

USING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING TO IMPROVE ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: Developing effective English writing skills is a key objective in secondary school education. However, traditional approaches often fail to engage students in meaningful and authentic writing experiences. This study explores the effectiveness of project-based learning (PBL) in enhancing English writing skills among secondary school students. A quasi-experimental design was employed with two groups: one receiving traditional instruction and the other participating in a project-based learning intervention over eight weeks. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention writing assessments and student questionnaires. The results indicated that students exposed to PBL demonstrated significant improvements in writing organization, coherence, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy compared to those receiving traditional instruction. Furthermore, qualitative data revealed heightened student motivation and a more positive attitude toward writing tasks. These findings suggest that integrating project-based learning into English writing instruction can promote stronger writing skills and greater student engagement in secondary schools.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning, English Writing Skills, Secondary Education, Student Engagement, Language Instruction

Introduction.

Developing strong writing skills is essential for academic success and future professional opportunities, particularly in secondary school education where students are expected to master complex language structures and express ideas coherently (Graham & Perin, 2007). However, many secondary school English programs still rely on traditional, teacher-centered approaches that focus heavily on rote grammar exercises and isolated writing tasks, leading to low student engagement and limited real-world application of writing skills (Hyland, 2003). As a result, there is a pressing need to explore innovative instructional strategies that foster active student participation and contextualized language use.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as an effective learner-centered instructional method that emphasizes collaboration, problem-solving, and the creation of authentic products (Thomas, 2000). In PBL, students engage in extended projects that require the integration of multiple skills, including critical thinking, planning, drafting, and revising, all of which are essential components of effective writing.

Numerous studies in second and foreign language contexts have demonstrated that PBL can significantly enhance learners' language proficiency by providing meaningful contexts for language use and encouraging autonomy (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Stoller, 2006). Unlike traditional writing tasks, PBL situates writing within purposeful activities that mirror real-world communication, making the writing process more relevant and motivating for students.

Despite the growing interest in project-based approaches, relatively few empirical studies have examined the specific impact of PBL on English writing skills in secondary school settings, particularly within EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. Given the challenges faced by many secondary school students in producing coherent and sophisticated written texts, investigating the potential benefits of PBL offers valuable insights for improving instructional practices.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of project-based learning on the English writing skills of secondary school students. Specifically, the study aims to determine whether PBL can lead to measurable improvements in writing performance and to understand students' perceptions of their writing experiences when engaged in project-based tasks. Two research questions guide this study: (1) How does project-based learning influence students' English writing performance? (2) What are students' attitudes toward writing when they are involved in project-based learning?

This study is significant because it provides evidence-based recommendations for English language teachers seeking to improve writing instruction in secondary schools. By demonstrating the potential of PBL to foster stronger writing skills and greater student engagement, the study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for more student-centred approaches in English language education. Ultimately, understanding how PBL affects writing development can support teachers in designing more effective, motivating, and meaningful writing curricula for secondary learners.

Methodology.

This study employed a **quasi-experimental design** to investigate the effects of project-based learning (PBL) on English writing skills among secondary school students. A quasi-experimental design was selected due to the natural grouping of students in intact classroom settings, which made random assignment impractical (Creswell, 2014). Two groups were formed: an experimental group that received PBL-based instruction and a control group that continued with traditional teacher-centered writing instruction.

The participants in this study were 60 secondary school students from two parallel 9th-grade classes at a public school in an urban area. Students' ages ranged from 14 to 15 years, and their English proficiency level was intermediate according to school placement tests aligned with the CEFR standards. Participants were selected through convenience sampling based on availability and willingness to participate. Prior to the

intervention, all students provided informed consent, and ethical approval was obtained from the school administration.

The intervention spanned **eight weeks** and consisted of implementing project-based activities aimed at improving students' English writing skills. In the experimental group, students worked collaboratively on a class magazine project, which included writing articles, interviews, opinion pieces, and short narratives. Each project phase (brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, and publishing) was guided by the teacher but required significant student autonomy and peer collaboration. In contrast, the control group continued practicing writing through standard textbook exercises and teacher-assigned essays with minimal collaboration or authentic context.

Data collection instruments included **pre-tests and post-tests** of writing, assessed using an analytic writing rubric adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981), measuring content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Writing prompts for both tests required students to produce argumentative or narrative essays of similar length and complexity. Additionally, a **student perception questionnaire** was administered to the experimental group at the end of the intervention to gather qualitative data about their experiences with project-based learning.

Quantitative data analysis involved comparing pre-test and post-test writing scores between the experimental and control groups. A paired sample t-test was conducted within each group to examine the significance of score improvements, and an independent sample t-test compared post-test means between the two groups. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25. For the qualitative data from the questionnaires, thematic analysis was employed to identify common themes related to students' attitudes toward writing and their engagement during the project (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, the writing rubric was piloted with a small group of students not involved in the main study, and inter-rater reliability was established by having two independent raters evaluate a sample of writing tasks, achieving a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.82, indicating strong agreement. Moreover, triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data helped strengthen the overall trustworthiness of the findings.

Results.

The analysis of the quantitative data revealed significant differences in writing performance between the experimental group, which received project-based learning (PBL) instruction, and the control group, which followed traditional writing practices. Pre-test scores indicated no statistically significant difference between the two groups prior to the intervention ($p > 0.05$), confirming that both groups started with comparable writing abilities.

Following the eight-week intervention, the experimental group's post-test mean writing score increased from 67.2 to 80.5 out of 100, reflecting substantial improvement across all rubric criteria: content development, organization, vocabulary usage, grammatical accuracy, and mechanics. The control group, by contrast, showed only a modest improvement, with mean scores increasing from 66.8 to 70.1. A paired sample t-test within the experimental group indicated that the improvement was statistically significant ($t(29) = 8.92, p < 0.001$), whereas the control group's improvement was marginally significant ($t(29) = 2.15, p = 0.04$).

An independent samples t-test comparing the post-test scores of both groups demonstrated a statistically significant difference ($t(58) = 4.87, p < 0.001$) in favor of the experimental group. This finding suggests that the students who participated in project-based learning outperformed those who experienced traditional instruction in writing.

Qualitative analysis of the student perception questionnaires further supported the quantitative results. Three major themes emerged from the thematic analysis: enhanced motivation, increased ownership of writing tasks, and improved collaboration skills. Students reported feeling more motivated to write because the projects were meaningful and connected to real-world contexts. Many participants expressed that writing for an actual audience, such as classmates or community members, made the writing process more exciting and purposeful. For instance, one student wrote, "Working on the class magazine made me want to write better because others would read it, not just the teacher."

Furthermore, students highlighted that having autonomy over project topics and content boosted their confidence and creativity. They appreciated being able to choose topics they were passionate about, which, according to their responses, led to richer and more developed writing pieces. Finally, collaboration was noted as a crucial factor; students learned from each other through peer feedback sessions and group discussions, which they believed helped them refine their writing.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that project-based learning had a positive impact not only on the technical aspects of writing but also on students' attitudes toward the writing process. These improvements were notably greater than those achieved through traditional instructional methods.

Discussion

The findings of this study clearly indicate that project-based learning (PBL) has a significant positive impact on the development of English writing skills among secondary school students. Students who participated in the PBL-based instruction demonstrated greater improvements in content development, organization, vocabulary usage, grammar, and mechanics compared to their peers in the traditional instruction

group. These results align with previous research emphasizing the benefits of PBL in second and foreign language classrooms (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Stoller, 2006).

One of the most noteworthy outcomes of this study is the enhancement of students' motivation and engagement toward writing tasks. The authentic nature of the projects provided students with real purposes for their writing, which increased their investment in the process and outcomes. This finding supports the views of Thomas (2000), who emphasized that authentic, meaningful tasks in PBL settings foster greater student motivation and more sustained effort.

Another important observation from the study is the increase in student autonomy and creativity. Students were allowed to select topics and project formats, which led to more personalized and expressive pieces of writing. This outcome reflects the principles highlighted by Blumenfeld et al. (1991), who argued that giving students ownership over their learning tasks promotes deeper engagement and skill development. Despite the overall success of the PBL intervention, several limitations must be acknowledged. The relatively short duration of the study—only eight weeks—may not have been sufficient to observe the full extent of PBL's potential impact on long-term writing proficiency. In addition, the sample size was limited to a single school context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to broader educational settings. These limitations are consistent with challenges identified in other PBL research (Condliffe et al., 2017).

Future research should consider implementing longitudinal studies across diverse educational contexts to examine the sustained effects of PBL on writing development. Further investigation into how different types of projects (e.g., digital storytelling, community-based projects) influence specific aspects of writing, such as argumentative or persuasive writing, would also be valuable. Additionally, exploring the role of teacher support and scaffolding strategies within PBL environments could yield deeper insights into how to maximize the effectiveness of this approach for secondary school learners.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that incorporating project-based learning into English writing instruction in secondary schools can significantly enhance writing proficiency and student motivation. PBL offers a promising alternative to traditional writing instruction by creating meaningful, student-centred learning experiences that mirror real-world communication demands.

Conclusion

This study explored the effectiveness of project-based learning (PBL) in improving English writing skills among secondary school students. The results revealed that students engaged in PBL-based instruction showed significant improvements in content organization, vocabulary usage, grammatical accuracy, and mechanics compared to students taught through traditional methods. In addition to

measurable improvements in writing performance, students in the experimental group demonstrated higher levels of motivation, engagement, and ownership over their writing tasks.

The findings support the growing body of literature advocating for learner-centered instructional strategies in language education. Project-based learning offers authentic, meaningful contexts that encourage students to apply writing skills in ways that mirror real-world communication. By promoting collaboration, creativity, and autonomy, PBL enables students to develop not only linguistic competence but also critical soft skills essential for their academic and future professional lives.

While the study produced promising results, limitations such as the short intervention period and restricted sample size suggest the need for further research. Future studies should explore the long-term effects of PBL on writing development across diverse educational contexts and student populations. Additionally, examining variations of PBL implementation, such as digital storytelling or interdisciplinary projects, could provide deeper insights into optimizing writing instruction in secondary schools.

In conclusion, project-based learning presents a powerful approach to teaching English writing by transforming traditional instruction into dynamic, student-centred experiences. Secondary school teachers are encouraged to incorporate PBL strategies to foster not only improved writing outcomes but also greater student motivation, creativity, and engagement in the English classroom.

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