESL Grade 9 learners encounter with productive language skills?	Pre- tests and observations
2. How do ESL Grade 9 learners whose learning is informed by project-based learning behave in relation to proficiency in productive language skills?	Observations and post-tests
3. Why do learners who have been exposed to Project-Based Learning behave the way they do?	Focus group interviews

All research questions are listed in *Table 1* (above), along with information on how they were answered. As a result, each research topic was paired with the data collection tools. This was a data collection process.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

The process of examining, purifying, converting, and modelling data to find relevant information, make inferences, and aid in decision-making is known as data analysis. It entails using a range of computational and statistical methods to analyse and extrapolate knowledge from massive

databases (Nowell et al., 2017). Researchers utilise research data analysis to distil data into a narrative and then interpret it to extract insights. It makes logical that the data analysis process aids in breaking up enormous amounts of data into smaller pieces.

In this study, numeric data (pre- and post-test) were analysed by the researcher through the use of SPSS software. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), also known as IBM SPSS Statistics, is a software package used for the analysis of statistical data. Thus, data for pre- and post-tests were presented using tables as a tool that demonstrates clearly the difference between two tests. On the other hand, thematic analysis was employed to analyse non-numeric data generated from focus groups interviews; using Atlas.ti software to code the data. Thematic analysis is a highly popular technique among qualitative researchers for analysing qualitative data, which usually comprises thick descriptive data. According to Naeem (2023), thematic analysis is a method where the researcher closely examines the generated data to identify common themes, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. Moreover, recorded interviews of participants were transcribed and data was analysed by identifying themes. Thus, data was interpreted.

3.7 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

In mixed methods research, validity is defined as the findings' accuracy and reliability (Zohrabi, 2013). Validity is improved when examining PBL's effect on English proficiency by triangulation is the process of cross-verifying outcomes using both quantitative (such as test scores) and qualitative (such as focus group interviews and observation) data. Moreover, to ensure that the tools and processes are appropriate for Grade 9 ESL learners and the learning environment; an English Language expert was consulted, my supervisor in this case. Lastly, Validity undertakings were upheld by gathering information from several sources (observations, learners) and making sure that the results were consistent across them (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020).

Reliability issues were not overlooked in this study. According to Heale and Twicross (2015), reliability is the consistency and reproducibility of the study findings. Statistical analysis (e.g., using SPSS for descriptive statistics), standardised tests, and explicit grading rubrics are used to establish quantitative dependability in mixed methods investigations (Kroll & Morris, 2009). The instrument's stability was assessed throughout time using pre- and post-tests, which included giving the identical test to the same people at various points in time. Focus group interviews were

analysed using inter-rater agreement, thematic analysis, and systematic coding to support qualitative reliability. The reliability of mixed techniques is enhanced by clearly documenting replication procedures and integrating data so that results from various approaches corroborate one another (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020).

3.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Supporting the claim that the inquiry's conclusions are "worth paying attention to" is the goal of trustworthiness in a qualitative investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability are more factors that contribute to the reliability of qualitative research. This mixed-methods study explored the impact of PBL in enhancing productive language skills. Thus, the four mentioned elements of trustworthiness were considered in this study.

3.8.1 Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility refers to how credible the study findings are. The topic has been sufficiently studied to accurately reflect the opinions expressed by participants, alternatively. For each trustworthiness criterion, Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe a few methods. Qualitative researchers could, for instance, use investigators, techniques, or data triangulation to gain credibility. Since several data sources, methodologies and researchers produce comparable results, researchers may demonstrate the validity of their findings using one of two or even three triangulation procedures (Denzin, 2015). Another technique is member-check or participant validation, through which the study participants would judge the accuracy of the data and the researcher's interpretations (Riazi et al, 2023). In this study, the researcher used multiple data sources to validate research findings. Observations (unstructured) were used to investigate challenges relating to productive language skills. Additionally, focus group interviews were used to investigate perceptions of learners toward PBL. Moreover, the researcher informed participants about the findings into avoid false information.

3.8.2 Transferability

The external validity of a study is referred to as transferability. It can be demonstrated by giving a thorough explanation of the participant's answers, the researcher's interpretation, and the extent to which the study's findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations or contexts (Stahl & King, 2020). It refers to providing sufficient details and evidence so that readers may judge the transferability of the results to other contexts. Moser and Korstjens (2018) emphasise that the

researcher should assist readers in determining whether the study's conclusions and insights may be applied to comparable situations. Generalisability of the current study's result is not guaranteed as contexts differ. Although not holistically the results can be applied in different situations. Contextually, this is dependent on the sociocultural elements affecting the learners' learning, the teachers' PBL experience and the learners' competence levels. As the researcher ensured transferability by explicitly describing the results of both classroom and participant observations, it is anticipated that the results would be transferable to similar academic contexts.

3.8.3 Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability is correlated with reliability and refers to the degree to which a study might be replicated by another researcher and yield same results (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Researchers can make sure that the study method is rational, traceable and well-documented to attain dependability. Readers are better equipped to assess the dependability of the research when they can look into the research method among other factors (Ahmed, 2024). An audit of research procedure is one technique to show its dependability. Data generated from focus group interviews were provided both before and after transcription. Moreover, written tests were documented. Data collection tools were evaluated and examined by the researcher's supervisor to ensure alignment with the grade syllabus; also, data analysis and interpretation of findings were among items audited.

3.8.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree of objectivity within which the researcher reported the findings. By using reflexivity techniques, researchers can reveal and analyse their own opinions, views and practices in their capacity as researchers, as well as how these may have affected the study process and findings (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022): this allows researchers to attain confirmability. Test questions, rubrics and lesson plans based on teaching language skills to ESL ninth-grade learners were made public by the researcher. This guaranteed the process's transparency throughout the data generating process. Confirmability was established when credibility, transferability and dependability were all achieved. It is recommended to seek a third perspective or engage in peer debriefing to validate the interpretation of the findings. It is to ensure that the intended meaning of the participant is accurately captured and personal bias from the researcher is eliminated (Simoni et al., 2019). Additionally, member-checking was considered after data were generated through focus group interviews.

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics, the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong. Ethics is based on well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness or specific virtues (Bell & Bryman, 2007).

3.9.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent is foundational to any ethical research practice. It is a process that ensures participants are fully aware of the research's purpose, the procedures involved, potential risks and benefits, and how their data would be used (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). Baker et al. (2016) state that informed consent is not just a one-time formality; it is an ongoing dialogue between the researcher and the participant. This dialogue ensures that participants remain informed and continue to agree to their involvement throughout the research process.

Researchers need to seek consent from legal guardians and take extra steps to ensure that participants understand their rights. According to McGregor (2023), researchers must present information in a way that is accessible and comprehensible, tailoring their approach to the needs of their participants. This involves using simple language (native language if needed), visual aids, or having a verbal discussion in addition to written documentation. In addition, effective communication pertaining to the parameters of a research proposal helps to ensure that learners are fully aware of what is required of them should they choose to participate (Cacciattolo, 2015).

The Faculty of Education's consent letter to the school principal and the principal's acceptance of the class teacher were the two items of concern. The focus of the research was on learners, therefore principal acts as the legal guardian in this case, the consent letter was delivered to them. Furthermore, the ethical concerns stated the nature and purpose of this; the benefits of taking part (for both teachers and learners) and its duration. Lastly, supervisor's contact information was shared for further clarifications.

3.9.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Researchers should make every effort to protect the anonymity of the research participants and the privacy of data (Mirza et al., 2023). Before conducting data collection sessions, these two points must be communicated to participants and incorporated into the researcher-participant agreement.

Participants often share personal and sensitive information, trusting that researchers would protect their identities and keep their data secure.

Lobe et al. (2020) emphasise that confidentiality means that the information participants provide would not be disclosed to others in a way that could reveal their identity. This is typically achieved by anonymising data, using pseudonyms, or assigning unique identifiers. Digital data were stored on encrypted drives and secure cloud platforms compliant with recognised data protection standards. In addition, hard copies were kept in locked cabinets within restricted-access areas. Importantly, anonymity means that researchers are aware of who their study subjects are, but they cannot be identifiable by other people as information such as their names, phone numbers, videos, photos, or physical characteristics are concealed (Newman et al., 2021). For this research, participants' identities were kept private including the details of the school being investigated.

3.9.3 Respect for Participants

Respecting participants involves more than just following ethical guidelines; it requires a deep commitment to understanding and valuing their perspectives, experiences and cultural backgrounds (Bos, 2020). Researchers must approach their work with humility and an awareness of their own biases and assumptions. Moreover, researchers should be aware of cultural norms, values and communication styles that may differ from their own. This may include learning about the community they are studying, adapting their research methods to be more inclusive and respectful (Laryeafio & Obbewe, 2022).

Researchers typically hold more power in the research relationship, which can influence participants' responses. Participants may feel pressured to provide socially desirable answers or to agree with the researcher (Fleming, 2018). To mitigate this in the current study, the researcher created a safe and supportive environment where participants felt comfortable expressing themselves honestly. The researcher used a vacant classroom in that school that was convenient for participants. Moreover, this involved using neutral language, offering multiple ways for participants to share their thoughts, and being attentive to non-verbal cues.

3.9.4 Results communication

It is important to inform participants of the research's progress whenever feasible, according to Mirza et al. (2023). Following the collection of data, researchers ought to ensure that every participant is provided with a copy of their answers, questionnaire or transcript. A summary of the

analysis of the data should also be given to the research participants to avoid any misinterpretation of the data or fabrication of conclusions. At the end of the study, researchers should debrief participants and provide them copies of any papers or other publications that resulted from their involvement, (British Educational Research Association, 2018). In the context of this study, the researcher communicated the outcome of the research conducted with the participants to avoid any misinterpretation of the data.

3.10 SUMMARY

This chapter concentrated on the methodological elements that established the basis for this research. The discussion covered various elements, including the chosen paradigm, approach, research design, sampling techniques, data collection and generation methods, data analysis procedures, considerations of validity, reliability, trustworthiness and ethical considerations. The chapter provided context by outlining the practical steps taken in the field during the research process.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

4.0 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the research paradigm, approach, design, sampling techniques, methods of data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and research ethics. In light of this, the findings are presented in alignment with the methodology. This chapter presents the information obtained from the participants using the three methods of data collection used in the study. Observations, pre- tests and post- tests and focus group interviews were the methods used to collect data.

4.1 Data presentation

In this chapter, the findings of this study are presented and interpreted according to each data collection method in alignment with the three research questions to provide a comprehensive detailing of the issues each question sought to uncover. Thus, the findings are presented in the two phases, the problem identification phase (phase 1) and the therapeutic phase (phase 2). The research questions are as follows: 1) What challenges do ESL Grade 9 learners encounter with productive language skills? 2) How do ESL Grade 9 learners whose learning is informed by project-based learning behave in relation to proficiency in productive language skills? 3) Why do learners who have been exposed to Project-Based Learning behave the way they do?

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of Participants (ESL classroom)

Gender	Age Range	Number
Boys	14-15	5
	16-17	3
Girls	14-15	8
	16-17	4
		20 (total)

4.1.1 Problem identification phase (Phase 1)

Research question 1: What challenges do ESL Grade 9 learners encounter with productive language skills?

This study is guided by exploratory sequential mixed methods. Thus, the initial stage of data collection is qualitative phase followed by quantitative phase. At the beginning, ESL grade 9 learners were observed using unstructured observation to uncover the challenges they encounter with productive language skills (speaking and writing). On the other hand, the second step was collection of quantitative data. In order to obtain quantitative data, pre-tests were administered for both speaking and writing test; also, structured observation was used to identify challenges learners face with speaking and writing.

4.1.1.1 Results of Qualitative Phase

Table 3: Unstructured Observation for Speaking skills

Time	Activity/Context	Observations (Narrative)	Theme(s) Observed	Comments/Interpretation
00:05	Introduction & Warm-up	S03 frequently switches to Sesotho when explaining ideas; S07 barely speaks, looks down avoiding eye contact.	Code switching, lack of confidence	S03 relies on L1 for vocabulary; S07 shows anxiety
00:20	Group Discussion	S12 hesitates before answering questions, pauses for 10 seconds; teacher repeats question to prompt response.	Hesitancy, teacher-centredness	Teacher dominates questioning, limiting peer talk
00:35	Pair Work	Several learners (S02, S05, S09) remain silent; S14 whispers in Sesotho to partner, then stops when teacher looks.	Reluctance to participate, code switching	Peer interaction limited; possible fear of error
00:50	Class Presentation	S02 reads text nervously, voice low; teacher interrupts to correct pronunciation repeatedly.	Lack of confidence, teacher-centredness	Teacher correction may increase anxiety
01:10	Writing Task Reflection	Learners write quietly; S11 glances around, writes	Hesitancy, reluctance	Silent writing phase lacks verbal engagement

		slowly; no volunteers to share ideas aloud.	to participate	
01:20	Wrap-up Discussion	Few learners volunteer; teacher calls on S06, who answers briefly; others avoid eye contact or look away.	Teacher-centredness, reluctance to participate	Participation limited to teacher prompts

The table above indicates the results of unstructured observation. Learners in ESL grade 9 classroom were observed based on their speaking skills. To keep learners' identities anonymous, the researcher named learners by student 01 to student 20 (S01-S20). This observation happened in a lesson that spanned 80 minutes. Moreover, the results show that in the first 5 minutes, learner S03 relied on Sesotho when explaining ideas. On the other hand, learner S07 was not making eye contact as a way of avoiding answering in class. Learners engaged in a group discussion; however, the teacher dominated the question which led to learner S12 hesitating before responding.

Furthermore, 35 minutes afterward, the teacher changed the classroom activity to pair-work. The results reveal that several learners (S02, S05, S09) remained silent; S14 whispered in Sesotho to partner, then stopped when teacher looked. Learners were requested to participate in the presentations 15 minutes later. Due to anxiety, S02 lost confidence as the teacher repeatedly interrupted to correct pronunciation. In the writing task there was silence, silent writing phase lacked verbal engagement. Learners showed less participation in wrap discussions. It is concluded that teacher-centred, reluctance to participate, code-switching, hesitancy and lack of confidence are the themes identified as challenges that ESL learners face. Following, is the results on writing skills obtained by unstructured observation.

Table 4: Unstructured Observation for Writing skills

Writing Task Type	Observations (Narrative)	Theme(s) Observed	Comments/Interpretation
Essay Writing	S06's paragraph contains repeated subject-verb agreement errors: "He kick the ball." Vocabulary is very basic.	Grammar errors, limited vocabulary	Shows foundational grammar gaps and limited word choice
	S09, S020's ideas are scattered, no clear introduction or conclusion. Sentences jump	Difficulty organising ideas	Needs support in paragraph structure and coherence

	from one idea to another without transition.		
	S13 wrote only 3 sentences, left several lines blank. Appeared distracted, frequently looking around instead of writing.	Lack of motivation or engagement	Possible frustration or low interest in task
	S07's draft shows repeated misuse of tenses; vocabulary limited to everyday words. Peer feedback was minimal, indicating low engagement.	Grammar errors, limited vocabulary, lack of engagement	Peer interaction low, possibly due to lack of confidence

Table 4 demonstrates a classroom observation that was done in an ESL grade 9 class. The researcher marked classwork books of learners during and after the lesson. There were consistent issues with verb tenses, subject-verb agreement and sentence structure, indicating foundational grammar gaps. Thus, learner S07's draft shows repeated misuse of tenses. On the other hand, learners rely heavily on basic, repetitive words, which restricts expression and depth in writing. Learner S09 and S020 struggle with logical flow, paragraph structure and transitions, leading to disjointed writing. Additionally, the researcher reveal that some learners produce incomplete work or show signs of distraction, suggesting low interest or confidence in writing tasks. For instance, learner S13 wrote only 3 sentences, left several lines blank. It is important to highlight that; limited vocabulary, lack of engagement, grammar errors and difficulty in organising ideas form themes that emerge under challenges that ESL grade 9 learner encounter with writing skills. For this reason, tests were administered to gather rich data.

4.1.1.2 Results of Quantitative Phase

Table 5: Speaking skills Pre-test

Pre-Test				
Learners' marks in percentage (%)	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
6%	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
10%	1	5.0	5.0	10.0

13%	2	10.0	10.0	20.0
17%	2	10.0	10.0	30.0
20%	3	15.0	15.0	45.0
23%	1	5.0	5.0	50.0
25%	1	5.0	5.0	55.0
27%	3	15.0	15.0	70.0
33%	2	10.0	10.0	80.0
40%	1	5.0	5.0	85.0
43%	1	5.0	5.0	90.0
57%	1	5.0	5.0	95.0
60%	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 indicates that 20 grade 9 ESL learners took the test. Data reveals that most learners (17) scored between 13% and 33%, with the highest frequency at 20% and 27%. Moreover, few learners (4) scored above 40%, showing that only a small number demonstrated higher proficiency. Lastly, several learners scored below 20% indication significant challenges in speaking skills. This data presented suggests that grade 9 ESL learners in school Y face considerable difficulties with speaking skill, with overall low to moderate proficiency and wide variation among learners. The researcher identified that these challenges are link to limited practice, confidence and insufficient exposure to spoken English.

Table 6: Writing skills Pre-test

Pre-Test

Learners' marks in percentage (%)	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
13%	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
16%	1	5.0	5.0	15.0
20%	3	15.0	15.0	30.0
30%	2	10.0	10.0	40.0
33%	2	10.0	10.0	50.0
37%	2	10.0	10.0	60.0
40%	2	10.0	10.0	70.0
43%	1	5.0	5.0	75.0
47%	2	10.0	10.0	85.0
50%	2	10.0	10.0	95.0
60%	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

In the table above (Table 6), the analysis of the writing skills score of 20 Grade 9 ESL learners in school Y reveals significant challenges in their productive language proficiency. The scores range widely from a low of 13% to a high of 60%, indicating a substantial gap of 47 percentage points between the lowest and highest performers. The average score is approximately 34%, which is well below the typical passing threshold of 50%, and the median score is 35%, meaning that half of the learners scored 35% or less. The most common score among the learners is 20%, with three learners achieving this result, highlighting a concentration of low performance. Limited vocabulary, grammar errors and challenges in organising ideas are what the researcher discovered.

4.1.2 Therapeutic Phase (Phase 2)

Research question 2: How do ESL Grade 9 learners whose learning is informed by project-based learning behave in relation to proficiency in productive skills?

Table 7: Speaking skills Post-test

Post-Test				
Learners' marks in percentage (%)	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
13%	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
20%	2	10.0	10.0	15.0
27%	2	10.0	10.0	25.0
33%	7	35.0	35.0	60.0
37%	1	5.0	5.0	65.0
50%	2	10.0	10.0	75.0
53%	4	20.0	20.0	95.0
67%	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The post-test of speaking skills results for the Grade 9 ESL learners in *Table 7* indicate a notable improvement compared to the pre-test scores. The scores ranged from 13% to 67%, with the most learners clustering around the 33% mark. Specifically, one learner scored 13%, two learners scored 20%, two scored 27%, seven scored 33%, one scored 37%, two scored 50%, four scored 53%, and one learner achieved the highest score of 67%.

Table 8: Paired Samples Statistics (Speaking skills)

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-Test	26.55%	20	14.457%	3.233%
	Post-Test	37.70%	20	13.989%	3.128%

The paired sample statistics (Table 8) for the Grade 9 ESL learners' speaking skills test indicate a clear improvement following the intervention. The pre-test mean score was 26.55% with a standard deviation of 14.09, while the post-test mean increased to 37.70% with a slightly lower standard deviation of 13.99.

Table 9: Writing Skills Post-test

Post- Test

Learners' marks in percentage (%)	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
13%	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
17%	1	5.0	5.0	20.0
20%	2	10.0	10.0	30.0
27%	2	10.0	10.0	40.0
35%	1	5.0	5.0	45.0
37%	1	5.0	5.0	50.0
43%	1	5.0	5.0	55.0
47%	1	5.0	5.0	60.0
50%	3	15.0	15.0	75.0

53%	3	15.0	15.0	90.0
67%	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 9 shows the score of post-tests of writing skills, 30% of the learners scored at or below 20%, which remained unchanged from the pre-test, indicating that a significant portion of the learners continue to struggle with foundational writing skills. Meanwhile, the proportion of mid-tier performers, those scoring between 27% and 47%, decreased from 50% to 30%. Conversely, a fair improvement was observed; the number of high performers scoring 50% and above, doubled from 20% to 40%, reflecting a substantial improvement among the higher-achieving learners. The analysis of the post-test writing scores for 20 Grade 9 ESL learners in school Y shows a noticeable improvement in overall language proficiency compared to the pre-test results. The scores range from 13% to 67%, with the highest score increasing by 7% from the pre-test maximum of 60%.

Table 10: Paired Samples Statistics (writing skills)

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-Test	33.95%	20	13.621%	3.046%
Post- Test	37.75%	20	17.932%	4.010%

The analysis of paired sample statistics for the Grade 9 ESL learners' writing scores involves comparing their pre-test and post-test results to assess the impact of the instructional intervention. The mean score increased from 33.95% in the pre-test to 37.75% in the post-test. On the other hand, the standard deviation rose from 13.28% to 17.93%.

4.1.2.1 Qualitative data

Research question 3: Why do learners who have been exposed to Project-Based Learning behave the way they do?

Table 11: Description of Participants

Participants’ Pseudonym	Age	Gender
P1	14	Boy
P2	15	Girl
P3	17	Girl
P4	16	Boy
P5	14	Girl

The above table demonstrates the description of ESL grade 9 learners who were purposively interviewed based on their performance after the intervention. Participants were five (5), the two (2) of them were boys ranging from 14-16 years. On the other hand, girls who took part in the focus group interview were three (3), their age ranged from 14-17 years. Below are the themes presented and interpreted.

Table 12: Increased Engagement and Enjoyment with Learning (Theme 1)

Question	Responsible
How did you feel when working on these projects compared to regular classwork?	<p>P1: <i>It was more fun and interesting than just reading or writing exercises.</i></p> <p>P2: <i>I felt more excited but also a little nervous because we had to speak in front of the class.</i></p> <p>P3: <i>It was easier to remember things because we were doing something active.</i></p> <p>P4: <i>I liked working with friends, working with friends made me want to do my best.</i></p> <p>P5: <i>Sometimes it was challenging, but I enjoyed learning by doing.</i></p>

Participants from Table 12 unanimously reported heightened engagement during the PBL activities compared to those of traditional classrooms. The collaborative nature of projects fostered intrinsic motivation, with P4 noting, "*Working with friends made me want to do my best.*" P5 emphasised enjoyment of hands-on tasks: "*I liked learning by doing.*" Projects involving creative output were particularly effective in sustaining interest. Findings suggest that PBL creates a more dynamic and interactive environment, which motivates learners to participate actively and enjoy the learning process.

Table 13: Enhance Speaking Confidence and Practice (Theme 2)

Question	Responses
<p>Do you think working on projects helped you speak more in English? Why or why not?</p>	<p>P1: <i>Yes, because being the presenter helped me speak more clearly.</i></p> <p>P2: <i>Definitely, it made me practice speaking in a real situation.</i></p> <p>P3: <i>Yes, practicing with my group made speaking less scary.</i></p> <p>P4: <i>I felt I spoke more because I had to discuss with my group.</i></p> <p>P5: <i>It helped me speak more because I had to explain things clearly in front of my classmates.</i></p>

The above table demonstrates a question that participants were expected to respond to. Question: *Do you think working on projects helped you speak more in English? Why or why not?* All participants demonstrated improved oral proficiency through PBL. Regular group discussions and presentations reduced speaking anxiety, as P3 stated: "*Practising with my group made speaking less scary.*" P1 highlighted role-specific growth: "*Being the presenter helped me speak more clearly.*" Authentic tasks such as debate (P2) and presentation (P5) provided low-pressure speaking practice. PBL provides authentic contexts for speaking, reducing anxiety and encouraging learners to practice English in meaningful ways; which boosts their oral proficiency and self-assurance.

Table 14: Improvement in Writing Skills (Theme 3)

Question	Responses
<p>How did your writing change after doing the projects? Can you give examples?</p>	<p>P1: <i>My writing became clearer and more organised, like when I wrote the reports.</i></p> <p>P2: <i>Writing dialogues for our play taught me natural expressions.</i></p> <p>P3: <i>I improved in writing descriptions and summaries for the brochures.</i></p> <p>P4: <i>I started using better vocabulary and linking words in my reports.</i></p> <p>P5: <i>I practiced writing speeches that were easy to understand.</i></p>

Structured project outputs (reports, speeches, brochures) improved writing organisation and vocabulary (see table 14). P4 observed: *"My reports used better linking words."* P2 noted genre-specific gains: *"Writing dialogues for our play taught me natural expressions."* P3 and P5 demonstrate the improvement in their writing style. The writing tasks embedded in PBL, such as reports, speeches, and brochures, promote practical writing skills development by requiring learners to produce purposeful texts.

Table 15: Development of Responsibility and Autonomy (Theme 4)

Question	Responses
<p>Did you feel more responsible for your</p>	<p>P1: <i>Yes, If I didn't do my part, the project suffered.</i></p> <p>P2: <i>I had to prepare my part well or the project would be incomplete.</i></p> <p>P3: <i>I felt responsible to help my group succeed. I was the idea generator and helped with research.</i></p>

<p>learning during the projects? How?</p>	<p>P4: <i>I managed my time better to finish my tasks.</i> P5: <i>I learned to plan and organise my work.</i></p>
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Table 15 demonstrates that projects fostered learner accountability across all participants. P1 linked individual preparation to group success: "*If I didn't do my part, the project suffered.*" In addition, P2 understood role playing. P4 developed time management skills: "*I managed my time better to finish my tasks.*" Role ownership (e.g., P3 as "idea generator") encouraged proactive learning. It is evident that PBL fosters learner autonomy (P5) by assigning clear roles and responsibilities, which encourages ownership of learning and accountability.

Table 16: Challenges and Problem-Solving Skills (Theme 5)

Question	Responses
<p>What were some challenges you faced during project work, and how did you deal with them?</p>	<p>P1: <i>Sometimes people didn't agree, so we talked and listened carefully.</i></p> <p>P2: <i>I was nervous speaking, but practicing helped.</i></p> <p>P3: <i>We had little time, so we divided tasks.</i></p> <p>P4: <i>Some group members didn't do their part, so we reminded them kindly.</i></p> <p>P5: <i>Some learners did not want to share their ideas; they were not confident enough, but we encouraged them by saying that we are here to help each other.</i></p>

Participants from the above table were asked to state some challenges they faced during project work, and how they dealt with them. Responses highlight that among the challenges; lack of confidence, lack of motivation to participate, group conflicts and time challenges persist. P2 and P5 state that confidence in speaking was low. However, P2 stated: *“practicing helped.”* On the other hand, P5 assured other participants that they are there to help one another, thus, each member should feel confident to voice their ideas. Challenges such as unequal participation were resolved through negotiation, as P4 detailed: *“We reminded members kindly to contribute.”* Furthermore, group conflicts (P1: *“We disagreed sometimes”*) were resolved through iterative problem-solving. Moreover, time constraints were managed via task delegation (P3), while peer mentoring addressed skill gaps (P4). The data suggest that PBL not only enhances language skills but also promotes critical soft skills like communication, negotiation, time management and adaptability.

Table 17: Personal Growth and Changed Learner Identity (Theme 6)

Question	Response
<p>Do you feel different as a learner now compared to before you started doing projects in English? Why?</p>	<p>P1: <i>Yes, I am more confident and active in class. Before projects, I stayed quiet. Now I share ideas.</i></p> <p>P2: <i>I feel less afraid to speak English.</i></p> <p>P3: <i>I enjoy learning English more now.</i></p> <p>P4: <i>I am more responsible for my learning.</i></p> <p>P5: <i>I feel I can communicate better in English tasks.</i></p>

All participants from *Table 17* reported lasting confidence gains. The question was, *Do you feel different as a learner now compared to before you started doing projects in English? Why?* P1 contrasted pre- and post-PBL mindsets: *“Before projects, I stayed quiet. Now I share ideas.”* P5 connected skills to broader competence: *“I communicate better in English tasks.”* Identity shifts included P4’s self-perception as *“a responsible learner”*. It can be concluded that PBL contributes

to transformative learning experiences that shape learners' attitudes and identities as effective English users.

4.2 SUMMARY

This chapter presented qualitative and quantitative data that was collected using multiple tools. Data that was presented was collected by unstructured observations, pre- and post-tests and focus group interviews, and was presented using tables. The following chapter entails the discussion of the findings, conclusions and relevant recommendations.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter entailed the finding of both qualitative data and quantitative data. This chapter consists of discussion of findings for both qualitative and quantitative as guided by research questions. Thus, as the researcher, I used observation and pre-tests to uncover the challenges that ESL learners encounter with productive language skills. On the other hand, post-tests were used to measure learners' reaction to the treatment. Learners also shared their experience with the treatment (PBL); focus group interviews were used. Identified themes for both speaking and writing skills are discussed below. Lastly, conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made.

5.1 Discussion of findings

5.1.1 Problem identification phase (Phase 1)

Research question 1: What Challenges do ESL Grade 9 learners encounter with productive language skills?

As the researcher, I had to familiarise myself with the targeted ESL grade 9 learners to make these learners feel comfortable, the data was generated after some time. In addition, after a week of attending classes with these learners, I generated data using observations (unstructured) to record observed occurrence of events in the ESL grade 9 classroom. Participants in that classroom were not informed that their behaviours were recorded.

Furthermore, the findings of this study firstly revealed that learners relied on mother tongue interference. When it comes to explaining concepts, learners used code-switching due to lack of confidence in using the English language. In some cases, learners felt more confident in speaking Sesotho than speaking English. It can be concluded that mother tongue interference was high. In accordance, Tahimic's (2024) results in the study on the extent of the effect of mother tongue on productive language skills suggested that in a case where the learners' exposure to the mother tongue is high, learners' productive language skills would significantly be affected by the learners' exposure to the mother tongue.

In writing, the results of this study revealed the foundational grammar gaps. Learners had an issue in grammar errors as a result to mother tongue interference. These learners at the foundation phase were introduced to grammatical structure of Sesotho (L1). However, these learners are still stuck at that phase when it comes to English language (L2). Mushtag et al. (2023)'s findings agree with the findings of this current study. The results showed that learners relied on L1 grammatical structure over L2 grammatical structure which makes it harder to show coherence in their writing. Therefore, it can be concluded that mother tongue interference has a negative impact on writing skills. The prevalence of grammar errors and limited vocabulary suggests that learners have not yet fully internalised essential language rules and lexical resources, which are critical for effective writing

Moreover, this study's findings revealed that there was lack of engagement; learners were reluctant to participate due to lack of practice in English language. It is important to highlight that when learners choose to feel reluctant in learning, it is a sign of lack of motivation (Abrar, 2016). Additionally, one of the contributing factors was the teaching strategy that was used. Teachers should motivate learners to become part of their learning. However, the teacher was dominating the classroom, learners were not given enough time to explore in their learning hence this approach limits practice of English language in the classroom. One of the cognitive techniques is to practice more to become accustomed to the characteristics of the English language (Dewi et al., 2017). Limit of practice in English language is evident where the learners speak less in the classroom, also writing activities were so limited. In the same line, it was suggested that learners face difficulties due to low motivation, teachers' lack of interest, a lack of confidence in practicing English and traditional methods of teaching English (Owen, 2019).

As a researcher, I also investigated the challenges of learners in the ESL grade 9 classroom for both speaking and writing hence the introduction of pre-tests. Learners participated in the tests presented to them. The results of pre-tests for speaking skills highlighted that only 10% of these learners managed to score above 50%, 90% of these learners did not perform well in their tests; specifically scored below 50% due to lack of confidence. Additionally, all these significant challenges are associated with lack of exposure to spoken English which impacted negatively their vocabulary. These results suggested that due to the potential of learners' performance improving;

a different approach to teaching should be considered. Furthermore, 20% of learners who scored between 33% to 43% in their tests have a high possibility of improving.

To gather rich data as a way of uncovering their challenges, the grade 9 ESL learners' writing skills were tested. The results revealed that these learners faced significant challenges. The small number of 15% is the percentage of learners who scored above 50% in tests. On the other hand, 85% of learners scored below 50% due to lack of practice which resulted to limited vocabulary in their writing and their arrangement of ideas. To sum up, learners demonstrated a significant challenge in both speaking and writing. Thus, based on the provided evidence; there is no skill that learners showed to master better than the other.

5.1.2 Therapeutic Phase (Phase 2)

Research question 2: How do ESL Grade 9 learners whose learning is informed by project-based learning behave in relation to proficiency in productive skills?

ESL grade 9 learner were then introduced to the treatment (PBL), this treatment aimed at solving the challenges that these learners encounter with productive language skills. It is important to highlight that all learners participated in administered post-tests.

The post-tests results of speaking skills showed improvement in learners' scores. *Table 7* provides the evidence that 35% of learners obtained from 50% and above which indicates that they responded well to the treatment. To validate the above statement, the comparison of pre- and post-tests reveal that only 10% of learners scored from 50% and above in the pre-tests (*Table 5*) which demonstrates the difference of 20%. The treatment was effective, number of learners who scored 30-40% has increased from 15% (pre-tests) to 35% (post-tests).

Furthermore, paired samples statistics (*Table 8*) results revealed that the rise in the mean by 11.15 percentage points demonstrates a meaningful gain in speaking proficiency. The relatively stable standard deviation suggests that the variability in learners' performance remained consistent before and after the intervention, indicating that improvements were seen across different proficiency levels rather than being limited to a few individuals. These descriptive statistics highlight the positive impact of the teaching approach on the overall speaking skills of the learners. This concurs

Astawa et al. (2017)'s findings which revealed that PBL have positively impacted English productive skills.

Writing skills of grade 9 ESL learners showed improvement in the test scores. Learners managed to score satisfactory results as an indication that PBL was an effective teaching strategy. Additionally, this is evident where number of learners who scored from 50% showed an increase from 15% in pre-tests to 40% in post-tests. On the other hand, the number of learners who scored from 30-49% demonstrated a decrease. In pre-tests, 45% of learners obtained from 30-49% and 20% of learners obtained from 30-49% in post-tests. These results suggested that PBL assisted learners to improve in their performance.

The paired samples statistics (Table 10) revealed the increased mean score from 33.95% in the pre-test to 37.75% in the post-test, indicating a modest overall improvement in writing proficiency. However, the standard deviation rose from 13.28% to 17.93%, which suggests that while some learners improved significantly, others showed little to no progress, leading to greater variability in scores. These results are in alignment with that of Alotaibi's (2020) study, in which it was found that the explicit PBL approach significantly improved the persuasive writing skills of Saudi EFL secondary learners, with a significant difference in post-test mean scores, indicating a positive impact of the PBL paradigm. It can be concluded that PBL was effective teaching strategy in enhancing writing skills among grade 9 ESL learners. The significant effect of PBL on learners' writing skill was also concluded by Sadeghi et al. (2016); the result of their research indicated that the learners who were taught by PBL performed better in their writing skill than the learners who were taught by the tradition method of teaching.

Research question 3: Why do learners who have been exposed to Project-Based Learning behave the way they do?

Learners shared their experiences with PBL, identified themes according to the findings are discussed below.

Increased Engagement and Enjoyment with Learning (Theme 1)

Learners reported higher levels of engagement and enjoyment when participating in PBL activities. The collaborative and hands-on nature of projects made learning more relevant and meaningful,

motivating learners to participate actively. Astawa et al (2017)'s findings are consistent with the findings of this study. The findings reveal that PBL promote learners' enthusiasm, confidence, creativity, self-esteem and collaborative learning ability. The learners' behaviour in the classroom showed that they enjoyed the learning process, considering their active participation throughout the lesson. In this study learners shared their experience with PBL, they indicated that they enjoyed interaction with one another as it helped. To cement this notion, Laskar and Bhattacharjee (2022) put forward that learners benefit from one another as they socially interact.

On the other hand, other participant revealed that enjoyment in their learning emerged from taking part in real-world activities in the classroom. In support, the constructivist approach places emphasis of doing by learning in PBL (Dharmayanti & Joni, 2021). The findings of this study showed the importance of engaging learners and allowing learners to become part of their learning thus, increased engagement.

Enhanced Speaking Confidence and Practice (Theme 2)

A significant theme was the improvement in speaking confidence. PBL provided authentic opportunities for learners to use English in discussions, presentations and group work. The supportive environment allowed learners to take risks with language, receive peer feedback, and gradually built their oral proficiency. This finding is consistent with studies showing that PBL, encourages communicative competence and reduces language anxiety, as learners practice speaking in purposeful, low-stakes settings. Astawa et al. (2017)' results of a study on the effect of Project-Based Learning on students' English Productive Skills; shows that PBL enhances learners' confidence in practicing their English as they work collaboratively in team and helped each other. It indicates that peer evaluation or feedback is an important element in PBL: peer evaluation is a critical area that helps learners in group works to review their own work (Hanardi, 2015). In addition, the process of peer evaluation hold significance as it allows learners to scaffold others.

Improvement in Writing Skills (Theme 3)

Learners also noted progress in their writing abilities. The requirement to produce written reports, reflections, and project documentation encouraged them to organise their thoughts and apply new vocabulary and grammar structures. PBL's iterative process; drafting, revising and finalising work

helped learners develop greater accuracy and complexity in their writing. This supports evidence that project-based activities can lead to measurable gains in writing proficiency among ESL. Moreover, Talat and Chaudhry (2014)'s results found that after treated with PBL method of teaching, learners developed creativity as indicated by creative ideas and language use. In the same vein, Vygotsky (1978) states that incorporating project-based learning activities in learning help learners to understand concepts fully, connect ideas, apply their learning to real situations, deeply analyse concepts and arrange their thoughts. Finally, it is a process of learning that enables learners to give meaning to real-life situations.

Development in Responsibility and Interaction (Theme 4)

PBL demanded that learners take ownership of their learning, manage time, and collaborate effectively with peers. Learners reported feeling more responsible for their contributions and more aware of group dynamics. This sense of accountability promoted positive interdependence and fostered essential social skills, such as negotiation, leadership and conflict resolution. The literature highlights that PBL cultivates learner autonomy and teamwork, which is both crucial for language and personal development. Shaalan (2020)'s findings on the effectiveness of PBL as a teaching instruction. Thus, it promoted autonomously and self-motivated learning in which learners learnt at their pace without teacher dominance or traditional methods of teaching. Imtiaz and Asif (2012), who explored the impact of Project-Based Learning on teaching English found that Project-Based Learning did not only improve learners' language skills but make them independent learners as well. In addition, the learners also learnt some other skills including working as team members, autonomous and independent learning.

Challenges and Problem-Solving Skills (Theme 5)

While learners faced challenges such as managing deadlines, resolving disagreements, and overcoming language barriers, they developed problem-solving skills. The process of navigating obstacles required critical thinking and adaptability, which are transferable skills beneficial beyond the language classroom. Research confirms that PBL environments, by design, encourage learners to engage in higher-order thinking and collaborative problem-solving. Shalaan (2020) affirms that PBL is an innovative teaching strategy that improved learners' critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. The findings of this study also highlighted that some learners were hesitant to take part in PBL activities, however their communication skills helped in terms of solving the problem

they were facing. Similarly, Kemaloglu-Er and Sahin (2022)'s finding suggested that PBL activities helped learners in terms effective communication in English.

Personal Growth and Changed Learner Identity (Theme 6)

Finally, learners described experiencing personal growth, including increased self-esteem and a shift in their identity as language users. Many expressed pridefulness in their accomplishments and a greater sense of agency in their learning journey. This transformation is a hallmark of effective PBL, which positions learners as active participants in their education and supports the development of a positive learner identity. These findings buttress Saenz et al. (2018) and Santhi et al. (2019)'s, that PBL has paved the way for learners participatory and autonomous learning.

5.2 Summary of key findings

The key findings revealed that before the introduction of the intervention, grade 9 ESL learners faced challenges with their productive language skills. Observed behaviours by the researcher demonstrated that among challenges that these learners faced include, lack of confidence in the English language, limited vocabulary which affected their writing skills and speaking skills. Moreover, reluctance to participate was among the challenges that these learners encountered. On this basis, it is evident that the teaching approach that was utilised by the teacher contributed to the reluctance of participation. The teacher relied on teacher-centred approaches; notably, the disengaging classroom activities.

To reiterate, the pre-tests were administered to investigate the challenges among learners. The quantitative data demonstrated that learners were facing significant difficulties. Thus, learners' performance was not satisfactory. However, the introduction of the treatment (PBL) showed a great impact in learners' performance. Learners who were not even at average level were able to improve as a result of good response to the treatment. Furthermore, learners shared their experiences with PBL: the findings based on learners' experience with PBL revealed that learners now enjoy learning which they feel part of. This supports the stance that collaborative learning enhanced their communication and problem-solving skills.

5.3 Conclusion

The study concludes that Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a teaching strategy provides activities that enhance productive language skills in ESL classroom. Moreover, the teaching strategy that is learner-centred has a positive effect on learners' engagement in the classroom, motivation and

personal growth. In addition, the study revealed that there was positive effect on the development of low achieved, medium achieved and average achieved learners in their writing skills and speaking skills. It is evident that PBL activities brought life in the ESL classroom which learners demonstrated by obtaining satisfactory scores after they were introduced to PBL. The activities that were introduced in the ESL grade 9 classroom included oral presentations, discussions and debates.

Additionally, the study explored the impact of PBL on enhancing productive language skills among Grade 9 ESL learners in Maseru, guided by Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. The findings clearly demonstrated that knowledge was socially co-constructed through collaborative group work and shared problem-solving during PBL activities. For example, learners worked in teams to create presentations and discussions, negotiating meaning and language forms together, which exemplifies knowledge construction as a social process rather than individual memorisation.

Learners actively built knowledge through dynamic engagement with the teacher, who facilitated discussions by posing scaffolded questions and providing constructive feedback. For instance, when learners demonstrated struggle with vocabulary or sentence structure, the teacher prompted them to self-correct or try alternative expressions rather than giving direct answers, fostering deeper cognitive engagement and autonomy. The ability to exchange ideas through interactive activities builds an individual, hence collaborative learning developed ESL learners' communication skills. The reflection of learners on the PBL tasks revealed that engaging in authentic tasks allowed them to broaden their global knowledge. Alike, Zaidi (2014)' findings support these findings; in the implementation of PBL activities, learners found balance in English language skills and awareness of social issues. This study concludes that the researcher who acted as a teacher, honed English production language skills of these learners by effectively implementing elements of PBL.

It is noticeable that learners played an active role in their learning by setting group goals, dividing responsibilities, and presenting their projects, which required them to negotiate language use, make decisions, and reflect on progress. In addition, this learner-centred approach underscored their agency in constructing knowledge, aligning with social constructivism's emphasis on active participation. The study confirmed that among 21st century skills, PBL enhanced problem-solving

and self-direct skills. Learners' reflection on the implementation of PBL highlighted that in situations during teamwork tasks when they had to find suitable solutions, they used communication as a tool. Moreover, learners felt responsible for the learning. Aldobekhi and Abahussain (2024)'s findings corroborate these findings; PBL encourages learners to take charge of their education.

Increased interaction was created through structured group activities and classroom routines that encouraged discussion and collaboration. For instance, pair and group discussions before presentations allowed learners extensive language practice and scaffolding opportunities among themselves. Scaffolding was evident in multiple areas, including vocabulary development, grammar correction and pronunciation practice. The teacher provided temporary support tailored to learners' current proficiency, gradually withdrawing assistance as learners' skills improved. Peer scaffolding also occurred, where more proficient peers helped with language explanations and modelled target language use.

Moreover, the teacher and peers served as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) by offering guidance, language input and corrective feedback throughout the project phases. The teacher guided learners through vocabulary selection and appropriate language structures, while peers contributed by modeling language use and supporting communication strategies within groups.

To sum up, the findings of this study revealed that Vygotsky's social constructivism is a valuable framework for understanding how PBL enhances productive language skills among ESL learners. Thus, the meaningful, social, and scaffolded nature of learning in the PBL environment created multiple opportunities for learners to co-construct language knowledge actively and collaboratively.

5.4 Areas for further study

The study explored the impact of Project-Based Learning in enhancing proficiency in productive language skill among ESL grade 9 learners in Maseru. The researcher feels the need for further research that would explore the impact of PBL in enhancing receptive language skills (listening and reading). The research may help to uncover what possible factors influence receptive language skills and how PBL may address these factors. On the other hand, the perceptions of teachers or learners toward PBL on teaching and learning of English language may be investigated. Moreover, the current study focused only on one group of grade 9 ESL learners in Maseru district. Thus, the

future researcher may explore PBL in rural area schools or in different educational setting (private schools). The present study focused on small sample size which provides further research on a larger sample size.

5.5 Recommendations

The present study recommends that instead of relying just on rote memorisation, English language teachers in Lesotho should adopt project-based learning and learner-centred approaches to actively engage learners and enhance their productive language skills. Developing proficiency in various formative tests is necessary to improve their assessment literacy, which would help them better identify learning gaps in their learners and improve their education.

Furthermore, English as a second language (ESL) learners should actively engage in project-based and collaborative learning activities to improve their speaking and writing abilities, which are essential for gaining productive language proficiency. Learners should ensure that they set specific learning objectives and use the feedback from assessments to determine their areas of strength and growth. English language syllabus emphasises the need of developing literacy skills in both English and Sesotho to improve communication and academic success.

Developing real-life skills outside of the classroom, learners should participate in clubs, extracurricular activities and technology-supported learning. It is important to highlight that learners would be better equipped to manage the demands of continuous assessment and project work if they develop self-discipline and time management skills. In addition, to guarantee they overcome learning obstacles and continue to make progress, learners should ask for help from their peers and teachers when they are having problems.

Equally important, to effectively teach literacy in English in multigrade classrooms, it is crucial that trained professionals engage in continuous professional development. Planning lessons and implementing interventions based on assessment data would enhance learner performance and accountability.

5.7 SUMMARY

This chapter entailed the discussion of findings for both qualitative and quantitative data based on the research questions that guided this current study, the summary of key findings, limitations of the study, conclusions, areas of further research and recommendations.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Unstructured Observation for Speaking skills

Name of the school:

Class level:

Date of the observation:

Time of the observation:

Time	Activity/Context	Observations (Narrative)	Theme(s) Observed	Comments/Interpretation

APPENDIX B

Unstructured Observation for Writing skills

Name of the school:

Class level:

Date of the observation:

Time of the observation:

Writing Task Type	Observations (Narrative)	Theme(s) Observed	Comments/Interpretation

APPENDIX C

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

PRE-TEST/POST-TEST

GRADE 9

SPEAKING TEST

Total Marks: 40

School Name.....

.....

Name of the learner.....

Presentation on a Memorable Day

Question:

Please talk for 1-2 minutes about a memorable day in your life. Describe what happened, who was with you, where it took place and explain why this day was special to you.

Follow-up prompts (if needed):

- What made this day different from other days?
- How did you feel during that day?
- Would you like to experience a day like that again? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D

Speaking Skills Test Rubric

Criteria (7-8)	Beginning (1)	Developing (2-3)	Proficient (4-5)	Advanced (6)
Pronunciation	Frequent errors, hard to understand	Some errors, mostly clear speech	Few errors, clear speech	Accurate and natural pronunciation
Vocabulary Usage	Limited vocabulary, repetitive words	Basic vocabulary with occasional variety	Adequate vocabulary, appropriate word choice	Rich vocabulary, precise and varied usage
Grammar and Syntax	Frequent grammatical errors	Some errors, basic sentence structures	Mostly correct grammar with complex sentences	Grammatically accurate and varied structures
Fluency	Hesitant, fragmented speech	Moderate fluency with pauses	Smooth speech with minor hesitations	Fluent and coherent speech
Response to Stimuli	Delayed or incomplete responses	Basic responses with effort to elaborate	Relevant and clear responses	Quick, insightful, and detailed responses

APPENDIX E

Speaking Skills Test Scores

Student Names	Pre-Test	Post-Test
S1	27%	33%
S2	6%	13%
S3	13%	20%
S4	33%	33%
S5	60%	50%
S6	20%	33%
S7	17%	33%
S8	27%	50%
S9	17%	37%
S10	43%	53%
S11	40%	33%
S12	25%	53%
S13	33%	53%
S14	57%	67%
S15	10%	27%
S16	20%	20%
S17	13%	33%
S18	27%	27%
S19	20%	33%
S20	23%	53%

APPENDIX F

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

PRE-TEST/POST-TEST

GRADE 9

Writing Test

Total Marks: 30

Time: 45 minutes

Instructions:

- Write clearly and neatly.
- Pay attention to punctuation and capitalisation.
- Use the vocabulary and grammar you know.

INFORMAL LETTER

Question

Write a letter to a friend telling them about your favourite hobby. Describe what you like about it, how often you do it and why you think your friend might enjoy it too. Do not forget to ask your friend about their hobbies!

(TOTAL = 30)

APPENDIX G

Writing Skills Test Scores

STUDENT NAME	Pre-Test	Post- Test
S1	43%	50%
S2	60%	47%
S3	30%	35%
S4	33%	27%
S5	50%	67%
S6	16%	20%
S7	13%	13%
S8	20%	13%
S9	37%	53%
S10	40%	53%
S11	20%	17%
S12	20%	13%
S13	33%	20%
S14	37%	67%
S15	30%	53%
S16	40%	50%
S17	47%	50%
S18	50%	37%
S19	47%	43%
S20	13%	27%

APPENDIX H

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. How did you feel when working on these projects compared to regular classwork?
2. Do you think working on projects helped you speak more in English? Why or why not?
3. How did your writing change after doing the projects? Can you give examples?
4. Did you feel more responsible for your learning during the projects? How?
5. What were some challenges you faced during project work, and how did you deal with them?
6. Do you feel different as a learner now compared to before you started doing projects in English? Why?


APPENDIX I

Letter Of Introduction

The National University of Lesotho

P.O. Roma 180
Lesotho
Africa

Telephone: +266 22340601
Fax: +266 22340000
<http://www.nul.ls>



Faculty of Education

22nd April, 2025

The Principal
Manonyane High School
Maseru
Lesotho

Dear Sir/Madam,

**RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT
MANONYANE HIGH SCHOOL**

I am writing to kindly request permission on behalf of the following student to conduct academic research at your school as part of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education (English Language) programme at the National University of Lesotho:

Student Name: Lehlohonolo Daniel Lesoma
Student Number: 201904423
Supervisor: Dr. Mahao
Research Topic: *Exploring the Impact of Project-Based Learning in Enhancing English Language Proficiency among Grade 9 ESL Learners in Maseru, Lesotho*

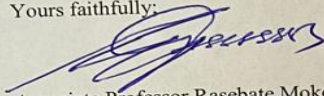
The proposed study aims to investigate how project-based learning can improve the English language proficiency of Grade 9 learners who study English as a Second Language (ESL). With your permission, Mr. Lesoma would like to work with a selected number of Grade 9 learners and English language teachers at your school. The research will involve classroom-based activities, observations, and possibly brief interviews or questionnaires.

Kindly note that all ethical considerations will be observed throughout the research process. Participation will be voluntary, and confidentiality of all participants and the school will be strictly maintained. The findings of the research will be used solely for academic purposes.

We would highly appreciate your support and cooperation in granting permission for Mr. Lesoma to conduct his research at your esteemed institution. Should you require any further information or documentation, please do not hesitate to contact me or the student directly.

Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to your favorable response.

Yours faithfully:



Associate Professor Rasebate Mokotso
For: Head of Department
Department of Languages and Social Education (LASED)



APPENDIX J

Turnitin Plagiarism Report

Lehlohonolo Lesoma

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-  Postgraduate Studies 2024_25
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