# IMPLEMENTING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING FOR EFL STUDENTS' WRITING ACHIEVEMENT AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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**Abstract:** Writing is the process of recursively producing written work. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of project-based learning to elevate the students' academic writing at the tertiary level and to know the students' opinion of the implementation of project-based learning in teaching writing. A mixed method design is employed and it is conducted in twelve sessions. It involves thirty- eight students of the English Department of a private university in Mataram West Lombok, Indonesia who attend academic writing class in the academic year 2022-2023. Project-based learning through the Canva application is conducted in academic writing class. To collect the data, writing tests and interviews were used. The finding revealed that project-based learning is able to improve the students writing achievements, the students perceived project-based as interesting, challenging, motivating, enhancing their English, and increasing their creativity. Project-based enabled them to work together in groups and to think contextually about the problem given. To conclude, it is advisable for EFL teachers to implement project-based learning integrating ICT.
**Keywords**: *academic writing; Canva application; ICT; project-based learning.*

## INTRODUCTION

Writing plays an important role in a student's academic success at the tertiary level. Writing is considered a productive skill and activities in writing lead to written products in the process of EFL learning. It can serve as a medium for the students in learning the knowledge base of their discipline (Maguire *et al*., 2013), in which they are also learning to develop and organize their arguments (Spiller & Ferguson, 2011). Writing requires a wide range of knowledge and the ability to produce an intelligible text (Rofiqoh *et al*., 2022). Through writing, students will be able to convey feelings, ideas, and information (Chalish & Masitowarni, 2013). Students at the university level should master the way to write well. It has to be done to fulfill the purpose of learning writing for students. Besides, students are necessary to attain academic writing ability since it influences their academic achievement (Oktarina *et al*., 2018).

Nevertheless, writing is not an easy task for many EFL college students. This is because writing demands adequate knowledge of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Toba *et al*., 2019). It is also strengthened by the fact that rhetorical conventions of English texts, the structure style, and organization often differ from conventions in students' first language (Akbar *et al*., 2018; Almubark, 2016; Hasan & Marzuki, 2017; Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017). EFL learners face setbacks in writing, for example, part of speech grammar, syntactic, structure, spelling, prepositions, punctuation, cohesion, discourse markers, writing paragraph with a clear focus, paraphrasing, vocabulary, lack of ideas, and weak structure organization (Bram & Angelina, 2022; Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020; Fareed *et al*., 2016; Nasser, 2019; Nenotek *et al*., 2022; Nik *et al*., 2010; Toba *et al*., 2019). Writing remain challenging and much more difficult particularly when students deal with run-on sentences, misuse of connectives, synonym confusion, pronoun misuse, subject-verb agreement, generating, organizing, or even translating ideas or thoughts into an understandable text (Xie, 2020; Stoller, 2002; Nunan, 1999). In tertiary education, the problem persists due to learners' lack of exposure to writing practice (Ilham *et al*., 2020). In addition, based on preliminary observation and interviews conducted by the researcher on the English academic writing subject, the factors that cause students' problems in writing are arranging correct sentences, writing the topic sentence, organizing ideas into paragraphs, and limitation of

vocabulary. Therefore, to be proficient in writing, EFL college students need to have good knowledge of how to recognize, manage and overcome such things as complexities at the level of the clause, grammatical form, and unfamiliarity with the use of language in writing that is not only learn how to write but also reinforce several aspects of language that they have not completely mastered.

In this context, one of the alternative methods to teaching writing by adapting a project-based learning method, with the language learning being guided by the meaningful project to fulfill the learning objectives. Project-based learning encourages learners to learn a project, make learning relevant, personalize and engaging (Thomas, 2000; Wang, 2020) and it is also an authentic teaching pedagogy that allows learners to plan, execute, and assess the project beyond the classroom with real-world experiences (Chard, 2013; Chi & Dieu, 2021; Essien, 2018; Somani & Rizvi, 2018; Ulrich, 2016). Project-based Learning (PBL) helps students gain a deep understanding of the acquired knowledge, develop a high level of learning, and promotes motivation to learn English (Al-Busaidi & Al-Seyabi, 2021; Kimsesiz *et al.*, 2017; Rostika *et al.*, 2021; Tuyen & Tien, 2021; Wongdaeng & Hajihama, 2018). Furthermore, project-based learning engages learners in an active process of learning (Chi & Dieu, 2021).

Moreover, Alan & Stoller (2005) and Stoller (2002) offer ten steps of project-based learning in maximizing the benefit of project work in the foreign language classroom. Steps 1 and steps 2 are used for project preparation by agreeing on a theme for the project and determining the final outcome. Steps 3 to step 7 are applied to accomplish by students for conducting the project. Step 3 is to structure the project, the students and instructor work out project details that guide students from the opening activity to the completion of the project. Step 4: instructor prepares students for the language demands of information gathering. At this stage, the instructor prepares students for the language, skill, and strategy demands associated with information gathering. Step 5: After practicing the skills and language needed for gathering information, students are ready to collect information using methods such as interviews, letter writing, and library search. Step 6: The instructor prepares students to compile and analyze data. At this stage, students need to master the language and skills needed to compile and analyze the

information that they have collected from different sources. Step 7: students compile and analyze information. Working in groups, students organize information and discuss the value of the data they have collected, keeping some and discarding others. Furthermore, steps 8 and step 9 are used for the student to present the final outcome of the project. The instructor designs language improvement activities to help students successfully presents the outcome of the project and the last step, step 10, is used to evaluate the whole process of the implementation of PBL.

In regard to project-based learning for teaching writing, many studies show its potential in supporting EFL students writing achievement. Some researchers have investigated the potential of project-based learning in the Indonesia context. Those studies were conducted to look the improvement of students teaching writing, such as project-based learning and problem-based learning method are able to the students writing achievement (Fitriani *et al.*, 2022; Affandi & Sukyadi, 2016); project-based learning to improve the ability of students on writing and students' opinion (Argawati & Suryani, 2020); positive impact the implementation of PBL integrating ICT in a rural high school (Santhi *et al.*, 2019); project-based learning is effective in improving students' narrative writing skill (Somani & Rizvi, 2018); project-based learning model significantly develop persuasive writing skills of secondary school students (Alotaibi, 2020); project-based learning has significant effect on students' English writing skill at junior high school (Praba' *et al.*, 2018); learning autonomy in writing class (Sukerti & Yuliantini, 2018); PBL can be used to enhance formal writing and critical argumentation (Nunn, 2020); PBL has positive effects on the students' comparison paragraph writing (Sadeghi *et al.*, 2016); project-based learning through blogging affect students' writing ability (Sa'diyah & Cahyono, 2019); project-based language teaching effective for EAP writing course (Grant, 2017); PBL cause consistent improvement in the abilities to write and speak (Artini *et al.*, 2018); Project-based learning enhance students' essay writing (Firdausah & Sari, 2020); PBL promote EFL learners writing skill (Aghayani & Hajmohammadi, 2019); PBL can enhance and foster students writing skill by applying reflective thinking (Hasani *et al.*, 2017); PBL develop students' ability and creativity in writing narrative story (Syarifah & Emiliasari, 2019); PBL can

improve students writing ability (Susanti *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the fact that some studies were conducted in the area of project-based learning for teaching writing skills, not much has been performed to explore project-based learning for teaching writing skills at EFL tertiary education level, its implementation in the classroom, and the student's reactions. Studies reaching PBL in the Indonesian context were mostly conducted in primary and secondary education. Moreover, some phases were conducted in doing the projects with different names and numbers. This study synthesized the PBL phases proposed by previous studies which involved the Preparation, Implementation, Presentation, and Evaluation phases. Given that the area of research exploring project-based learning in teaching writing skills is still understudied at the tertiary level, it is essential to conduct a further investigation through comprehensive research to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the extent of project-based learning implemented in the EFL classroom.

Considering the urgent needs and advantages of project-based learning in students' learning, this study tried to investigate the effect of PBL in the tertiary EFL context and to describe the students' opinions of the implementation of project-based learning in teaching writing. It covers the description of the learning process, the student's progress in the learning program, and student's perception of the teaching method.

**METHOD**
The present research performed a mixed method that focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data (Cresswell & Clark, 2007). The two data sets were collected during a single study with the aim of answering two different research questions. Pre-test and post-test of writing were used to collect the quantitative data. The result of the quantitative test was used to determine whether or not there was a significant effect on students' English writing skills before and after being taught by using Project-based Learning (PBL). The qualitative data collected after the intervention was used to identify the influence of PBL on the teaching and learning process. Paired-sample t-test was used to analyze the quantitative data,

The subject of this study was the fourth-semester EFL students who attend an academic writing course at the English Department of a private university in Mataram West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. There were 38 students in one class selected through purposive sampling. This research was conducted in twelve meetings to complete the essay project through the Canva application.

Regarding the data sources, writing tests and interviews were the instrument used to gather the data in researching the research questions. The students' pre-test and post-test on writing descriptive text using the writing criteria of Brown (2004) which cover content, organization, language use, vocabulary, and mechanics. Interview questions focused on students' beliefs, motivations, and experiences of the participants toward project-based learning. The interviews were conducted with six students as representatives of the research subjects consisting of two high achievers, two medium achievers, and two low achievers in the classroom. The interview could be classified as a semi-structured interview, which required a list of particular issues related to the topic under investigation as the directed questions but could be tailed by some other issues during their interview (Gill *et al.*, 2008). The interviewees were asked about the issues relevant to the essay project through the canvas application.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**
This section discusses the effect of PBL through Canva application on students writing ability and the students' opinions toward project-based learning.

*The effect of PBL to improve students' writing ability*
In order to analyze the obtained data, the following steps were applied. They are the normality and homogeneity test of the pre-test and post-test of the group, and the independent sample t-test of the pre-test and post-test of the group. The data of this research were obtained by conducting tests before treatment (pre-test) and after treatment (post-test). The pre-test and post-test were given before and after the treatment.

*Descriptive statistics result of writing skill*
Table 1 showed the result of students' writing tests, both pre-test, and post-test for the experimental group

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics*

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | 38 | 47 | 78 | 63.42 | 9.705 |
| Post-test | 38 | 65 | 93 | 81.82 | 7.229 |
| Valid N | 38 | | | | |

It can be seen from the data in table 1 that students of the experimental group in the pre-test obtained a mean score of 63.42 with the highest score was 78 and the lowest score was 47, while in the post-test the mean score was 81.82 and the minimum score was 65. It means that there is an improvement between students' pre-test and post-test in the experimental group.

*The result of the normality distribution test*
Before doing further analysis, a normality test was needed to find out whether the obtained data from the pre-test and post-test were categorized as normal or not. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov formula from SPSS 23 for windows was used to conduct the normality test. The criteria for the test to be used are the data can be categorized as normally distributed if the significant data is more than 0.05. The details of the normality test can be seen in table 2 below:

Table 2. *Tests of normality*

| | Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a] | | | Shapiro-Wilk | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Statistic | df | Sig. | Statistic | df | Sig. |
| Pretest Experiment class | .146 | 38 | .039 | .921 | 38 | .011 |
| Posttest Experiment class | .089 | 38 | .200[*] | .970 | 38 | .401 |

From the statistics calculation by using the normality test of *Shapiro-Wilk* in SPSS v.23, it was found that the significance value of the pre-test was 0.011 and the post-test was 0.401. It could be said that the post-test score was categorized as normal since Sig. value under the Shapiro- Wilk column is greater than 0.05.

*The result of the homogeneity test of variance test*
The next step after the normality test was the homogeneity test. The homogeneity test was based on *the Levene* test in SPSS v.23 with a level of significance value greater than 0.05. The result of writing the pre-test and post-test of the experimental group is presented in the following table.

Table 3. *Test of homogeneity of variances*

| | Levene Statistic | df1 | df2 | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pretest Experiment class | 1.851 | 1 | 36 | .182 |
| Posttest Experiment class | 2.304 | 1 | 36 | .138 |

As can be seen from the table above, it was found that the significance value of the pre-test was 0.182 and the post-test was 0.138. Both of the tests were higher than the 0.05 level. It could be claimed that the experimental group was homogenous.

*Independent samples t-test*
The final step after the normality and homogeneity test was a parametric test. Since the data were normally distributed and homogenous, a Paired-samples t-test was applied. The calculation process was a comparison between the result of the Independent –sample t-test between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group. It was done to find out the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group. The output of the "Paired t-test" parametric statistical with the SPSS v.23 for the pretest and post-test score of each student can be seen in table 4 below.

Table 4. *The result of paired samples test of writing skill*

| | | Paired Differences | | | | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Pair 1 | Pretest Posttest | -18.395 | 6.495 | 1.054 | -20.530 | -16.260 | -17.457 | 37 | .000 |

Table 4 shows that the Sig.(2-tailed) value was 0.000 < 0.05, which means that the significance value was under the level of significance set. Then, it was safe to conclude that there was an improvement in the students' descriptive text writing scores before and after treatment given to the second-semester students of Muhammadiyah University of Mataram 2022/2023.

It could be inferred that the null hypothesis (Ho) was rejected whereas the alternative hypothesis was accepted. In other words, there was a significant difference in students' text

writing scores before and after treatment given to second-semester students of the Muhammadyah University of Mataram.

Based on the result of research and hypothesis testing that has been carried out, it showed that learning using project-based learning improve students' score in writing descriptive text. It can be seen from the result of the pre-test and post-test of students' writing tests which showed that the post-tests result is better than those of the pre-test. This is relevant to the study conducted by Aghayani & Hajmohammadi (2019) and Astawa *et al*. (2017) who claimed that project-based learning has a significant effect on the learners' writing ability.

*Student's perception of PBL in teaching of writing*
The second aim of the research was to elaborate on the student's response toward the implementation of project-based learning in teaching writing descriptive text. Interviews were used by the researchers to get the data. Six students who represented their groups were interviewed. The students' responses were elaborated in the following subsection general opinion on the project and project-based learning, an improvement in descriptive text writing, and difficulties during the learning process.

The summary of students' perception of the implementation of project-based learning in teaching writing skill.

*Opinion on project-based learning*
The first question in the interview was about the student's perception of the implementation of PBL in teaching writing skills. Almost all students respond in positive ways. They perceived that project-based learning can increase their experience, facilitated their creativity, and enhance their motivation in doing the project. As represented by S2's, S5's, and students 6's statements.

> The Canva project improves my experience. We can share our experience with friends in the group. (Interview item, Student 2)

> Very interesting and it helped us to facilitate our creativity. (Interview item, Student 5)

> My motivation was improved by doing the project in a group. Working in a group facilitated us exchanging ideas to arrange ideas in one paragraph. (Interview item, Student 6)

The above excerpts show that PBL was able to increase students' experience since they had to plan, do and finish the project with their groups. Besides, they thought that PBL was able to improve their creativity during the writing activity on creating descriptive text on Canva. It also increases students' motivation This result is in agreement with the study conducted by Affandi & Sukyadi (2016); Argawati & Suryani (2020); Astawa *et al*. (2017); Biazus & Mahtari, (2022); Burns & Lewis (2016); Farouck, (2016); Fitriani *et al*. (2022); Grant, (2017); Kimsesiz *et al*. (2017); Permata *et al*. (2022); Rostika *et al*. (2021); Santhi *et al*. (2019); Thuan (2018); Tuyen & Tien (2021) which showed that PBL helps students improve students experience, creativity, enthusiasm, confidence, self-directed learning, collaborative learning skill, social skill, critical thinking, productivity, communication, initiative technology literacy, and motivation when they finish their project. Cooperative learning, student-centeredness, life-long learning, self-directed learning, motivation, autonomy, and creativity are the characteristics of project-based learning (Thuan, 2018).

Particularly interesting is the S1 comment, which shows PBL are able to improve their activeness during the learning process in writing class, she said:

> Project-based learning increases our activeness, creativity, and motivation during the learning process. They had many things to discuss with their friend. It was fun, to complete the project with their friends, use technology during the discussion, and work. (Interview item, Student 1)

As observed from the excerpt above, PBL is able to increase students' activeness and motivation during the learning process in the writing class. The findings were in the same context as those of previous studies conducted by Al-Busaidi & Al-Seyabi (2021); Argawati & Suryani (2020); Artini *et al*. (2018); El-Nabawi & Shaalan (2020); Santhi *et al*. (2019); Sari & Prasetyo (2021); Shin (2018) which claimed that PBL was engaging and students showed their happy expression, active, enthusiastic and creative deal with a writing project. The students felt free to show their understanding of knowledge. Project-based learning engages learners in the learning process, motivates, and develops learners' creativity (Thuan, 2018). The project

improves learning motivation to learn writing skills.

The data also revealed that project-based learning promoted a positive attitude toward the learning of writing skills as seen in students' motivation and enthusiasm in fulfilling the tasks of academic writing subject. They work collaboratively in planning, creating, evaluating as well as reflecting on their project. This finding is consistent with previous researchers (Artini *et al.*, 2018; Astawa *et al.*, 2017; Wongdaeng & Hajihama, 2018) who claimed that project-based learning has an impact on students' positive attitudes toward learning to speak, and writing as indicated by the motivation, enthusiasm, and excitement on the students during the learning process.

*Improvement in English writing skill*
In regard to the development of participants' writing skills after the implementation of PBL in writing class, most of the students articulated that their writing skills were improved, which can be seen from their comments.

> PBL can increase my understanding of how to write a good paragraph and write descriptive essays. (Interview item, Student 2)

> I think PBL is very good because the lecturer provides material on how to write the topic sentence, and supporting sentences. (Interview item, Student 4)

> My writing skills were improved. I know more about vocabulary. (Interview item, Student 1)

> PBL could help me understands how to write a topic sentence, and supporting sentence, and students have a better understanding, we know grammatical error in the text. (Interview item, Student 6)

As can be observed from the above excerpt that PBL was able to increase students' knowledge of writing good paragraphs and writing a descriptive essays. Besides, they thought that PBL was very good and was able to improve their skill in writing topic sentences, supporting sentences, vocabulary, and grammatical errors in the text. These results are in agreement with the study conducted by Affandi & Sukyadi (2016); Anggerani *et al.* (2022); Argawati & Suryani (2020); Fitriani *et al.* (2022); Nunn (2020); Praba' *et al.* (2018); Sa'diyah & Cahyono (2019); Sadeghi *et al.* (2016); Santhi *et al.* (2019) which

showed that the implementation of project-based learning in the teaching writing works well.

*Difficulties during the learning process*
In responding to the difficulties found during the learning process of the Canva project, the students perceived that the difficulties were composing words into sentences, writing the topic sentence, supporting sentences, developing ideas into paragraphs, and vocabulary. The evidence can be seen from students' comments below.

> My difficulties on spend much time writing and revising and adding media on Canva and grammar. (Interview item, Student 3)

> Develop arrange words into a sentence, ideas into paragraphs, write topic sentences and supporting sentences, use vocabulary according to context, writing a good sentence. (Interview item, Student 4)

> My vocabulary is still minimal, when learning in PBL my vocabulary increases, I recommend applying PBL in other classes. (Interview item, Student 2)

From the students' comment above, it reveals that the students found it difficult to the allocation of time writing and revising. Adding media on Canva, how to arrange sentences with good grammar, develop ideas on writing topic sentences and supporting sentences, and limitation of vocabulary. The results share a similar sound to the study conducted Affandi & Sukyadi (2016); Santhi *et al.* (2019); Shin (2018) claimed that students would like to have more time allocated to writing, arranging sentences, and developing ideas.

**CONCLUSION**
This research attempt to explore the effect of PBL integrating ICT at the tertiary level. It employed a mixed method design involving 38 students by using writing test and interview to gather the data. The finding revealed that the learning process in PBL class is proven effective to facilitate students in increasing their writing ability. Despite the statistical significance on students' essay writing achievement, the students in their interview expressed their positive opinion toward PBL as a valuable challenge to improve their writing. All of them perceived that after doing the project, their writing was better. After planning, editing their text through the Canva application, and uploading their text on Instagram, the students perceived

their creativity as increasing. The students considered that PBL was challenging, motivating, and engaging, help them develop their creativity, enhanced their critical thinking, and allowed them to deal with real problems in a meaningful context. To conclude, such project-based learning is worthwhile for EFL teachers in conducting their writing courses at tertiary level education.

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