Project-based Learning to Promote High School Students' Descriptive Writing

Ardiana
Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar
ardiana@unismuh.ac.id
Ariana
Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar
ariana@unismuh.ac.id
Eka Irianti
SMA Negeri 4 Takalar
ekairianti22@gmail.com
Corresponding email: ardiana@unismuh.ac.id

Abstract

In high school, EFL learners are supposed to have the capability of writing a good descriptive text as one of the demand of the curriculum. However, many students still experience problems in producing a successful writing. This study aims at promoting high school students' writing skills, particularly in writing descriptive text, by utilizing project-based learning. This study employed a Classroom Action Research through two cycles which include planning, acting, observing, and evaluating stages. The data were collected from 23 students of X IIS 4 class of SMA Negeri 4 Takalar as the study subjects by using writing tests and observation. The results of the study show that there was an improvement in students' scores and behaviour when learning with project-based approach. In the diagnostic test, the students mean score was 65.57. The score improved by 9.9% in cycle I and 13.81% in cycle II to 72.09 and 82.04, respectively. Besides, in the pretest, only five students who can achieve the minimum completeness criteria, but at the end of cycle 2, twenty students can pass the minimum score. In addition, students become more actively engaged in the learning process as they are enthusiastic with the projects given by the teacher. This means that the use of project-based learning gave a positive impact to students' learning to write descriptive paragraphs and teachers are suggested to use it in teaching in EFL writing classrooms.

Keywords: Descriptive writing; EFL Classrooms; Project-based learning

Introduction

Writing activities cannot be separated from language learning process, including in EFL classrooms. Writing is among the four skills that students must possess, and it is an essential aspect of the communication process in which people can express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions (Anh, 2019). Having the skills to write

well, especially in foreign languages, will provide a huge benefit for the students, not only for their academic matters, but also for broader interaction in professional or global community. Writing stimulates students' creative and critical thinking, and boosts their learning autonomy, speech, and confidence (Smetanova, 2013). Excellent ability in writing will help the students to accomplish several tasks, such as taking notes, making essays, writing a letter or cards, or making written announcements. Also, it is a great investment for them if they want to continue for higher education since the entrance examinations may involve writing as one of the important tests. Besides, in the community, they might need to write an understandable email, memos, proposals, or reports to connect or work with foreign people in online community.

Writing is a complex skill (Cheung, 2016). As a skill to master, writing in English requires students to pay attention to a certain set of rules and conventions. They need to deal with the proper ideas to be written and how to organize them, the language and vocabulary use, and the mechanics like spelling, punctuation, etc. (Brown, 2007). The process of writing, where the students are suggested to plan, draft, and edit what they write (Harmer, 2004), even adds the complexity. In a more advanced level, students also have to analyze their sources of their writing and then synthesize them in a compact piece of writing (Klimova, 2013).

Many students are still experiencing some issues in composing a piece of English writing (Handayani, 2017). Limited mastery of vocabulary and insufficient knowledge of grammar are the major cause of students' difficulties to write well (Elisha, Safitri, & Santoso, 2019. Those problems led to writing anxiety among the students (Hartono & Maharani, 2019). In addition, the results of interview with the English teacher at SMA Negeri 4 Takalar also revealed that students are struggling when they have to compose a paragraph or even a sentence by using their own words and ideas. Majority of the students in that school still have problems with vocabulary use, punctuation, and developing ideas into sentences and paragraphs. Therefore, the teacher must always think about innovations and breakthroughs-new technique, methods, strategies, or media- to ensure that the students can maximize their potential in writing in English.

Project-based learning (PjBL) is considered to be an approach of teaching which involves students working on projects based on real-world contexts to advance their knowledge and abilities (Dharmayanti & Joni, 2022). Students are

given projects and they are supposed to find a solution to a problem or develop a product. Such projects might be used in every level of education ranging from primary education to higher education (Aziz, Hoesny, & Arifiyah, 2022; Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins, 2016). Teachers just have to modify and adjust the project types according to the students' need. In addition, project-based learning brings positive impacts to students. It emphasizes students-centered learning principle and make the students more engaged (Kavlu, 2017; Karyawati & Ashadi, 2018), strengthens students' problem solving and collaboration skills (Firdaus & Septiady, 2023), develop students critical thinking skills (Argawati & Suryani, 2020), and encourage students to be more active, creative and innovative (Mafruudloh & Fitriati, 2020). Due to the advantages it offers, project-based learning is highly recommended in the implementation of the new curriculum *Merdeka Belajar* in Indonesia.

Project-based learning have been used world-wide and plenty of research have revealed that project-based learning is effective to teach students to write. Most of them were focused on different types of text genres. Alotaibi (2020), for instance, tried to examine the effect of project-based learning on students' ability to write persuasive text, and the results show that there was a difference in the students' writing quality after learning using projects development. A similar result was also gained by Sadeghi, Biniaz, & Soleimani (2016) after using project-based learning to teaching students to write comparison/contrast paragraph; the students outperformed those taught with textbooks only. Other studies also revealed the positive effect of using project-based learning in teaching writing the other genres such as narrative, argumentative, report, and descriptive texts (Asrul, et al., 2021; Liukonas, 2020, Khairani & Tressyalina, 2019; Hidayati & Widiati, 2019).

Despite the positive influence of using project-based learning, there is still a need of more research on the effects of this project-based learning in the area of descriptive writing in high school level to strengthen the previous findings. Therefore, this study focused on exploring the improvement of students' skills in writing descriptive text after being taught by using Project-based learning and investigating the changes in students' behavior when learning using project-based learning.

Research Methodology

The design used in this research is Classroom Action Research (CAR). Action research focuses on solving practitioners' problems in their workplace (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Employing the CAR design of Kurt Lewins in two cycles, we involved the main four components in each cycle, namely: planning, action, observation and reflection. The relationship between the four components is seen a viable cycle described as follows:
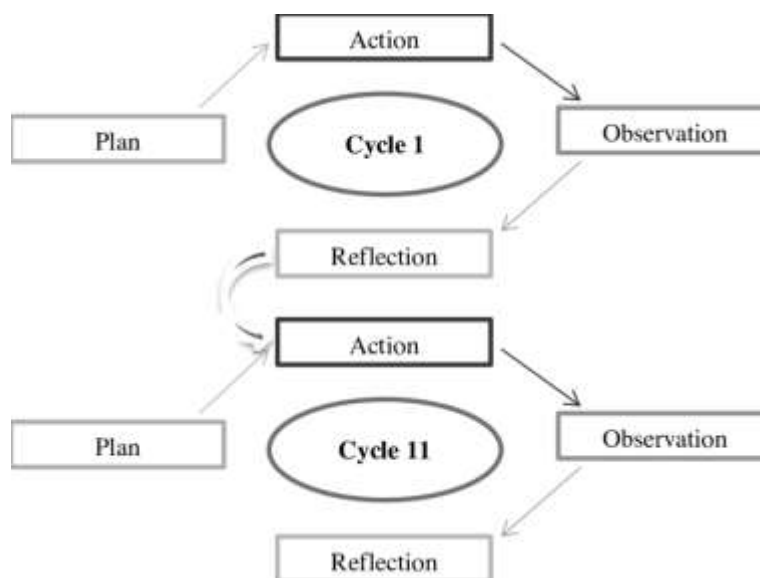
Figure 1. Kurt Lewin's Action Research Design

The subjects of this study were the tenth-grade students class X IIS 4 of SMA Negeri 4 Takalar in the academic year of 2022/2023 which consisted of 23 students. The subjects were chosen based on the teacher information that they still have low ability in writing English. The study was conducted in two cycles with 8 meetings in total. During the treatment, students were exposed with theories and practices of descriptive writing, especially describing places as the syllabus suggested, by using project-based learning. The projects they worked on is making a brochure to introduce places around them.

Writing tests and observation were used to collect the data. Writing tests were used to see the improvement of students' writing skills in writing descriptive text before and after the treatment was given, while observation was used to see whether the use of problem-based learning has any impact on students' learning

attitude and behaviour. The test were administered three times, namely diagnostic test and post-test after each cycle was completed. In the test, students were asked to write 1 or two descriptive paragraphs based on the theme provided by the researchers.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

This study was conducted in two cycles, started from September 20th, 2022 until December 4th 2022. The study was conducted through four cyclical stages namely, planning, action, observation, and reflection. In the planning stage, the researchers determined the topic and prepared the lesson plan. This study focused on teaching descriptive text, especially describing places. The researchers also discussed about the projects that are most likely to implemented in teaching describing places. Next stage is action stage where the researchers implemented the plan that has been made. In this stage, the teacher applied project-based learning by giving projects to students to be done in group, asking them to create brochures related to the theme given. The third stage is observation, in this stage, the researchers observed the influence of this project-based learning either to students' cognitive or students' behavior. The last stage is reflection where the researchers reflected from the evaluation results. The results of this reflection led to the next cycle.

Before the treatment was begun, the students were given a diagnostic test to know their prior ability in writing descriptive text. After each cycle was completed, the teachers administered the post-test. The results of the students' test was analyzed by using the Jacobs, et al.'s (1981) analytic scoring rubric which assesses 5 main components with different weight of score for each, namely content (13-30 points), organization (7-20 points), language use (5-25 points), vocabulary (7-20 points), and mechanics (2-5 points). the result of analysis of students' scores in the pretest and post-tests can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. Frequency and rate percentage of students' scores in the pretest and post-tests

No	Classification	Range	Non-Project Based	The Application of Project Based

			PreTest		Post-Test1		Post-Test2	
			Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1	Excellent	91 – 100	0	0	0	0	4	17.39
2	Very good	81 – 90	3	13.04	6	26.09	12	52.17
3	Good	71 – 80	4	17.39	6	26.09	4	17.39
4	Fair	61 – 70	10	43.48	6	26.09	3	13.04
6	Poor	51– 60	4	17.39	3	13.04	0	0
7	Very poor	Less than 50	2	8.70	0	0	0	0
	Total		23	100	23	100	23	100
	Highest score		85		85		94	
	Lowest Score		48		51		63	
	Mean Score		65.57		72.09		82.04	

The data displayed in the table depicts the changes in the frequency of students' scores in every criteria. In the pretest, there are two students being in the lowest score criteria that is very poor. However, none of the students achieves excellent score. In the first post-test (after cycle 1), the frequency of students scores are the same in very good, good, and fair criteria. There is still no students achieved excellent score, but none of them scored very poor anymore. Finally, in the post-test, the highest frequency of students obtained scores in the level of very good (52.07%) and four students can compose excellent writing, being on top of the range. In addition, no students obtained poor or very poor score.

The results of analysis show that there is an improvement in students' scores after the treatment. The most visible is in the excellent; it changes from 0% in the pretest and post-test I to 17.39% in the end of the study. Besides, the students who obtained very poor also decrease, meaning that their scores improve. In addition, the students' mean score improved from the pretest. In the pretest, the mean score is 65.57, and it improves by 9.9% in the end of cycle 1. After doing some evaluation in cycle 1 and started the cycle 2, the students' score increase by 13.81% In the end of the treatment.

Table 2. Students' Minimum Completeness

Minimum	PreTest	Post-Test 1	Post-Test 2

Mastery Criteria	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
≥ 80	5	21.74	11	47.83	20	86.96
≤ 80	18	78.26	12	47.83	3	13.04

The table depicts that, in the pretest, more than 75% of the students' scores still needs to be improved as it does not fulfill the minimum completeness criteria the school has determined that is 80. From the table, it can be seen that only 5 students' scores that fulfill the minimum completeness criteria. In the post-test 1, the students' score which achieved the minimum score went up to 47.83%, and in the post-test 2, 20 students have passed the minimum criteria. This indicates that the learning using Project based learning influence the students' scores.

Furthermore, the researchers also obtained data from observation results. The observation results reveals that students were more active and engaged during the process of learning using problem-based learning. They focused on the project they were making in the group. Students first discussed about the content of the brochure; what they need to write about the place they introduced. They also evaluate their own project after getting some suggestions from the teachers.

Discussion

This study's objective is to explore the improvement of students' ability in writing descriptive text, especially in high school level, by using project-based learning. The results of the study show that the students' mean score improved after learning using project based learning from 65.57 in the pretest to 82.04 the post-test. After the implementation, most of the students also passed the minimum completeness criteria that is 80.

Writing a descriptive paragraph or text that requires the students to be able to describe an object into writing. They sometimes need to use their imagination to make the writing more understandable and meaningful. Project-based learning helped the students to think what to write as they have create a real object. Learning through project-based learning gives the students opportunity to explore more about the topic they are going to describe. In addition, the projects they have to complete is a challenge as they have to make something real. On other words, the projects inspires them especially the content of the writing. Project-based

learning is regarded as a specific kind of inquiry-based learning where the context of learning is provided by real-world actions and actual questions and challenges. (Al-Balushi & Al-Aamri, 2014)

In addition, projects encourage collaboration among students in the group. Each member of the team has to contribute ideas of what is being written. During the course, they are busy searching information about the topic they are going to describe and write the information into their texts. In project-based learning, students are expected to be self-directed and self-Reliant (Kholis and Aziz, 2020). Moreover, in writing descriptive text, students have to use several specific language features such as adjectives and simple present tense, so they might have to edit and revise their writing to make it a good description. Project based learning involves student's participation in the learning process, makes the students focused on the projects, uses critical thinking skills, and learns autonomously (Randazzo et al., 2021).

Furthermore, during the course, students are very excited in learning. Being in a group project increases the level of enjoyment of the students in the classroom. They talked and laugh each other when giving ideas about the projects. Shin (2008) found that project-based learning improve students' motivation and self-efficacy in learning (Shin, 2018).

Conclusion and Suggestion

From the results of analysis and the discussion, it can be concluded that the utilization of project based learning can improve students' descriptive writing skills. This is proven by the the students' scores which improved from pretest to post-test. In the pretest, students' mean score was 65.57, and it increased to 72.09% in cycle 1 and 82.04 in cycle II. Besides, 20 out of 23 students had passed the the Minimum Completeness Criteria. In addition, students seemed more active and excited in learning as they enjoyed making the projects with their teammates. The positive result after the application of project-based learning indicate that this approach is suitable to be used in teaching EFL, especially to improve writing skills. Further researchers may explore more about the use of this approach in the other aspects of EFL teaching or investigate what the students' think about the implementation of this approach.

Acknowledgement

References

Alotaibi, M. G. (2020). The Effect of Project-Based Learning Model on Persuasive Writing Skills of Saudi EFL Secondary School Students. *English Language Teaching*, *13*(7), 19-26. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v13n7p19

Argawati, N. O. & Lilis, S. (2020). Project-based learning in teaching writing : the implementation and students' opinion. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, *8*(2), 219-226. doi: 10.25134/erjee.v8i2.2120.

Asrul, et al. (2021). The Effect of Project-Based Learning on Students' Achievement in Writing Narrative Text. *Journal of English Language and Education*, *6*(2), 103-109. https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v6i2.170

Al-Balushi, S. M., & Al-Aamri, S. S. (2014). The effect of environmental science projects on students' environmental knowledge and science attitudes. *International Research in Geographical & Environmental Education, 23*(3), 213-227.

Anh, D., T., N. (2019). EFL students' writing skills: challenges and remedies. IOSR *Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 9(6), 74-84

Aziz, I. N. , Hoesny, M. U., & Arifiyah, Y. (2022). The Effect of Project Based Learning on Sudents' Writing Skills. *AL HIKMAH Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, *12*(2), 224-233

Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy. (2nd ed.)*. New York: Longman

Cheung, Y. L. (2016). Teaching Writing. In W. A. Renandya, & H. P. Widodo (Eds.), *English Language Teaching Today: Building a Closer Link Between Theory and Practice*. New York: Springer International.

Dharmayanti, P. A. P. & Joni, D. A. A. W. (2022). Project based learning in English as a foreign language. *The 5th International Conference on Sustainable Development (ICSD)*, 30-36.

Firdaus, F. & Septiady, A. (2023). The effect of project based learning on the students' speaking ability. *Journal of Education*, *5*(3), 10105-10112

Harmer, J. (2004). *How To Teach Writing*. Harlow: Longman

Hartono & Maharani, M. M. (2019). English Writing Anxiety and the Writing Problems of IndonesiaEFL Learners. T*he 2nd Social and Humaniora Reseach Symposium (SoRes)*. Bandung: LPPM Universitas Islam Bandung, Unisba, 513-517

Handayani, Fitri. (2017). Students' Attitude toward Using Instagram in Teaching Writing. *Journal Educative: Journal of Educational Studies, 2*(1), 23-29. Doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.30983/educative.v2i1.318

Hidayati, A., E. N. & Widiati, U. (2019). Fostering Students' Writing Ability through Project Based Learning Approach. *Jurnal Pendidikan Humaniora, 7(4), 140-149*

Jacobs, H.L., Zinkgraf, S.A., Wormuth, D.R., Hartfiel, V.F. and Hughey, J.B.　(1981). *Testing ESL Composition: A Practical Approach*. Newbury House,　Rowley, MA.

Johnson, R. B. & Christensen, L. (2014). *Educational Research: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Approach (5th Edition)*. California: Sage Publication, Inc.

Karyawati, A. & Ashadi, A. (2018). Innovation in the classroom: Engaging English as a foreign learning students using project-based learning. *LingTera*, *5*(1), 61-31. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.21831/lt.v5i1.17067

Kavlu, A. (2017). Implementation of Project Based Learning (PBL) in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Classrooms in Fezalar Educational Institutions (Iraq). *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, *4*(2), 67–79. https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v4i2sip67

Khairani, D. & Tressyalina. (2019). The Influence of Project Based Learning Model on Student Writing Skills. *1st Progress in Social Science, Humanities and Education Research Symposium (PSSHERS 2019)*. Padang: Universitas Negeri Padang, 48-51

Kholis, M., & Aziz, I. N. (2020). The Effect of Project-Based Learning on Students Vocabulary Achievement at Second Grade of Islamic Junior High School. *JEET: Journal of English Education and Technology, 1*(1), 1–19

Kokotsaki, D., Menzies, V., & Wiggins, A. (2016) Project-based learning: A review of the literature. *Improving Schools, 19*(3), https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480216659733

Liukonas, Y. (2020) Assessing Students' Ability in Writing Argumentative Essay at an Indonesian Senior High School. *Journal of Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature, 8*(1), 284-296. https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v8i1.1344

Mafruudloh, N. & Fitriani, R. (2020). The effect of project based learning to the students' speaking ability. *Celtic: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching, Literature and Linguistics*, *7*(1), 57-64

Randazzo, M., Priefer, R., & Khamis-Dakwar, R. (2021). Project-Based Learning and Traditional Online Teaching of Research Methods During Covid-19: An Investigation of Research Self-Efficacy and Student Satisfaction. *Frontiers in Education, 6*(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.662850

Sadeghi, H., Biniaz, M., & Soleimani, H. (2016). The impact of project-based learning on Iranian EFL learners' comparison/contrast paragraph writing skills. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 6(9), 510-524

Shin, Myeong-Hee. (2018). Effects of project-based learning on students' motivation and self-efficacy. *English Teaching*, 73(1), 95-114.

Smetanova, E. (2013). Writing as part of foreign language acquisition. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 106*, 3375-3380