

Enhancing Evaluative Commentary Writing Through Project-Based Learning: Insights from Tertiary Language Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The Project-Based Learning (PjBL) approach effectively addresses the passive learning environment by fostering student independence. Project-Based Learning (PjBL), as a student-centered methodology, may be a superior alternative to the lecture-centric model, as it enables students to actively engage and exercise autonomy in their decision-making. Project-Based Learning promotes a student-centered approach, however, this constructivist method remains unfamiliar. Educators continue to employ the conventional approach to impart writing skills by consulting textbooks. Educators are reluctant to incorporate Project-Based Learning in writing classes due to insufficient understanding of this methodology. This may obstruct their efforts to transition to a progressive educational model that provides numerous advantages over conventional lecture-based instruction. This qualitative case study aims to examine the viewpoints of higher education language instructors regarding the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in writing instruction. Five experienced tertiary language educators were chosen through purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and a sequence of classroom observations. The chosen tertiary language instructors employed this method in classrooms of non-English major students. The integration results indicated a notable enhancement observed by tertiary language instructors in students' post-essays compared to pre-essays written prior to the implementation of PjBL. The observational data indicated that students performed exceptionally well in the classroom, and the role of tertiary language teachers was instrumental in enhancing comprehension of the material. This study is constrained by a limited sample size, comprising only five lecturers. The participants' lack of familiarity with the PjBL approach necessitated preliminary training, potentially influencing their engagement and the study's outcomes. Consequently, future research should aim to increase the sample size to yield more comprehensive results, thereby motivating more language educators to adopt this approach as their preferred teaching practice. In conclusion, the impact of PjBL on improving students' writing skills was substantial, making PjBL highly recommended.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning (PjBL), writing, tertiary language teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 emphasizes the importance of improving teaching

methods and strategies to produce excellent students. English language teachers face challenges in teaching English subjects, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. To address these issues, teachers must develop and apply novel methodologies like project-based learning (PjBL), which emphasizes the constructivist approach in tertiary education.

PjBL involves students in developing their own activity plans, designing collaborative projects, and creating tangible products to be presented to an audience. This approach engages students in designing, solving, and investigating problems, allowing them to exercise autonomy in decision-making while dedicating time to creating a product centered around a complex and challenging topic. Studies have shown that PjBL methods can increase communication skills, interpersonal skills, and motivation in learning (Din et al., 2020; Adlina et al., 2020). Additionally, PjBL has been proven to improve students' writing skills and grammar knowledge, enabling them to prepare formal documents such as resumes, business proposals, and meeting notices.

The effectiveness of PjBL can be seen in a few studies. A study by Borisova and Letkina (2019) shows that students taught with PjBL methods create success in increasing communication skills, interpersonal skills, and motivation in learning. Also, many studies have succeeded in proving that PjBL gains positive results when implemented in writing skills. A study by Sapan et al. (2019) highlighted the positive result of the implementation of PjBL in students' writing skills and grammar knowledge; students have proven that they can engage in preparing formal documents such as writing resumes, business proposals, and meeting notices. The following study by Syarifah and Emiliasari (2019) concluded that PjBL contributes positively to students' writing ability and creativity. The development can be seen when students understand the topic, purpose, and structures of writing.

All of the studies above have looked at the effectiveness of PjBL in English writing skills in various settings and contexts, however, only a few studies focus on Malaysian context, highlighting the view from tertiary language teachers. The present study aims to explore the impact of PjBL development on English writing skills from the perspective of tertiary language teachers highlighting the Malaysian context.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore the impact of PjBL development on English writing skills from the perspective of tertiary language teachers in the Malaysian context. By understanding the landscape at the tertiary level, teachers possessing impactful teaching methods is a crucial component of the education framework. This study will focus on PjBL as the teaching method and explore its impact on supporting evaluative commentary writing skills from the perspective of tertiary language teachers.

Research Objective: To investigate how tertiary language teachers perceive students' evaluative commentary writing skills after the intervention of PjBL.

Research Question: How do tertiary language teachers perceive students' writing skills after the intervention of PjBL?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-Based Learning in English Language Instruction

Instructing in the English language is challenging. Chai et al. (2020) assert that English language educators must confront challenges in teaching English, particularly in covering all language skills—speaking, listening, writing, and reading as well as other linguistic elements like grammar and vocabulary. The necessity for implementing effective instructional methods in English education is articulated in Malaysia's esteemed curriculum. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 stipulates that the teaching process must prioritize quality to enhance the learning experience for students. Consequently, the instructional methods must be engaging, enjoyable, and inspiring to encourage active student participation in the learning process. The effective instruction of the English language is of paramount importance for educators because of the essential role English plays in students' academic advancement. Proficiency in the English language is crucial for students' future development, especially during their transition from high school to university and subsequently from

university to the workforce.

One of the most essential language skills individuals must recognize is the capacity for effective writing (Lu, 2021). Islam et al. (2022) and Din et al. (2020) have demonstrated that ESL students encounter difficulties in acquiring productive skills, such as writing, and educators regard the instruction of writing skills as arduous and challenging. Consequently, project-based learning (PjBL) is identified as the most effective pedagogical method for educators aiming to improve writing instruction efficacy in students while simultaneously streamlining the teaching process for instructors.

Furthermore, researchers have investigated the correlation between Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and English writing proficiency. The correlation demonstrates favorable outcomes when students acquire writing skills, particularly in linguistic components. Kemaloglu-Er and Sahin (2022) present a comprehensive analysis of the advantages of Project-Based Learning in English Language Teaching. Kemaloglu-Er and Sahin (2022) conducted a pioneering analysis that demonstrated advancements in grammar, vocabulary, writing, and oral presentations. Salsabila (2018) revealed a significant positive correlation between Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and the instruction of writing procedural texts. The teacher's observation determined that the implementation of PjBL in writing instruction exhibited considerable significance in English schematic structure and grammatical features.

Consequently, PjBL has demonstrated its efficacy as a potent pedagogical method in education, offering numerous advantages for language instruction and acquisition. In the evolving realm of language curriculum, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) emerges as an effective pedagogical strategy that enhances students' language proficiency while equipping them with vital transferable skills for their future pursuits.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design with a case study approach to investigate tertiary language instructors' perceptions of students' writing abilities following the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL). The case study method was selected for its capacity to facilitate a comprehensive and contextually nuanced examination of the phenomenon.

The study was carried out at a public university in Terengganu, deliberately chosen to enable a concentrated examination of PjBL implementation in writing instruction. The researcher adopted the position of a participant observer, facilitating the establishment of a robust rapport with the participants while methodically gathering qualitative data. Through interaction with the participants in this role, the researcher acquired profound insights into their experiences and viewpoints concerning PjBL.

The study utilized a purposive sampling method, wherein participants were intentionally chosen for their pertinence to the research objective. According to Clark and Braun (2013), purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method that allows researchers to select participants capable of offering significant insights into the phenomenon under investigation. This study's sample comprised five permanently employed tertiary language lecturers at the selected university. The researcher's previous role as a part-time lecturer at the institution streamlined the participant selection process, as their familiarity with the academic environment and faculty members enabled easier access to individuals with direct experience in PjBL.

The data collection utilized two main research instruments: semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that qualitative research necessitates diverse data collection methods, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, to guarantee data credibility. This study concentrated on interviews and observations, with the researcher asserting that the integration of both methods augmented the validity of the results. The semi-structured interviews facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, while classroom observations enabled the researcher to observe the actual implementation of PjBL and corroborate the information gathered from the interviews.

Thematic analysis was utilized to discern recurring themes and patterns in the collected data for data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) characterize thematic analysis as a methodical procedure that encompasses data familiarization, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. This study employed Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, to streamline the coding process and ensure a systematic method for identifying significant themes. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to systematically arrange the data and create a detailed narrative that faithfully represented the participants' experiences with PjBL in writing instruction.

To guarantee the reliability and validity of the results, various measures were instituted. The researcher utilized expert reviewers to evaluate the interview questions for clarity and suitability. The interview questions were derived from previously validated studies, guaranteeing their pertinence to the research objectives. Data triangulation was employed to augment credibility, with classroom observations functioning as a method of cross-validating interview responses. Furthermore, the themes identified in this study were directly derived from prior literature, thereby reinforcing their alignment with established research. Uniform questioning was upheld throughout all interviews to guarantee consistency in data collection. Furthermore, member checking was performed, enabling participants to assess and confirm the precision of their transcribed responses and the researcher's interpretations.

The study attained a high level of reliability and validity in its qualitative data collection and analysis by employing various strategies, including expert validation, instrument adaptation, triangulation, systematic coding in thematic analysis, consistent questioning, and member checking. The methodological rigor measures guaranteed that the study's findings were credible, well-supported, and accurately represented the participants' authentic experiences with PjBL in writing instruction.

RESULTS

To address research question concerning language teachers' perceptions of students' English writing skills following the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), interviews were conducted with all five lecturers. The interview data were analyzed using Atlas.ti software, and the comprehensive results are organized according to the six writing components identified by Brown (2001): content, organization, syntax, vocabulary, discourse, and mechanics.

Nevertheless, in accordance with the criteria of the marking scheme noted by the lecturers in students' writing, there will be solely three fundamental components: content, language, and organization. According to that criterion, syntax, vocabulary, discourse, and mechanics will be categorized under language as specified in the marking scheme regarding language components. From the lecturers' perspectives, after comparing the pre-essays and post-essays of students, they observed that students' writing had enhanced in all dimensions. The students can achieve higher scores on post-essays. They are proficient in addressing the challenges related to writing that they encountered while enhancing their skills in the PjBL classes.

The lecturers said that students are able to present better ideas as the content of the writing.

L1: I've noticed that ever since I started using pjbl, my students' writing content has become richer and more relevant.

L2: I agree. The research and inquiry-based nature of pjbl pushes them to explore topics in depth rather than just writing surface-level essays.

L3: exactly! When they work on projects, they gather real data and examples, which makes their writing more informative and meaningful.

L4: and because they collaborate with their peers, they discuss and refine their ideas before writing, leading to more well-developed arguments.

L5: so true! Pjbl encourages critical thinking, and as a result, students produce writing that is more insightful

and content-rich.

Other than content, the lecturers also noticed students' language aspects have improved significantly. Therefore, their opinions in relation to language was seen in their answers mentioned below.

L1: Definitely! I've noticed that my students are using a wider range of vocabulary in their writing. Since PjBL exposes them to authentic materials, they naturally pick up new words and expressions.

L2: Not only vocabulary, but their grammar has also improved. Because they go through multiple drafts and revisions, they become more aware of their sentence structures and grammatical errors.

L3: That's true. I've also seen an improvement in fluency. In traditional essay writing, students often struggle to express their ideas, but with PjBL, they write more naturally because they are engaged in meaningful tasks.

L4: Another key benefit is coherence. When students work on projects, they need to structure their writing logically, making it easier to read and understand. Their use of linking words and transitions has improved significantly.

L5: The continuous writing, reviewing, and refining process in PjBL has definitely strengthened their language skills.

The lecturers have the opinion that the organization aspect of students' writing shows more rapid progress and less compared to other aspects of writing. They expressed that several students find organization relatively easy to improve compared to other aspects of writing. The lecturers' viewpoints were articulated in their interview statements as depicted below.

L1: Since pjbl requires students to plan their projects step by step, they've become more structured in their writing. Their introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions are more clearly defined now.

L2: I agree. Before using pjbl, many students struggled with logical flow. But now, they pay more attention to sequencing their ideas, making their writing easier to follow.

L3: In project-based tasks, students naturally outline their work before writing. This habit carries over into their essays, helping them present their points in a more organized manner.

L4: I've noticed that students are using linking words more effectively because they understand the importance of coherence in their projects. Their paragraphs connect more smoothly now.

L5: Exactly! Pjbl forces them to structure their thoughts logically, and that directly improves their writing organization. Would you all say that pjbl has helped them develop stronger organization skills?

DISCUSSION

Numerous previous studies demonstrate that the enhancements realized through Project-Based Learning (PjBL) are notably evident in content, language, and organization (Wardani et al., 2021; Sholihah, 2017; Sapan et al., 2019). Wardani et al. (2021) noted that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has significantly influenced the organizational component more than other components. Conversely, a limited number of studies refuted earlier research asserting that students exhibit minimal enhancement in language components, particularly grammar, following the implementation of Project-based Learning (PjBL).

According to Salsabila (2018), students exhibited sluggish advancement in grammar within their writing following the implementation of PjBL, even among high-achieving students, who only demonstrated improvement after the third manuscript sample. Consistent with this finding, Yunus et al. (2020) asserted that the students exhibited negligible enhancement in grammar while performing exceptionally well in other areas. Consequently, it indicates that multiple factors must be considered to achieve effectiveness in the

implementation of PjBL. Initially, comprehending optimal intervention durations, group sizes, and educational backgrounds can be regarded as essential factors in effectively structuring PjBL activities. Cahyono et al. (2024) assert that an extended duration of the PjBL intervention correlates with a greater impact on students' writing, identifying a 10-week duration as the most advantageous, succeeded by 8 weeks and 4 weeks. Salsabila (2018) asserted that students exhibited sluggish advancement in enhancing their grammatical proficiency in writing due to the brief duration of PjBL implementation. Conversely, the research conducted by Yunus et al. (2020) revealed that students demonstrated minimal advancement in grammar despite a six-week intervention.

CONCLUSION

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has demonstrated efficacy in enhancing students' writing abilities. Through participation in substantive projects, students cultivate greater language proficiency, deepen content understanding, and refine the organization of their ideas. The collaborative and research-oriented characteristics of PjBL foster critical thinking, creativity, and self-reflection, rendering writing more organized and intentional. Active participation in the learning process enhances students' confidence and writing proficiency. Consequently, PjBL is an effective pedagogical approach that not only improves writing skills but also cultivates a more profound comprehension of language and communication.

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