

ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN EFL WRITING CLASSES

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Keywords:

Project-Based Learning, critical thinking, EFL writing.

Kata kunci:

Project-Based Learning, berpikir kritis, penulisan EFL.

Abstract

. This study aims to examine the enhancement of students' critical thinking skills through the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classes. The study was motivated by the observation that many EFL learners struggle to construct arguments, evaluate information, and organize ideas logically in academic writing. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, involving 30 senior high school students as participants. Data were collected through classroom observations, analysis of students' written products, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that PBL significantly improved students' critical thinking skills. Students demonstrated greater ability to analyze issues, select credible sources, synthesize information, and present logical, evidence-based arguments. Collaborative activities within PBL encouraged deeper discussions, exchange of ideas, and evaluation of multiple perspectives, thereby strengthening higher-order thinking. Additionally, students developed heightened metacognitive awareness through project planning, decision-making, and reflective practices. Despite these benefits, some initial challenges were identified, including difficulties in time management and adapting to increased learner autonomy. Overall, the study concludes that PBL is an effective instructional approach for fostering critical thinking in EFL writing classes. It is recommended that PBL be integrated into English curricula more broadly to support students' cognitive, linguistic, and academic development.

Abstrak

. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peningkatan keterampilan berpikir kritis siswa melalui penerapan Project-Based Learning (PBL) dalam pembelajaran menulis pada konteks English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Latar belakang penelitian ini adalah rendahnya kemampuan siswa dalam mengembangkan argumen, mengevaluasi informasi, dan mengorganisasi ide secara logis dalam tulisan akademik. Penelitian menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif yang melibatkan 30 siswa sekolah menengah atas sebagai partisipan. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, analisis dokumen tulisan siswa, jurnal refleksi, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa PBL memberikan dampak positif yang signifikan terhadap perkembangan keterampilan

berpikir kritis siswa. Siswa menunjukkan kemampuan lebih baik dalam menganalisis isu, memilih sumber yang kredibel, mensintesis informasi, serta menyajikan argumen yang logis dan berbasis bukti. Kegiatan kolaboratif dalam PBL juga mendorong diskusi mendalam, pertukaran ide, dan evaluasi pandangan yang beragam, sehingga memperkuat kemampuan berpikir tingkat tinggi. Selain itu, keterlibatan siswa dalam proses proyek meningkatkan kesadaran metakognitif mereka, terutama dalam hal perencanaan, pengambilan keputusan, dan refleksi diri. Namun, beberapa tantangan muncul pada tahap awal implementasi, seperti kesulitan manajemen waktu dan adaptasi terhadap pembelajaran yang lebih mandiri. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa PBL merupakan pendekatan yang efektif untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berpikir kritis dalam penulisan EFL dan direkomendasikan untuk diterapkan lebih luas dalam kurikulum pembelajaran bahasa Inggris.

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INTRODUCTION

. Critical thinking has become an essential skill in modern education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings where students must analyze, evaluate, and create ideas using a second language. In writing classes, critical thinking is closely linked to students' ability to construct arguments, assess information credibility, and organize ideas coherently. However, many EFL learners struggle to reach higher-order thinking due to limited exposure to real-world problems, insufficient opportunities for independent inquiry, and writing tasks that emphasize accuracy over reasoning. These challenges highlight the need for teaching approaches that actively engage learners in reflective and analytical thinking processes (Praba, Artini, and Ramendra 2018).

Project-Based Learning (PBL) has been recognized as a powerful instructional model that promotes active learning and fosters critical thinking. Unlike traditional teacher-centered methods, PBL encourages students to engage in extended tasks that require planning, problem-solving, collaboration, and self-evaluation. In EFL writing classes, PBL offers authentic contexts for students to generate ideas, research information, and communicate their findings through written products. This shift from passive learning to hands-on exploration allows learners to interact more meaningfully with content, thereby improving both their writing performance and their ability to think critically (Arochman et al. 2024).

In many EFL classrooms, writing instruction tends to focus heavily on grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. While these components are important, excessive emphasis on linguistic accuracy may limit students' creativity and discourage deeper analysis. As a result, learners often produce writing that is grammatically correct but

lacking in reasoning, coherence, and depth. Implementing PBL can help shift the instructional focus from linguistic form toward content exploration and purposeful communication, enabling students to develop stronger critical thinking skills as they engage with real issues and authentic writing tasks (Song, Razali, and Jeyaraj 2025).

Preliminary observations indicate that many EFL students struggle with organizing arguments, evaluating evidence, and expressing their perspectives clearly in writing. These difficulties stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from the absence of learning activities that require critical engagement. Writing tasks are often completed individually and are limited in scope, providing little opportunity for collaborative problem-solving or sustained inquiry. By contrast, PBL creates a learning environment where students must negotiate meaning, decide on project directions, and justify decisions—all of which enhance cognitive engagement and critical thinking (Ambarsari et al. 2023).

Another challenge in EFL writing classes is the lack of motivation among students, especially when tasks are repetitive or disconnected from real-life contexts. PBL addresses this issue by making learning more meaningful, as students work on projects that relate to their interests, communities, or global issues. Through long-term engagement with a project, learners become more invested in the process, which increases intrinsic motivation and encourages deeper thinking. Motivated students are more likely to take intellectual risks, question assumptions, and refine their understanding—key aspects of critical thinking development (Mujiono et al. 2024).

Technology integration further enhances the potential of PBL in EFL writing. With access to online resources, digital tools, and multimedia platforms, students can gather diverse information, analyze multiple perspectives, and present their findings creatively. This exposure supports the development of information literacy, which is closely connected to critical thinking. The online environment also allows for collaborative writing, peer feedback, and reflective discussions, adding valuable layers to the writing process and promoting a more critical approach to information evaluation (Sallis 1995).

Collaborative learning is another important component of PBL that contributes to the enhancement of critical thinking. When students work in groups, they exchange ideas, negotiate roles, debate interpretations, and evaluate each other's contributions. These social interactions encourage learners to justify their reasoning, listen to alternative viewpoints, and reconsider their positions. Such collaborative dialogue cultivates intellectual openness and analytical thinking, which are crucial for producing well-structured and meaningful written texts (Karwono and Susetyo 2021).

Despite its potential benefits, implementing PBL in EFL writing classes requires careful planning and support. Some students may initially struggle with the increased responsibility and autonomy required in project work. Others may face difficulties

integrating content knowledge with language skills. Teachers must therefore provide scaffolding, clear instructions, and continuous feedback throughout the project cycle. Effective implementation involves guiding students in setting goals, managing time, conducting research, and revising their writing. With proper support, PBL can become an accessible and transformative approach to strengthening students' critical thinking abilities (Pontjowulan 2023).

Previous studies have shown that PBL significantly improves students' writing quality, creativity, collaboration skills, and ability to think critically. By engaging learners in real-world inquiry, PBL helps bridge the gap between language learning and content learning. As students navigate complex problems and produce written outputs that synthesize information, they develop higher-order thinking skills increasingly needed in academic and professional contexts. These findings emphasize the relevance of exploring PBL as a pedagogical approach for EFL writing instruction (Firdausah and Sari 2023).

Given the growing importance of critical thinking in education and the challenges faced by EFL learners in developing this skill, it is essential to investigate how PBL can be integrated effectively into writing classes. This study aims to examine how project-based learning enhances critical thinking skills in EFL writing by analyzing students' engagement, writing performance, and cognitive development throughout the project cycle. The findings are expected to provide insights for teachers, curriculum designers, and educational institutions seeking to improve the quality of writing instruction through innovative and student-centered methods (Aghayani and Hajmohammadi 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

. Critical thinking is commonly defined as the ability to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and make reasoned judgments. According to Facione (2015), critical thinking involves interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. In the context of EFL learning, these cognitive skills enable learners to move beyond surface-level understanding and engage more deeply with language and content. Critical thinking in writing requires students to construct logical arguments, examine multiple perspectives, and justify their claims with evidence. As writing serves as a medium for expressing and refining thought, strengthening critical thinking skills directly contributes to improved writing performance and academic literacy (Suteja and Setiawan 2022).

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a student-centered instructional model that emphasizes inquiry, collaboration, and the creation of meaningful products. Rooted in constructivist principles, PBL views learning as an active process in which students construct knowledge through exploration and problem-solving. Thomas (2000)

describes PBL as an extended learning experience in which students investigate complex questions or challenges (Song et al. 2025). In EFL writing, this approach encourages learners to integrate language skills with critical thinking as they gather information, analyze data, and present their findings in written form. Through sustained inquiry, students develop not only linguistic competence but also cognitive and metacognitive skills.

The application of PBL in EFL writing is supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. Collaborative activities in PBL, such as brainstorming, peer review, and group discussions, create opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, articulate reasoning, and internalize new concepts. When students work together to solve problems or produce written outcomes, they learn to question assumptions, evaluate ideas, and refine their thinking (Ruengkul 2020). These interactions provide scaffolding that helps learners reach higher cognitive levels, making PBL an effective approach for fostering critical thinking (Hasan et al. 2022).

Bloom's Revised Taxonomy also provides a theoretical foundation for integrating PBL into writing instruction. The taxonomy categorizes cognitive skills from lower-order (remembering, understanding) to higher-order (analyzing, evaluating, creating). PBL naturally aligns with the higher levels of the taxonomy because it requires students to analyze information, evaluate sources, and create written products (Latifah, Warisno, and Hidayah 2021). Writing tasks within PBL often ask students to synthesize ideas from multiple resources and justify their conclusions, thus engaging them in complex thinking processes. By working through these cognitive stages, students enhance both their writing and critical thinking capacities (Andargie, Amogne, and Tefera 2025).

In addition, PBL supports the development of metacognitive awareness, which is essential for critical thinking. Metacognition involves the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's own learning processes. During project work, students must set goals, manage their time, select appropriate resources, and reflect on their progress. These self-regulatory behaviors encourage learners to think critically about their decisions and refine their approaches to problem-solving (Susanti et al. 2020). In the writing process, metacognition enables students to evaluate the clarity, coherence, and strength of their arguments, ultimately leading to improved writing quality.

Previous research has demonstrated the positive impact of PBL on both language development and critical thinking. Studies indicate that PBL enhances students' engagement, motivation, creativity, and ability to work collaboratively. In EFL writing contexts, PBL has been shown to improve organizational skills, idea generation, argumentation, and overall writing competence. By situating learning within authentic, meaningful tasks, PBL encourages learners to explore topics deeply and consider multiple viewpoints. These outcomes support the adoption of PBL as an instructional

approach that promotes not only language proficiency but also the critical thinking skills necessary for academic and real-world success (Keterampilan Menulis pada Pembelajaran Bahasa Indonesia Kelas VIII et al. 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

. This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate how Project-Based Learning (PBL) enhances students' critical thinking skills in EFL writing classes. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of students' cognitive processes, engagement patterns, and perceptions during project work. This method provides flexibility in capturing rich, contextualized data that reflect students' development over time. The descriptive nature of the research enables the researcher to analyze how PBL shapes learners' writing behaviors, decision-making processes, and critical thinking practices within authentic classroom settings (Sugiyono 2012).

The participants of the study were 30 students enrolled in an EFL writing class at a senior high school. They were selected based on their active participation in classroom writing activities and their varied proficiency levels. The diversity within the group allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how PBL influences learners with different linguistic and cognitive profiles. The instructional intervention lasted for six weeks, during which students engaged in a series of project-based writing tasks. These tasks required them to select topics, conduct research, collaborate in groups, and produce written reports or essays that demonstrated their reasoning and argumentation skills (Ismaya 2019).

Data were collected through classroom observations, document analysis of students' written work, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. Observations focused on students' interactions, their engagement in group discussions, and their problem-solving approaches during project activities. Students' written products were analyzed to identify improvements in argumentation, organization, evidence use, and clarity of reasoning. Reflective journals provided insights into students' metacognitive awareness, difficulties encountered, and perceptions of the learning process. Interviews with selected students offered deeper understanding of how PBL contributed to their critical thinking development (Suryabrata 2016).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, all qualitative data were transcribed and coded to identify recurring patterns related to critical thinking indicators such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and decision-making. These themes were then categorized according to the components of critical thinking and PBL principles. Triangulation was employed by comparing observational data, written outputs, and interview responses to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Through this systematic analysis, the study aimed to provide a clear picture of how PBL

supports the development of critical thinking skills in EFL writing and to generate recommendations for instructional improvement (Ramdhan 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

. The findings of this study show that the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) had a significant positive impact on students' critical thinking skills in the EFL writing class. From the initial stages of the project, students demonstrated increased engagement as they began exploring topics of interest. Observation data revealed that learners took more initiative in gathering information, asking questions, and identifying issues that required deeper analysis. Compared to traditional writing tasks, PBL provided a more stimulating environment where students felt empowered to express ideas and investigate problems, laying a strong foundation for critical thinking development.

During the project planning phase, students exhibited early signs of analytical thinking as they discussed project directions and clarified objectives. They evaluated the relevance of different ideas, compared possible approaches, and justified their choices to teammates. This collaborative decision-making process encouraged students to articulate their reasoning and challenge one another's assumptions. Classroom interactions during this phase reflected a shift from teacher-dependent learning to student-driven inquiry, demonstrating the beginning stages of higher-order thinking supported by PBL.

As students moved into the research phase of the project, they showed noticeable improvement in their ability to synthesize information from various sources. They learned to identify credible references, extract key ideas, and compare perspectives from different authors. Analysis of students' notes and research logs revealed that they became more selective in choosing evidence to support their arguments. This selective filtering of information indicates strengthened critical thinking skills, particularly in evaluating the relevance and reliability of sources.

In the drafting stage, students' writing reflected improved reasoning and organization. Their essays showed clearer thesis statements, stronger logical connections between ideas, and more consistent use of supporting evidence. Compared to their initial writing samples, students' later drafts demonstrated greater coherence and depth of argumentation. The ability to integrate research findings into their writing and justify viewpoints with logical explanations highlights the role of PBL in enhancing analytical and evaluative thinking.

Group collaboration contributed significantly to the development of critical thinking. During group discussions, students frequently debated ideas, offered counterarguments, and requested clarification from peers. These interactions

encouraged students to reconsider their perspectives and refine their interpretations. The collaborative environment also supported the development of open-mindedness, as students learned to appreciate diverse viewpoints and incorporate constructive feedback into their writing. Peer dialogue played a crucial role in nurturing reflective and evaluative thinking.

Students' reflective journals provided additional insights into their cognitive growth. Many students reported that the project helped them think more deeply about the issues they were writing about. They noted that the process of researching, discussing, and drafting their work pushed them to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and make more thoughtful decisions. These reflections indicate an increased awareness of the cognitive processes involved in writing, demonstrating the impact of PBL on metacognition and self-regulation.

The project presentation stage also highlighted improvements in students' critical thinking. When presenting their findings, students had to justify their conclusions, explain their reasoning, and respond to questions from peers and the teacher. Their responses showed increased confidence and greater ability to defend their arguments logically. The presentation component provided an authentic context for students to practice articulating their thought processes, reinforcing both critical thinking and communication skills.

Data from semi-structured interviews confirmed that students perceived PBL as beneficial for improving their critical thinking. Several students stated that they felt more capable of analyzing information and constructing arguments compared to before the project. Others mentioned that PBL made writing more meaningful because they were working on real issues rather than abstract topics. Students also emphasized that learning through projects helped them understand the value of supporting opinions with evidence, which they recognized as a key aspect of critical thinking.

The analysis of students' final written products further demonstrated the positive influence of PBL. Their essays contained more nuanced arguments, clearer organizational structures, and more consistent use of evidence. Many students displayed an ability to draw connections between ideas, recognize biases, and propose alternative viewpoints – skills that were rarely observed in their initial writing samples. The depth and sophistication of these final products reflect substantial improvement in higher-order thinking.

In addition to cognitive gains, students also showed increased motivation and autonomy in the writing process. They took ownership of their learning, monitored their progress, and sought additional resources independently. This heightened sense of responsibility supported the development of self-directed learning habits closely associated with critical thinking. Motivational improvements also contributed to greater persistence when solving problems or revising drafts.

However, the study also revealed challenges associated with implementing PBL. Some students initially struggled with time management, integrating research into writing, and collaborating effectively with peers. These difficulties required additional guidance from the teacher, highlighting the importance of scaffolding in maximizing the benefits of PBL. Over time, most students adapted to the workflow and became more proficient in navigating the demands of project-based tasks.

Overall, the results indicate that PBL effectively enhances students' critical thinking skills in EFL writing classes. Through inquiry, collaboration, research, and reflection, students developed stronger analytical, evaluative, and creative thinking abilities. These findings suggest that PBL is a promising approach for improving both writing competence and cognitive development, especially in contexts where students need support in higher-order thinking.

B. Discussion

. The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that Project-Based Learning (PBL) plays a significant role in enhancing students' critical thinking skills within EFL writing classes. The results support existing theories suggesting that PBL fosters analytical, evaluative, and creative thinking by engaging learners in authentic tasks that require sustained inquiry. Students in this study became more capable of questioning assumptions, synthesizing information, and forming logical arguments. This suggests that PBL provides the type of meaningful cognitive engagement that traditional writing instruction often fails to achieve, especially in environments where grammar accuracy tends to overshadow the development of reasoning skills.

One key aspect contributing to this improvement is the collaborative nature of PBL. Throughout the project cycle, students engaged in discussions that required them to justify their views, provide counterarguments, and negotiate meaning. These interactions reflect Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that learning and cognitive development occur through social engagement. The dialogic exchanges observed in this study enabled learners to refine their interpretations and broaden their perspectives. Peer collaboration not only strengthened students' reasoning abilities but also promoted intellectual openness, which is a fundamental characteristic of critical thinkers.

The study also confirms that PBL supports the development of metacognitive awareness, an important component of critical thinking. Students had to plan their projects, identify information needs, monitor their progress, and evaluate their final written products. These activities helped learners to become more conscious of their thinking processes and more deliberate in organizing and presenting their ideas. As students gained experience in reflecting on their decisions and adjusting their approaches, they demonstrated greater autonomy and self-regulation—skills that are essential for both effective writing and lifelong learning.

Another significant outcome is the improvement in students' ability to use evidence effectively in writing. PBL required learners to conduct research, compare sources, and select relevant information to support their claims. This process

strengthened their evaluative thinking, as students learned to distinguish credible sources from unreliable ones and identify information that best aligned with their arguments. The integration of research findings into their essays shows that students became more adept at constructing arguments that were logical, well-supported, and coherent. This finding aligns with Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, which identifies evaluating and creating as the highest levels of cognitive activity.

Despite the many benefits observed, the study also highlights several challenges associated with PBL implementation. Some students initially struggled with independent decision-making, time management, and task coordination, reflecting their unfamiliarity with student-centered learning models. Additionally, the open-ended nature of PBL required students to engage in deeper thinking and take responsibility for their work—demands that some learners found overwhelming at first. These issues emphasize the importance of providing adequate scaffolding, clear guidelines, and continuous feedback to help students navigate the complexities of project work and maximize the cognitive benefits of PBL.

Overall, the findings confirm that PBL is an effective pedagogical approach for fostering critical thinking in EFL writing classes. By engaging students in meaningful projects that require inquiry, collaboration, and reflection, PBL creates a learning environment conducive to the development of higher-order thinking skills. The combination of authentic tasks, group interaction, and structured research opportunities enables students to think more deeply, write more effectively, and become more confident in expressing their ideas. These outcomes reinforce the value of integrating PBL into EFL curricula to support both cognitive and linguistic development.

CONCLUSION

. The findings of this study indicate that Project-Based Learning (PBL) is highly effective in enhancing students' critical thinking skills in EFL writing classes. Through sustained inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and authentic writing tasks, students demonstrated significant improvement in their ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information. PBL provided a learning environment where students could explore complex topics, justify their viewpoints, and develop well-reasoned written arguments. This represents a substantial shift from traditional writing instruction, which often prioritizes grammar accuracy over deeper cognitive engagement. The project-based approach thus helps bridge the gap between linguistic competence and higher-order thinking, which is crucial for academic success.

The study also highlights that PBL fosters important metacognitive skills that support critical thinking. By planning projects, managing resources, monitoring progress, and reflecting on outcomes, students became more aware of their thinking processes and writing strategies. Collaborative discussions further contributed to the development of intellectual openness and the ability to consider diverse perspectives. These cognitive and social benefits demonstrate that PBL does more than improve writing performance; it also cultivates essential life skills such as teamwork, problem-

solving, and self-regulation. However, the study also acknowledges the challenges students may face, including difficulties with time management and adapting to student-centered learning structures, indicating the need for strong teacher scaffolding.

Overall, this study concludes that PBL should be integrated more widely into EFL writing instruction due to its strong potential to develop critical thinking skills. Teachers play an important role in designing structured yet flexible project tasks, providing clear guidance, and supporting students throughout the process. With thoughtful implementation, PBL can transform writing classes into dynamic, inquiry-based environments that promote deeper learning and intellectual growth. Future research is recommended to examine long-term impacts of PBL, compare it with other instructional models, and explore its effectiveness across different language skills and educational contexts.

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