

THE EFFECT OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING ON STUDENTS' RECOUNT TEXT WRITING AT SMP NEGERI 1 PEMATANGSIANTAR

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Abstract

Writing is a crucial yet challenging skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Many Indonesian students experience difficulties in organizing ideas, applying correct tenses, and producing coherent paragraphs, particularly in writing recount texts. This study employed a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design involving 31 ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar. The treatment consisted of Project-Based Learning implemented over four instructional meetings. A writing test was administered as the instrument, assessing five aspects: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics by comparing mean scores from the pre-test and post-test. The findings revealed a significant improvement in students' writing performance, with the mean score increasing from 63.74 to 79.16, representing a 15.42-point (24.2%) gain. Notable improvement occurred in content and organization, indicating clearer idea development and better text structure. The study concludes that Project-Based Learning effectively enhances students' engagement, creativity, and writing competence in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: EFL Students; Project-Based Learning; Recount Text; Writing Ability

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most essential yet challenging skills in English language learning. Among the four language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Writing is often considered the most difficult to master because it requires complex cognitive processes that involve generating ideas, organizing them logically, using correct grammar, and selecting appropriate vocabulary. According to Alotaibi (2020), writing in a foreign language demands learners to manage several linguistic and cognitive aspects simultaneously, such as grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and mechanics, making it a particularly demanding task for EFL students. Similarly, UC Journal (2020) stated that writing is one of the most difficult skills for EFL and ESL learners because it requires the integration of linguistic knowledge, logical organization, and creativity, while students also struggle with anxiety and a lack of motivation. These issues are commonly found among Indonesian learners, who often experience difficulties in constructing ideas, using correct tenses, and developing coherent paragraphs in their writing.

In Indonesia, writing is one of the key competencies emphasized in the 2013 Curriculum (K13), which adopts a genre-based approach to teaching. Students are expected to master various text types, including descriptive, narrative, and recount texts. Among these, recount text plays an important role because it allows students to retell past experiences or events in chronological order using appropriate linguistic features. However, several studies have shown that students still find it difficult to write recount texts effectively. Utami and Apsari (2020), for instance, found that students experienced major difficulties in writing recount texts, especially

in grammar and language use (56.67%), followed by issues in content, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics. These findings suggest that conventional teaching methods, which are mostly teacher-centered and focus heavily on grammar explanation and writing drills, have not been sufficient to improve students' writing performance.

In the local context of SMP Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar, preliminary observations and informal interviews with the English teacher revealed similar challenges. Students frequently experienced difficulties in organizing ideas chronologically, applying past tense forms consistently, and developing sufficient content in recount texts. Diagnostic classroom data showed that the average writing score of ninth-grade students was below the school's minimum mastery criterion (KKM = 75), with most errors occurring in grammar and text organization. These initial findings indicate a clear need for an instructional approach that can support students in developing ideas collaboratively while improving structural and linguistic accuracy.

To address these persistent problems, teachers need to implement an instructional approach that can enhance students' engagement, motivation, and creativity in writing. One effective and innovative method that has gained considerable attention is Project-Based Learning (PBL). PBL is a student-centered teaching approach that encourages learners to acquire knowledge and skills through the process of working on extended, meaningful projects. According to Thomas (2020), PBL promotes deeper learning by integrating collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity, allowing students to take an active role in constructing knowledge rather than passively receiving it. In writing classes, PBL provides opportunities for students to plan, draft, revise, and produce a final written product collaboratively, making learning more authentic and enjoyable. Through such activities, students are not only able to develop their language competence but also enhance their confidence, problem-solving skills, and sense of responsibility for their own learning.

Previous studies have shown that Project-Based Learning has a positive impact on students' writing achievement. Alotaibi (2020) found that Saudi EFL students who were taught through PBL showed significant improvement in their writing performance compared to those taught using conventional methods. Similarly, Putri (2022) reported that the use of PBL in teaching recount texts led to better writing results and increased students' motivation and self-confidence. Another study by Chadafi and Syarifudin (2021) demonstrated that PBL was effective in improving vocational high school students' ability to write recount texts, as indicated by higher post-test scores. In addition, research by Pramesti and Nawawi (2021) revealed that PBL encouraged students to think critically and work collaboratively, although the researchers also noted several challenges such as limited time, facilities, and students' unfamiliarity with independent learning. These studies suggest that PBL can improve not only students' writing skills but also their engagement and positive attitudes toward learning English.

Despite the growing evidence supporting the use of PBL in EFL writing instruction, several research gaps still exist. Most of the previous studies were conducted in specific school settings or regions, and their findings may not represent students in different contexts, such as in North Sumatra. Moreover, some studies only measured overall writing scores without analyzing improvements across specific aspects of writing, such as content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Few studies have also explored the relationship between PBL and students' motivation or confidence in writing. These gaps indicate the need for further research to examine how Project-Based Learning affects not only the overall writing

performance but also individual components of writing and students' attitudes toward the writing process.

Although numerous studies have confirmed the positive impact of Project-Based Learning on EFL writing achievement, several gaps remain. First, few studies explicitly analyse changes in students' writing scores across specific aspects content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics using a standardized analytic rubric. Second, limited research has documented the short-term effect of PBL implemented systematically over four instructional meetings, particularly at the junior secondary level. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining the aspect-based improvement of students' recount writing through a clearly structured four-meeting PBL procedure.

METHOD

This study employed a pre-experimental one-group pretest–posttest design to examine the effect of Project-Based Learning (PBL) on students' ability to write *recount* texts. The participants were 31 ninth-grade students of class IX-8 at SMP Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar. The research was conducted over four instructional meetings, preceded by a pre-test and followed by a post-test.

Pre-Implementation Stage

During the pre-implementation stage, coordination was conducted with the school, particularly the English teacher, to identify the main problems encountered by students in writing *recount* texts. Based on the initial discussion, it was found that students experienced difficulties in developing ideas, organizing text structure coherently, and using appropriate grammar and vocabulary. Following this, the community service team prepared supporting learning tools, including a Project-Based Learning lesson plan, instructional materials on *recount* texts, and an assessment instrument in the form of a writing rubric. The rubric assessed five aspects of writing: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. This stage aimed to ensure that the activity was aligned with the needs of the school and the objectives of the pre-experimental research study.

Implementation Stage

The implementation stage was conducted through the application of Project-Based Learning in teaching *recount* text writing. The activity involved one class, namely class IX-8, consisting of 31 students. At the beginning of the activity, students were introduced to the concept and structure of *recount* texts as well as the steps involved in Project-Based Learning. The students were then divided into small groups and assigned a writing project based on personal experiences or events closely related to their daily lives. Through collaborative work, students planned, drafted, and revised their *recount* texts. Throughout the project, the pre-experimental research study and the English teacher provided guidance, feedback, and support, particularly regarding text organization, grammar usage, and vocabulary selection. This stage allowed students not only to practice writing skills but also to develop collaboration, responsibility, and critical thinking through project-based activities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study entitled "*The Effect of Project-Based Learning on Students' Ability in Writing Recount Texts at Grade Ninth of SMP Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar*." The findings are based on the data collected from students' pre-test and post-test scores. The data were analyzed to

determine whether the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) could improve students' ability to write recount texts. The presentation of the findings includes the results of students' scores, the comparison between pre-test and post-test, and the interpretation of the improvement in their writing performance. Before the treatment, the students were given a pre-test to measure their initial writing ability. After four meetings of Project-Based Learning activities, a post-test was administered to assess their writing improvement. The results of students' pre-test and post-test are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

No	Student Name	Pre-test	Post-test	Improvement (Pre - Post)
1	Aqilah	62	78	16
2	Arfian	65	81	16
3	Christin	63	79	16
4	Christy	60	75	15
5	Devanny	67	84	17
6	Eisyah	64	79	15
7	Eliya	62	76	14
8	Ester	66	82	16
9	Fanzio	63	78	15
10	Ghisela	65	80	15
11	Hawila	61	75	14
12	Irfan	68	84	16
13	Irzy	64	79	15
14	Jonathan	66	83	17
15	Kania	62	77	15
16	Kezia	63	78	15
17	Marlina	65	81	16
18	Mercy	60	74	14
19	Muhammad	67	83	16
20	Nabila	64	80	16
21	Patricia	62	77	15
22	Putri	66	82	16
23	Rangga	63	78	15
24	Reinhard	61	76	15
25	Rosa	65	81	16
26	Ruben	64	79	15
27	Sabar	62	76	14
28	Sabera	63	78	15
29	Siti	67	84	17
30	Sitor	60	75	15
31	Zaskia	66	82	16
Total		1976	2454	478

The data presented in Table 1 indicate a clear improvement in students' writing performance after the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL). The mean score

increased from 63.74 in the pre-test to 79.16 in the post-test, showing an average improvement of 15.42 points, or approximately 24.2%. This result demonstrates that the four-meeting implementation of PBL effectively enhanced students' ability to write recount texts.

The improvement was evident in all five aspects of writing content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Students' ideas became more developed and relevant to the topic (content), their writing was better structured with chronological order (organization), and they showed greater control of verb tenses and sentence patterns (grammar). Moreover, they used more appropriate and varied words (vocabulary) and demonstrated better spelling and punctuation (mechanics). These findings indicate that Project-Based Learning not only improved students' writing scores but also increased their motivation and confidence to express personal experiences through writing. The result supports the findings of Alotaibi (2020), Putri (2022), and Chadafi and Syarifudin (2021), who reported that PBL enhances EFL students' writing performance and fosters creativity, collaboration, and learner autonomy. Therefore, it can be concluded that the application of Project-Based Learning contributed positively to the students' improvement in writing recount texts.

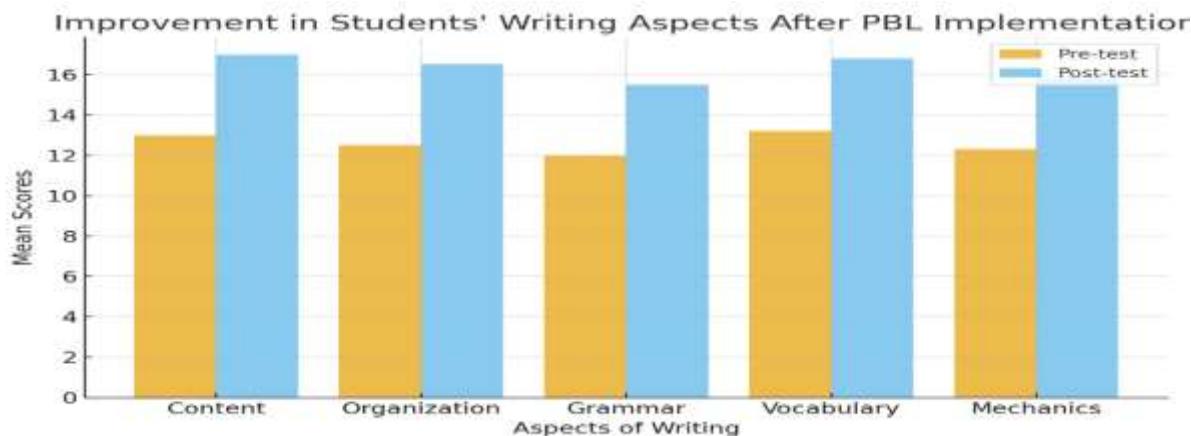


Figure 1. Improvement of Students' Writing Aspects After PBL Implementation

Figure 1 presents the comparison of students' mean scores in five aspects of writing content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics before and after the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL). As shown in the figure, all aspects of writing improved noticeably after the treatment. The most significant improvements were observed in content and organization, with increases of 4.0 points each, showing that students were better able to develop ideas and structure their writing in a logical order. Improvements in vocabulary, mechanics, and grammar were also evident, though slightly smaller, with gains between 3.5 and 3.7 points.

These results suggest that Project-Based Learning helped students not only produce more coherent and well-organized texts but also become more accurate and expressive in their writing. The active learning process where students collaborated, discussed, and revised their writing enabled them to internalize the characteristics of recount texts more effectively. Thus, Figure 2 reinforces the conclusion that PBL significantly enhanced students' writing ability across all aspects of performance.

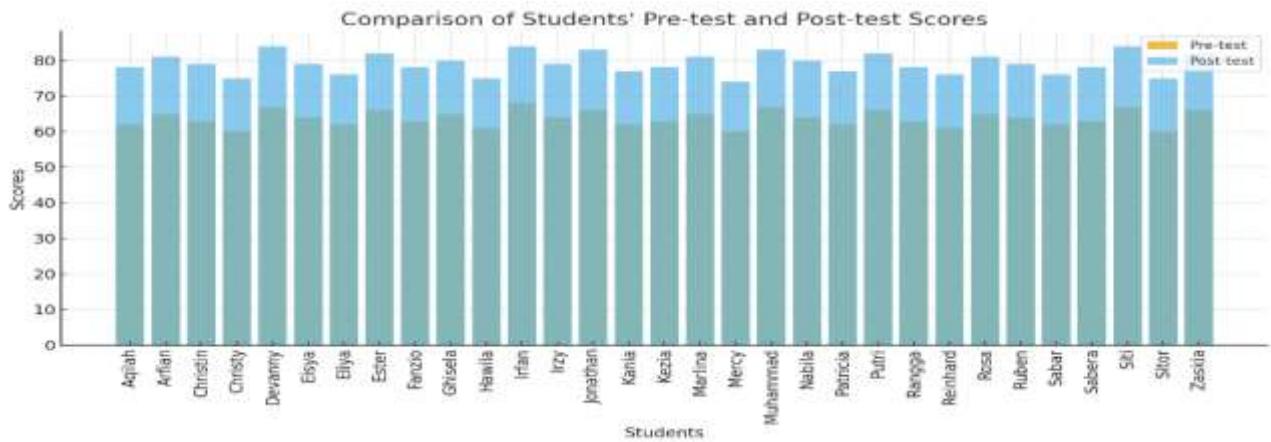


Figure 2. Comparison of Students' Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

Figure 2 illustrates the comparison between students' pre-test and post-test scores after being taught through Project-Based Learning (PBL). The figure clearly shows that all 31 students experienced an increase in their writing scores after the treatment. The pre-test scores ranged between 60 and 68, while the post-test scores ranged between 74 and 84. The noticeable rise in students' scores demonstrates that the implementation of PBL had a positive impact on their writing performance. This improvement indicates that through project-based activities such as planning, drafting, and presenting their work, students became more engaged and motivated in writing recount texts. They also showed better understanding of text structure and grammar, as well as increased confidence in expressing their experiences in English. Overall, Figure 1 shows that the mean score improved from 63.74 in the pre-test to 79.16 in the post-test. This improvement of 15.42 points or 24.2% highlights the effectiveness of PBL in enhancing students' writing ability.

Discussion

This study strongly suggests that Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an effective method for enhancing students' writing skills in recount texts. The increase the average of score from 63.74 in the pre-test to 79.16 in the post-test shows that PBL helped students produce better writing in terms of idea development, organization, language use, and overall coherence. These results support the idea that PBL fosters a more engaging and meaningful learning environment, encouraging students to actively participate in building their understanding. During the PBL activities, students participated in several stages such as planning their writing project, gathering information, drafting their recount text, reviewing peers' work, and presenting the final product. These steps allowed students to engage in authentic writing experiences that encouraged them to think critically, use English for communication, and reflect on their progress. This process aligns with Thomas (2020), who stated that PBL promotes deeper understanding and long-term learning by involving students in collaborative and purposeful projects.

The greater improvement in content and organization compared to grammar suggests that Project-Based Learning was particularly effective in supporting idea generation and text structuring. Through collaborative planning and discussion, students were able to recall experiences, sequence events logically, and elaborate ideas more clearly. However, grammatical accuracy, especially the use of past tense forms, showed relatively smaller gains, indicating that grammar development may require more focused instruction. This finding implies that PBL

should be complemented with targeted grammar mini-lessons and explicit corrective feedback to optimize linguistic accuracy alongside content development.

The improvement across the five aspects of writing also highlights the multifaceted benefits of PBL. The highest gains were found in content and organization, suggesting that students became more capable of developing ideas and structuring them logically after the treatment. This finding echoes Utami and Apsari (2020), who emphasized that EFL students often struggle to organize their writing effectively, and that learner-centered approaches such as PBL can address these difficulties. Meanwhile, the increases in grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics suggest that PBL also enhanced students' linguistic competence, as they had more opportunities to apply language knowledge in context. In addition, PBL fostered students' motivation and positive attitudes toward writing. Before the treatment, many students considered writing to be a difficult and monotonous activity. However, during the PBL process, they were able to work collaboratively, express their creativity, and share personal experiences. These opportunities made writing more enjoyable and less anxiety-inducing. This result supports Alotaibi (2020) and Putri (2022), who found that PBL improves students' engagement, motivation, and confidence in language learning, particularly in writing activities.

Furthermore, PBL encouraged students to take responsibility for their learning. Instead of relying solely on the teacher's explanation, they learned to explore resources, manage time, and make decisions throughout the project. This finding aligns with Pramesti and Nawawi (2021), who stated that PBL enhances students' sense of ownership and autonomy in learning, which in turn improves learning outcomes. Similarly, Haerazi and Irawan (2019) argued that student-centered approaches enable learners to apply English skills in authentic contexts and develop stronger communicative competence. Overall, the discussion confirms that Project-Based Learning offers significant advantages in EFL writing instruction. It improves students' cognitive, linguistic, and emotional skills at the same time. By incorporating collaboration, creativity, and real-world context into learning, PBL enables students to improve their writing grades and also gain vital 21st-century skills like communication, critical thinking, and teamwork.

Despite the positive findings, this study has several limitations. First, the use of a one-group pretest-posttest design without a control group limits causal inference. Second, the improvement in post-test scores may be influenced by practice effects, as students completed similar writing tasks. Third, writing assessment relied on human raters, which may involve a degree of subjectivity despite the use of an analytic rubric. Future studies are recommended to employ experimental designs with control groups, longer treatment durations, and additional variables such as students' motivation or writing self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has a significant positive effect on ninth-grade students' ability to write recount texts at SMP Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar. Students' mean scores increased from 63.74 in the pre-test to 79.16 in the post-test, showing an average improvement of 15.42 points across writing aspects, including content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. PBL created an engaging and meaningful learning environment by actively involving students in collaborative projects, which enhanced motivation, critical thinking, and confidence in expressing ideas. These results align with previous studies confirming the effectiveness of PBL in improving writing skills and learner autonomy.

Therefore, PBL is recommended as an effective strategy for teaching writing in EFL classrooms and for future research across different text genres.

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