

Enhancing EFL Students' Recount Text Writing Through Project Based Learning: A Classroom Action Research Study in an Indonesian Junior High School

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Abstract

Improving English writing skills continues to be a critical issue in Indonesian junior high schools, particularly in writing personal recount texts. A baseline assessment conducted at SMP St. Thomas 3 Medan highlighted that students faced significant language challenges, particularly in organizing chronological events and using past tense, and showed minimal interest in writing activities. This study aimed to address these challenges by implementing a Project-Based Learning (PjBL) approach to improve students' recount writing skills and stimulate increased classroom engagement. Using a Classroom Action Research (CAR) framework, the study spanned two cycles and involved 31 eighth-grade students. Information was collected through written evaluations, observation forms, and surveys to assess students' academic performance and engagement levels. Results indicated that the implementation of PjBL resulted in significant improvements in writing skills. The average student writing score increased from 54.12 in the initial learning cycle to 86.00 in the final learning cycle, and the overall mastery percentage increased significantly from 22.5% to 93.54%, effectively exceeding the Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM). Furthermore, survey data showed that students strongly preferred Project-Based Learning (PBL) because it encouraged teamwork and meaningful educational experiences. These results suggest that Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an effective teaching method for improving students' conceptualization and writing skills, and provide valuable information for teachers aiming to increase student participation and writing achievement in EFL classrooms. These findings underscore the potential of PBL to transform traditional writing instruction into a more dynamic and engaging student-centered process, offering practical solutions for educators facing similar challenges in EFL environments. By fostering a collaborative environment, PBL not only improves linguistic skills in writing narrative texts but also increases students' confidence and motivation.

INTRODUCTION

English language study is an important part of modern education since it is the dominant international language in many sectors, including science, technology, and worldwide communication. Because of its role as a medium of worldwide communication, English literacy is critical for academic achievement and global preparedness. In Indonesia, English education is now based on the Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes communicative skills and the formation of the Pelajar Pancasila profile. According to national standards, English learning combines four fundamental skills listening, reading, speaking, and writing which are divided into receptive and productive abilities (Kemendikbudristek, 2024).

Writing is viewed not just as a language activity, but also as a complicated communication process that allows people to communicate meaning systematically across cultures (Pratiwi, 2021). To create logical writing, a higher-order cognitive activity is required, such as planning, organizing, and editing (Zhang et al., 2023). Furthermore, writing is a social and functional activity of meaning creation, not merely a collection of linguistic norms (Halliday, 1985). Mastering recount texts is an important part of the eighth-grade curriculum. This genre seeks to recount events chronologically utilizing certain text structures orientation, sequence of events, and re-orientation as well as linguistic characteristics such as past tense and temporal conjunctions (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Gerot & Wignell, 1994).

However, observations made during teaching practice at SMP St. Thomas 3 Medan indicated that several students suffered greatly with English writing. The main challenges observed were a restricted vocabulary and a lack of fluency with the simple past tense. Furthermore, the lack of contextual learning hampered students' capacity to create chronological timelines, resulting in poor confidence and a reluctance to engage in writing tasks. Because themes were frequently detached from their real-life experiences, students struggled to create ideas, resulting in writing performance that fell short of expectations.

To address this issue, this study employed Project-Based Learning (PjBL). PjBL is an effective technique for improving EFL learners' writing skills because it places students at the center of the learning experience, actively engaging them in a meaningful writing process (Larmer, 2015). According to Thomas (2000), PjBL increases student engagement by enabling them to work on complex, real-world tasks that require sustained inquiry and collaboration. In the EFL context, Beckett and Slater (2019) emphasized that project-based instruction significantly helps students bridge the gap between linguistic knowledge and communicative performance. Furthermore, PjBL has been shown to improve various dimensions of writing, including content, conceptual structure, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, through active student participation (Nabila Arif & Sukarno, 2024).

The usefulness of Project Based Learning has been demonstrated in a variety of scenarios. The use of PjBL in junior high school greatly improves students' productive skills, notably in creating functional texts. A study using the Classroom Action Research (CAR) methodology over two cycles found a significant upward trend in students' classical mastery, with the percentage of students meeting the Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM) rising from 48.27% in the pre-cycle to 86.20% by the end of the second cycle (Wijaya Kusuma, 2024). A second study conducted by Putri (2025) discovered that narrative writing abilities increased from an average of 25.43 in the first cycle to 31.89 in the second cycle.

Previous research has confirmed the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in various contexts, such as improving productive skills in junior high schools (Wijaya Kusuma, 2024) and narrative writing skills (Putri, 2025). However, limited research has examined its implementation in teaching recount text in Indonesian junior high schools through a cyclical action research approach that integrates collaborative project production and reflective revision. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the systematic application of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) phases to improve

students' capacity in writing recount text at SMP St. Thomas 3 Medan. Using Classroom Action Research (CAR), this study connects Project-Based Learning (PjBL) theory with local practice by examining how project-based activities improve students' overall writing structure and engagement. Based on the research background, the author decided to conduct a study titled "Enhancing EFL Students' Recount Text Writing Through Project Based Learning: A Classroom Action Research Study In An Indonesian Junior High School". Therefore, this study examines:

1. How is the process of implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) conducted to improve eighth-grade students' writing skill in recount texts at SMP St. Thomas 3 Medan?
2. What are Students Responses Toward the Implementation of Project Based Learning in Writing Recount Texts?

METHOD

Research Design

Classroom Action Research (CAR) is conceptualized as a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by practitioners to optimize the rationality and justice of their pedagogical practices. The model articulated by Kemmis and McTaggart represents a quintessential framework in educational research, meticulously adapting Kurt Lewin's foundational tenets into a pragmatically structured classroom format. Rather than being confined to a rigid set of technical protocols, this model emphasizes a transformative process that bridges the gap between strategic theorization and practical field implementation. Central to this approach is the dynamic spiral cycle, which facilitates a continuous evolution of teaching methodologies. Moreover, the attainment of enhanced instructional quality is contingent upon the rigorous and systematic iteration of four pivotal phases: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Within this framework, the reflection phase serves a critical function, as the empirical insights derived therein constitute the fundamental basis for re-evaluating and refining strategies in subsequent cycles. In this regard, the model empowers educators to function as proactive researchers, fostering a sustainable environment for educational innovation and professional growth (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

The Classroom Action Research (CAR) method was chosen for this study based on the major research goal of improving and developing students' writing abilities through direct application of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the classroom. Unlike experimental or survey designs, which focus on testing variable correlations or measuring generic phenomena, CAR enables researchers and practitioners to execute learning interventions in a systematic manner through cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. This approach is chosen because it allows for continual development based on the findings of each cycle's reflections, allowing the PjBL implementation process to be adjusted to the specific requirements of students at SMP St. Thomas 3. As a result, CAR was rated most appropriate to meeting the objective of developing students' writing abilities in a contextual and practical setting. Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that Classroom Action Research has the potential to find and develop solutions to practical problems in the classroom, meaning that Classroom Action Research also brings improvements in practice. In this study, the author participated in research to solve problems that emerged in encouraging students' writing skills through the application of project-based learning techniques.

The Subject of The Study

The participants in this study were eighth-grade students from SMP St. Thomas 3 Medan. There are four classes of eighth-grade children in the school, and the researcher chose class 8-3, which consisted 31 pupils, 11 boys and 20 girls. The average age of students is 13-14 years. This class was chosen based on initial observations showing low student involvement in writing English texts.

Data Collection

In this study, data were collected using both quantitative and qualitative data. Creswell (2014) explain that Mixed methods research combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a better knowledge of the study topic. The instrument for collecting quantitative data was a test consisting of a pre-test and a post-test.

The instrument for collecting quantitative data was a test that was comprised of two separate tests, pre-test and post-test have been commonly used to measure students' achievement or improvement in an skill (Fairbairn & Brown 2005). This study also used qualitative data in conjunction with the quantitative data gathered using different instruments. The instruments for qualitative data collections were observation sheets, field notes and questionnaires as recommended by (Chand 2025) .

FINDINGS

Quantitative

Student learning outcomes showed a systematic and significant improvement from the pre-test to the post-test stage after the intervention through the implementation of the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model. This improvement not only includes the overall average score, but is also seen from the drastic increase in the percentage of students who were able to achieve the minimum completion criteria (KKM) in each research cycle. A detailed summary of student score data, which includes a comparison of the average score (mean) and the percentage of completion at each testing stage, is presented systematically in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Students' Test Score Distribution

Test	Mean	Mastery Percentage
Pre-Test	53,87	22,6%
Formative Test	73,58	54,8%
Post-Test	86,00	93,54%

From Table 1 shows that students' writing skills improved consistently throughout the trial. In the pre-test phase, the average student score was 53.87, with a 22.6% completion rate (only 7 students attained the KKM). This initial research verifies the issue of poor student involvement and writing abilities in grades 83.

After treatment in Cycle I, the average score increased to 73.58, with the completion percentage increasing significantly to 54.8%. Despite this improvement, the results did not meet the established research success indicators. Therefore, the study was continued to the next cycle. In Cycle II, after the researcher reflected on and improved the scaffolding strategy in the Project-Based Learning model, the average student score reached 86 with the completion percentage increasing significantly to 93.54%. At this stage, 28 out of 31 students successfully exceeded the Minimum Competency (KKM). The improvement from the Pre-test to Cycle II can be calculated using the formula:

$$N.Gain = \frac{p2-p1}{p1} \times 100\%$$

Where:

P1 = Pre-test Percentage

P2 = Cycle II percentage

Using this improvement formula, the 58.90% rise from pre-test to cycle 2 in the classical completion aspect demonstrates that implementing PjBL is successful in boosting students' writing achievement and promoting more active participation in class.

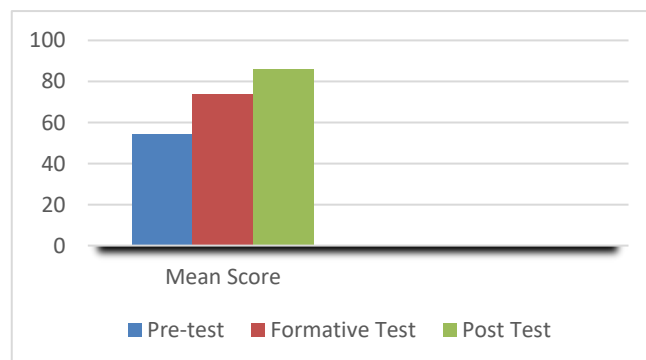


Figure 1. The Histogram of Quantitative Data

Qualitative

In addition to the quantitative analysis described previously, this study also integrated qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the learning process during the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL). This qualitative data was collected through instrument triangulation, including observation sheets, field notes, questionnaire results, and in-depth interviews with students. This integration of various data sources was carried out to capture changes in student behavior, motivation, and challenges faced more objectively and factually. A summary synthesis of all qualitative findings is presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Comprehensive Integration of Qualitative Data Sources

Theme	Observation & Field Note Findings	Questionnaire & Interview Data
Student Confidence	Collaborator noted students showed increased courage in presenting initial drafts.	Students reported feeling comfortable making mistakes; interviewees stated they were "less afraid" to write.
Collaborative Dynamics	Groups functioned effectively, with students actively helping peers with sentence structure.	Majority stated peer discussion helped; interview feedback highlighted "easier idea generation" in groups.
Learning Motivation	Observations confirmed higher class participation compared to traditional lessons.	Students felt projects were "fun" and "relevant" to their lives during interviews.
Technical Support	Researchers observed persistent confusion regarding grammar and vocabulary during writing phases.	Students explicitly requested more guided instruction on mechanics in both survey and interview sessions.

DISCUSSION

Significant improvements in numerical assessments and qualitative engagement indicators from pre-test to Cycle II demonstrate that the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) framework serves as a highly effective strategy for improving students' English writing skills. The incorporation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) appears to have shifted students' perspectives; by taking ownership of developing concrete project outcomes, students shifted from viewing writing as an educational obligation to valuing it as a genuine means of communication.

The significant rise in average test scores and completion rates that surpassed the school's Minimum Competency (KKM) at the study's conclusion demonstrates that the organized phase of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) offered the essential framework for students to grasp the intricate elements of writing. This achievement can be linked to students' feeling of ownership regarding their projects. As students participated in the stages of planning, developing, and presenting, they cultivated a natural motivation that inspired greater attention to grammatical precision and vocabulary selection. Qualitative findings further corroborated these outcomes by indicating that the project-oriented approach effectively transformed the classroom into a more vibrant, student-focused, and cooperative environment.

Students who previously demonstrated minimal engagement demonstrated increased behavioral and cognitive engagement during the development of their projects. Although the use of Project-Based Learning required significant classroom time, the study showed that the fresh and interactive aspects of the remained consistent students' interest throughout the experience. In conclusion, the study findings suggest that Project-Based Learning is an appropriate approach to address issues related to student writing skills and engagement at SMP St. Thomas 3 Medan. By fostering a team-oriented environment and offering relevant contexts for writing, Project-Based Learning successfully connects traditional teaching methods with students' developmental needs, ensuring they remain motivated and actively participate in their language acquisition process.

CONCLUSION

After evaluating and discussing the research findings, it was determined that implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) at SMP St. Thomas 3 Medan greatly increased students' English writing abilities and classroom involvement. The model's success was clearly proved by the constant growth in students' average scores, which increased from a baseline of 54.12 on the pre-test to 73.58 on the formative exam and finally to 86 on the final posttest. This quantitative improvement was bolstered by a significant rise in the percentage of students fulfilling the Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM), which rose from 22.5% on the pre-test to 54.8% on the formative exam, resulting in a final classical mastery of 93.54%. at the end of Cycle 2. These statistics indicate that PjBL helped students organize their thinking more systematically and effectively during the project-making process.⁷ Furthermore, the installation of PjBL effectively addressed the initial problem of poor student involvement reported at the start of the project. Working on real projects increased 31 students' engagement, collaboration, and motivation to finish their writing tasks. The positive impact of this approach is also evident in student replies, with questionnaire research revealing that 51.61% of students believe PjBL is beneficial and entertaining for their learning process. As a result, the introduction of Project-Based Learning to improve students' English writing abilities at SMP St. Thomas 3 Medan was successful and got excellent feedback as an effective learning technique.

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