

Developing Writing Skills through Project-Based Learning (PBL) Approach in ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Teaching language skills in separation has been practiced for decades, which demonstrated to be less effective for students' language learning. This study aims to introduce a project-based learning (PBL) approach in developing students' writing skills in the target language, English language. Other than the PBL approach, this study is underpinned by social constructivist theory. This PBL project was conducted for three weeks. It involved 22 students from the Faculty of Music at a higher education institution. They were assigned a problem-solution essay task on real issues that they observed within their faculty. Then, they would need to prepare a video and present. A survey was conducted after tasks completion in order to gauge their perception of their writing abilities. The findings indicate that students' perceived improvements in grammar, vocabulary use, sentence construction, and writing clarity after participating in the PBL project. Positive perceptions of PBL were also reported with students' increased confidence, motivation, and willingness to write in English. These findings show that PBL supports integrated language learning, and improves students' writing alongside other language skills. It is recommended for future research to replicate the study through different delivery modes, such as online platforms, with other groups of students. The approach can also be applied in other contexts and environments.

Keywords: Writing Skills, Project-Based Learning, Perception, Social Constructivist Theory

INTRODUCTION

In tertiary education, it is essential for university students to master speaking and writing skills in preparing them for their professional world upon graduation. The preparation involves multiple competencies including their language proficiency in verbal and written communication, highlighting the need for integrated, and authentic language learning (Chan, 2021). In line with this perspective, educators should not concentrate on a single language skill, and should aim towards a holistic and integrated language teaching and learning (Akki & Larouz, 2021). However, traditional language classrooms that taught language skills separately have often been practiced for years. Responding to this need, the Academy of Language Studies at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) has incorporated the integration of all language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) into its English language syllabus to support learners' English language development. This integrated curriculum aims to improve the English language teaching and learning process in the university. In this context, ESL educators play an important role in supporting this positive initiative from the university, including selecting appropriate and effective instructional methods tailored to their students' needs in their ESL classrooms.

This study is underpinned by Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist learning theory. This theory explains that learning is developed through active interaction in interpersonal, cultural-historical, and individual factors (Wibowo et al., 2025). From this perspective, it is clear that knowledge is acquired and constructed through peer collaboration in an interactive learning environment. Similarly, project-based learning (PBL) practices collaborative learning, where students would communicate, discuss and develop their understanding with their peers together. In this context, educators should play a major role in recognising their students' level of

understanding and using it as a stepping stone to deliver effective language teaching and learning in their classrooms (Ban, 2023). Social constructivism is grounded in two key principles: learners construct new knowledge by connecting it to prior experiences, and learning occurs as an active process in which meaning is continuously refined through interaction, leading learners from their current understanding to a higher level of cognition.

Thus, the adoption of project-based learning (PBL) is deemed as a practical and effective approach to enhancing students' writing skills, alongside with other skills in the integrated English curriculum. It has been well accepted among both educators and students, indicating that it supports its implementation in higher education contexts (Guo et al., 2021). The introduction of problem-solving tasks encourages active and interactive discussion among students, allowing them to identify and propose a viable solution to given challenges in a collaborative effort. These practices also offered rooms for students to develop their English language proficiency, thereby contributing to the improvement of students' writing skills in ESL classrooms.

In addition, project-based learning (PBL) promotes a student-centred learning, as students are responsible for their own learning. It develops students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication of ideas collaboratively. Moreover, students would be able to increase their awareness of their learning development, as they reflect on their learning experiences (Ciftci, 2015). This highlights students' role as active recipients of knowledge who construct and share understanding throughout their learning process.

Despite the growing body of research on project-based learning in language education (Guo et al., 2021; Almulla, 2020), much of the existing literature has focused on its general impact on language learning and student engagement. In addition, previous studies have often examined language skills separately, with limited attention given to the relationship between writing and other language skills within an integrated language learning environment (Akki & Larouz, 2021). Further research is needed to explore students' perceptions of writing development through project-based learning in Malaysian tertiary ESL classrooms. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate students' perceived writing development and their perceptions of project-based learning following the implementation of a project-based learning approach in an integrated language skills course.

This study adopts a project-based learning (PBL) approach in the teaching of writing skills in the ESL classroom. Students were assigned a problem-solution essay task to be completed in groups. In this collaborative writing task with their peers, they would discuss, negotiate, and share ideas with their peers for task completion. The whole process of this study is particularly significant as it demonstrates how writing skills can be developed through an integrated language learning approach that combines reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing Skills

It is a common perspective that writing is a complex skill and can influence students' motivation negatively (Dang, 2019). Furthermore, it requires a range of language competencies for students to produce a good written work quality (Suastra & Menggo, 2020). These competencies include developing appropriate central ideas, providing relevant supporting details, integrating relevant concepts, making suitable word choices, selecting appropriate topics, using correct punctuation, ensuring coherent sentence transitions, and applying appropriate referencing. These expected writing outcomes align with the present study, in which students were given autonomy to select issues and subsequently produce a full written report on the chosen topic. This task is appropriate for undergraduate learners, as university-level students are expected to develop proficiency in academic writing to achieve their educational goals (Argawati & Suryani, 2021). Although writing is widely recognised as one of the most challenging language skills, researchers suggest that problem-based learning can help reduce these difficulties.

Social Constructivist Theory

Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist theory proposes that learning and cognitive development occur primarily through social interaction and are shaped by culture and language. Rather than learning being an individual process, Vygotsky argued that knowledge is constructed through interactions with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers, parents, and peers. One important concept in Vygotsky's social constructivist theory is scaffolding, which involves providing temporary support to learners as they develop new skills and gradually removing that support as competence increases. Puntambekar (2022) posits that learning is enhanced when support is distributed across teachers, peers, and instructional tools, allowing learners to gradually assume responsibility for their own learning. Recent research further suggests that scaffolding can improve academic performance, self-efficacy, and engagement across both traditional and digital learning environments (Herold & Seufert, 2025). In project-based learning, students collaborate to solve authentic problems, negotiate meaning, exchange feedback, and co-construct knowledge while completing shared tasks. These collaborative processes reflect the principles of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, making it an appropriate theoretical foundation for examining students' perceived writing development through project-based learning (PBL) approach in ESL classrooms.

Project-based Learning (PBL)

Project-based learning (PBL) is an instructional approach in which learning is organised around the development of projects, resulting in the presentation of outcomes (Levine & Mosier, 2014). The significant contribution of PBL is mostly on learner autonomy and inquiry-based learning. According to Boss and Krauss (2007), as cited in Giao and Nguyen (2021), this approach ensures students' participation in problem identification, careful investigations through multiple sources, and the production of meaningful outcomes within a deadline. The entire task completion process causes students to take charge of their learning and practice critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

This approach is widely implemented in higher education for its nature that involves active students' role in their learning, moving away from teacher-centred approach in the classroom (Guo et al., 2021). It promotes flexible learning that requires students to practice inquiry and teamwork. The flexibility of project-based learning (PBL) encourages students to complete meaningful and authentic projects assigned to them (Almulla, 2020). Although the implementation of PBL may be different across educational settings, it is commonly employed in a similar route that begins with inquiry, continues with collaboration, and ends with the production of a final outcome. Therefore, students would need to actively participate in all stages of the project to ensure tasks completion.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative research design was employed in this study to determine students' perceptions of their writing skill development after the implementation of a project-based learning (PBL) approach in their language learning. A quantitative approach is deemed suitable for a systematic measurement of students' perceptions through numerical data analysis (Mishra & Alok, 2017). In this study, a survey method was utilised, using questionnaires as an instrument for data collection. Quantitative research methodologies focus on collecting and analysing numerical data to describe characteristics, find correlations, or test hypotheses. In this study, the methodology involved using surveys to gather data after the project-based learning period. Quantitative methods, such as this, provide a systematic and objective way to evaluate educational interventions, ensuring that the results are reliable and replicable (Khan et al. 2023).

Research Procedure

The study was conducted within three weeks. Students participated in a structured project-based learning (PBL) task that integrated all language skills including reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The task is based

around real issues happening at the faculty. Throughout the project, students worked in a team to identify problems, propose solutions, prepare problem-solution essays, and produce a presentation video. In identifying the problems and proposing solutions, they collected and analysed information through reading activities and interviews. With information in hand, they wrote their findings using problem-solution essay format and created the video for oral presentation. The tasks were designed according to the progressive structure of PBL that begins from inquiry to production. Minimal guidance was offered to students throughout the process as they were given autonomy and freedom to build their case and complete the tasks. The outcomes of the project are a video presentation and submission of a problem-solution essay from each team. The outputs reflect students' learning process that integrates all language components such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

Participants

Twenty-two (22) students from the Faculty of Music participated in the study. The course involved was Integrated Language Skills III, which focuses on all language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). The participants were selected through convenience sampling as they were enrolled in the researcher's course during the semester. The students' language proficiency varied as the class composed of heterogeneous participants consisted of twelve (12) males and ten (10) females, with one (1) special need participant in the class.

Instrument

This study utilised a questionnaire adapted from Faridah et al. (2011), which examines learners' perceptions of project-based learning, and Yang and Puakpong (2016), which focuses on learners' perceived language abilities following exposure to a project-based learning (PBL) intervention. The instrument comprised 25 items designed to measure students' perceived writing ability after exposure to the PBL approach, as well as their views on its implementation in ESL classroom settings. A six-point Likert scale was used, as it has been shown to yield higher reliability compared to a five-point scale (Chomeya, 2010). A pilot study was conducted, and the reliability indices for all items exceeded 0.70, with an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.904. Since the reliability coefficient falls within the acceptable range of 0.70 to 0.95, the instrument was considered reliable. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the intervention to capture students' overall perceptions of the project-based learning experience.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding 1: Improvement in Students' Writing Ability

The findings show that students' writing ability improved after the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) approach. The participants perceived positive development in several aspects of writing. First, participants reported that they were able to write problem-solution essays after participating in the PBL activity. They also indicated improvements in grammar use in their writing. In addition, participants stated that they used words more appropriately in their written work after the PBL activity. The findings further show that participants were able to construct longer sentences compared to their previous writing performance. Participants also reported that their writing became clearer after completing the PBL tasks.

Finding 2: Students' Perception of Project-based Learning (PBL)

The participants perceived project-based learning (PBL) positively as an effective approach for enhancing their writing ability. All items recorded positive responses, indicating favourable views of PBL approach in ESL writing instruction. Participants agreed that project work provided opportunities for them to engage in active research, which supported the development of their writing skills in language learning. They also shared that they were more willing to write in English after participating in PBL activity. In addition, participants expressed their interest for more opportunities to practise their writing skills in ESL classrooms. Finally, they reported they gained more confidence in their writing ability following the implementation of project-based learning (PBL).

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings demonstrate that project-based learning (PBL) approach is effective for enhancing ESL students' writing skills, alongside other language skills such as speaking, listening and reading. It not only improves linguistic aspects of writing such as grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure but also fosters confidence, motivation, and positive learning attitudes among ESL learners. These findings are consistent with previous studies which suggest that PBL promotes active learning, collaboration, and meaningful engagement in language learning tasks (Guo et al., 2021; Almulla, 2020). The findings also support the argument by Boss and Krauss (2007), as cited in Giao and Nguyen (2021) that inquiry-based and collaborative tasks encourage students to take ownership of their learning and engage more deeply in the writing process.

Beyond confirming that students perceived improvements in writing, the findings suggest that the authentic nature of the project may have played an important role in promoting meaningful language use. Rather than completing isolated writing exercises, students wrote to communicate solutions to real issues within their faculty, giving the writing task a clear purpose and audience. This authentic context may have encouraged greater cognitive engagement and sustained motivation, enabling students to pay closer attention to grammar, vocabulary, and organisation throughout the writing process. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of project-based learning (PBL) may stem not only from collaboration but also from the meaningfulness of the learning task itself.

These findings align with the social constructivist perspective underpinning this study. According to social constructivist theory, learning occurs through social interaction, collaboration, and the co-construction of knowledge (Wibowo et al., 2025). Throughout the project-based learning (PBL) activities, students engaged in discussions, negotiated ideas, shared information, and worked collaboratively to complete the assigned tasks. These collaborative interactions can be viewed as a form of peer scaffolding, where students support one another by sharing ideas, providing feedback, and refining their writing throughout the project. In line with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, such scaffolded interactions may have enabled learners to accomplish writing tasks beyond what they could have achieved independently, contributing to their perceived improvement in writing ability. Such interactions may have contributed to their perceived development in writing skills, as learners actively constructed knowledge and refined their understanding through meaningful communication with their peers. More importantly, these findings provide empirical support for the social constructivist principle that learning develops through interaction with others. Throughout the project, students negotiated meanings, justified ideas, and received continuous feedback from peers before producing the final essay. Such collaborative dialogue may have functioned as scaffolding, allowing learners to refine their language use beyond what they could have achieved individually. Therefore, the findings extend the application of Vygotsky's theory by demonstrating how collaborative writing tasks can support perceived writing development within tertiary ESL classrooms.

It is crucial to highlight that the findings also address the gap identified by Akki and Larouz (2021), where language skills are often treated separately with limited attention given to the relationship between writing and other language skills. In this study, the project-based learning (PBL) tasks assigned to students made it necessary for them to integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing to ensure the completion of project tasks. The nature of the tasks suggests that students' writing skills can be improved together with other language skills. This finding contributes to the existing literature by suggesting that writing instruction does not necessarily need to be separated from other language skills. Instead, writing development may occur naturally when learners engage in authentic communicative tasks requiring them to read information, discuss ideas, negotiate meaning, and present solutions. Consequently, the present study supports a more integrated model of ESL instruction, particularly in tertiary education where communication tasks are rarely limited to a single language skill. This suggests that project-based learning (PBL) is a holistic approach in ESL learning as it offers students the opportunities to apply all language skills in authentic and meaningful contexts.

An interesting finding is that students reported increased confidence and willingness to write in English following the project. Although the study focused primarily on writing development, the improvement in

affective factors may be equally important. Confidence and willingness to write are often associated with greater classroom participation and persistence when facing challenging writing tasks. This suggests that the benefits of PBL extend beyond linguistic improvement to include psychological readiness to use English in authentic situations.

In addition, the autonomy provided to students through authentic problem-solving activities in the ESL classroom aligns with Ban's (2023) view that project-based learning (PBL) offers supportive and meaningful learning environments that drive students to participate and learn responsibly. These outcomes also suggest that PBL has strong potential to address challenges associated with teaching writing in ESL contexts, particularly in higher education where students are required to produce higher-level and academic-level writing. While the findings are encouraging, they should be interpreted within the context of several methodological limitations. These limitations also provide directions for future research.

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was relatively small and involved students from one faculty in a single institution. Second, the study relied on students' self-reported perceptions rather than objective measures of writing performance. Third, the intervention was conducted over a period of only three weeks, which may not fully capture long-term developments in students' writing abilities. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

It is recommended for future research to replicate the study through various modes of delivery, such as utilising appropriate online platforms with different groups of students to enhance the validity and generalisability of the findings. Due to the flexible nature of the approach, it is deemed suitable for project-based learning (PBL) tasks to be conducted in both online and face-to-face learning environments. Furthermore, its flexibility allows future research to explore its implementation in diverse academic contexts, such as student exchange programmes, intensive English courses, and offshore language programmes, to further support and enhance ESL students' writing skills in language learning.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that ESL instructors may consider incorporating project-based learning into writing courses to provide students with authentic opportunities to integrate reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Rather than treating writing as an isolated skill, educators can design projects that require students to investigate real-world issues, collaborate with peers, and communicate meaningful solutions. Such practices may simultaneously improve writing proficiency, learner autonomy, and engagement within tertiary ESL classrooms.

In conclusion, the project promotes learner autonomy, collaborative learning, and the development of writing skills among students. The implementation of project-based learning (PBL) approach in ESL classrooms provides students with opportunities to practice and enhance their writing skills alongside other language skills while completing authentic tasks. The use of project-based learning (PBL) approach in the ESL classroom also encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning, fostering greater independence in their learning process. Therefore, this approach can be adopted by ESL educators to improve students' writing skills in ESL contexts by providing an environment where writing is meaningfully integrated with other language skills. As higher education increasingly emphasises authentic communication and graduate employability, project-based learning offers a practical pedagogical approach that enables students to develop writing proficiency while simultaneously strengthening the collaborative and communicative competencies required beyond the classroom.

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