

Project-based learning in English academic writing: Students' and lecturer's views, hindrances, and practical strategies

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ABSTRACT

Despite a plethora of studies on project-based learning (PjBL) for teaching English academic writing in a higher education setting, it has remained underinvestigated in non-English department contexts, and students' practical strategies to overcome hindrances have also been underexplored. This present study scrutinizes the views, hindrances, and practical strategies involved in the enactment of PjBL for teaching English academic writing in a non-English department setting. This study adopted a qualitative research method with a single-case study design. Three undergraduate students and one English academic writing lecturer were purposefully recruited as participants. Data were gathered through individual, semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data, and member checking was employed to ensure trustworthiness. The findings suggest that the students positively viewed the enactment of PjBL as very helpful although they had mixed opinions about whether the project should be carried out individually or in groups. Moreover, PjBL offers four advantages, including minimizing individual tasks, avoiding getting stuck, accomplishing the project in a well-planned manner, and engaging students more actively. Appropriate technological tools and teaching media are encouraged to be incorporated into PjBL. Although several hindrances related to teamwork and writing were encountered, the students attempted to overcome these hindrances with some practical strategies. Implications, limitations, and future studies are also discussed.

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

English academic writing; practical strategies; project-based learning; views and hindrances on project-based learning

Article History:

Received: 10 May 2024

Revised: 31 May 2024

Accepted: 15 June 2024


Published: 20 June 2024


How to Cite in APA Style:

Atmojo, A. E. P. & Hanifah, Z. (2024). Project-based learning in English academic writing: Students' and lecturer's views, hindrances, and practical strategies. *Journal of Educational Management and Instruction*, 4(1), 29-40.

Introduction

English academic writing has become an enormous challenge for most English as a foreign language (EFL) students in Indonesia (Rosyada & Sundari, 2021). For non-native English speakers (NNES), English academic writing is typically regarded as a complicated skill to master. Numerous socio-cultural and linguistic challenges, such as sentence structure, grammatical accuracy, discourse organization, and word choice, have been encountered by EFL students, leading to extensive studies on effective methods to foster their English academic writing (Emir & Yangin-Ekşi, 2023). This skill is difficult to master

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 <https://doi.org/10.22515/jemin.v4i1.8993>

since it requires both intellectual ability and writing competence in all stages, including brainstorming ideas, making an outline, sketching a conceptual framework, and drafting and revising a manuscript (Nurkamto et al., 2022). It also necessitates greater objectivity and accuracy, causing many EFL students to strive for English academic writing. In fact, different expectations, target needs, motivation levels, learning experiences, educational backgrounds, and writing systems can affect their English academic writing skills. As a consequence, English academic writing instructions require special attention (Nurkamto et al., 2024).

In a higher education context, non-English department students hold two contrasting views on English that are affected by several factors, such as teaching methods, their teachers, and their own views on the linkage between English and the globalization era. Although they view English as an interesting course that facilitates academic, social, and economic achievement, they still perceive it as difficult (Ifanti & Maunah, 2021). More specifically, English academic writing, which is needed to write research articles, has become a major challenge for non-English department students (Syathroh & Rizkiani, 2023). At least, they need English academic writing to write an abstract for their final project (Fitriani et al., 2021; Fitriani & Sabarniati, 2021). Thus, English academic writing instructions for non-English department students require extraordinary attention.

As an instructional method that can develop students' writing skills, project-based learning (PjBL) seems to be an effective and dynamic method of teaching writing. It enables students to get immersed in meaningful real-world tasks, allowing them to actively practice their English language skills in problem-solving contexts (Garim et al., 2023). Focusing on accomplishing authentic activities assigned to a project, PjBL allows students to participate in communication that enables the use of English in a natural setting (Padmadewi et al., 2023). Furthermore, PjBL enables students to learn in an integrated way and be responsible for their own learning. As a student-centered method, it enables students to construct their own knowledge and transform learning into comprehensive and authentic experiences. It also engages demotivated students and offers an environment to foster their motivation (Aghayani & Hajmohammadi, 2019).

Based on socio-cultural theory, PjBL has been widely recognized and employed in education worldwide (Padmadewi et al., 2023; Yamada, 2021). As this method has been utilized in various settings to promote learning outcomes, it has recently gained great attention in the context of higher education (Batubara et al., 2023). PjBL is a transformative and systematic instructional method that helps students acquire knowledge and skills by investigating and responding to an authentic, contextualized, and complex problem, challenge, or question over an extended period of time. Students' knowledge and skills, such as communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, are developed through the creation of tangible or intangible products and their presentation to a real audience (Meng et al., 2023). In other words, PjBL regulates instructions through project-based activities. A project typically encompasses complicated tasks based on challenging problems or questions that assign students to design, solve problems, make decisions, or perform investigations over an extended period of time, which leads to a final product (Padmadewi et al., 2023). Students can work on the project alone or in groups, and they share the final product with others (Sultan et al., 2023).

PjBL typically comprises three stages, including planning, implementation, and presentation stages. At the planning stage, students select a topic, carry out a literature review, seek the sources of required information, and organize the required resources. Subsequently, students expand on their ideas, gather data, share roles, and undertake the project during the implementation stage. Ultimately, students present the final products of their projects and obtain feedback for reflection (Syarifah & Emiliasari, 2019). In detail, PjBL is enacted through several stages, including choosing a topic, determining the final product, structuring and detailing the project, collecting data, organizing and analyzing

data, presenting the final product, and evaluating the entire process (Ilham, 2022). For teaching writing, PjBL can be enacted in more specific stages, comprising posing challenging questions, arranging a plan and schedule, making an outline, writing a draft, monitoring any progress of the draft, presenting the draft, reviewing and editing the draft, accomplishing and publishing the final manuscript, and undertaking evaluation and reflection (Batubara et al., 2023).

In a higher education context, PjBL has been enacted to teach various courses, such as an introduction to computer-assisted language learning (ICALL) (Mali, 2017). Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, it was also utilized to teach English for specific purposes (ESP) (Habibi et al., 2022) and English for Islamic studies (EIS) through online learning environments (Asfihana et al., 2022). For teaching writing in higher education, PjBL has been incorporated with some technological tools, including Canva (Ilham, 2022), learning management system (LMS) (Padmadewi et al., 2023), and blogs (Sa'diyah & Cahyono, 2019). Furthermore, PjBL has been employed to teach some genres of writing, including academic writing (Ilham, 2022), narrative stories (Syarifah & Emiliasari, 2019), research proposals (Padmadewi et al., 2023), and argumentative writing (Sa'diyah & Cahyono, 2019). Most previous studies focused on the effectiveness of PjBL to teach writing (Aghayani & Hajmohammadi, 2019; Sa'diyah & Cahyono, 2019). Several previous studies were also concerned with the perceptions (Ilham, 2022; Syarifah & Emiliasari, 2019) and challenges (Padmadewi et al., 2023) of PjBL for teaching writing.

Despite an array of studies on PjBL for teaching several genres of writing in a higher education setting, these previous studies predominantly involved English department students as participants (Ilham, 2022; Padmadewi et al., 2023; Sa'diyah & Cahyono, 2019; Syarifah & Emiliasari, 2019). Scant studies on PjBL for teaching writing engaged non-English department students as participants. Furthermore, students' practical strategies to deal with the hindrances of PjBL for teaching writing in higher education also remain underinvestigated since previous studies merely focused on the practical strategies done by research proposal writing lecturers (Padmadewi et al., 2023), English language teachers (Yamada, 2021), and school stakeholders (Sultan et al., 2023). To fill this void, this study contributes to expanding what has been known about views, hindrances, and practical strategies for enacting PjBL in an English academic writing class from the perspectives of non-English department students and the lecturer who taught them. It offers several advantages to explore how PjBL is perceived in this particular context, what hindrances occur in its enactment, and how students overcome these hindrances with certain practical strategies that were scarcely investigated in previous studies. Therefore, this present study is guided by the following questions:

- 1) How do the students and their lecturer view the enactment of PjBL in the English academic writing class?
- 2) What hindrances do the students face in the PjBL-based English academic writing class?
- 3) How do the students overcome these hindrances?

Method

Research design and context

This study employed a qualitative research method since data were collected in a natural setting and analyzed to establish themes or patterns, which included the voices of participants, reflections of the researchers, and descriptions and interpretations of the problems. Particularly, a single case study was chosen because this study investigated a real-world, contemporary bounded system over an extended period of time, resulting in descriptions and themes of a case generated from in-depth data collection (Creswell, 2013). Contextually, this study took place at one non-English department of a public university located in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia. This department offered English

courses for first-year students in two semesters, comprising the first and second semesters. Nonetheless, this study merely focused on the English course provided in the second semester, which was determined to be an English academic writing course.

Participants

This study took place at one site to investigate activities and processes that involved several individuals (Creswell, 2013). It utilized nonprobability sampling in the form of purposive or purposeful sampling. In particular, maximum variation sampling was employed to involve participants who represented the greatest variation in the general English course scores, the TOEFL test scores, and gender (Glesne, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Based on several criteria, including scores on the general English course in the first semester, scores on the TOEFL test, strong willingness to voluntarily participate in this study, and richness of information given to the researchers, three undergraduate students and one English academic writing lecturer from a non-English department were purposefully recruited as participants. The students were all in the second semester. They had various learning achievements in the general English course and the TOEFL test. They were enrolled in the English academic writing course while participating in this study. Furthermore, the participants' real names were anonymized in order to keep their privacy and identities secret. In this study, the participants were called Student A (18 years old, female), Student B (17 years old, female), Student C (18 years old, male), and The Lecturer (24 years old, male). All the participants had also given their informed consent before this study began (Bos, 2020; Resnik, 2018). Obviously, this study has adhered to ethical standards in educational studies.

Data collection

All the participants were requested to elucidate their views, hindrances, and practical strategies for the enactment of PjBL in the English academic writing class through individual, semi-structured interviews (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The interview protocol was developed based on the research questions and evaluated by three experts in the field of English language teaching: two experts with doctoral degrees and one expert with a master degree. Each individual interview lasted around 45 to 60 minutes. The second author became the interviewer in this study. Furthermore, member checking was employed to ensure trustworthiness. Interview transcripts and the manuscript draft were shared with the participants, allowing them to provide feedback and interpretations (Glesne, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data analysis

In this case study, thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Categorizing data based on codes or labels became a crucial step in the process of thematic analysis. This analysis aimed to grasp a social phenomenon in a more comprehensive way by looking at the processes associated with that phenomenon, including people's views, attitudes, and beliefs toward it (Glesne, 2016). Practically, unimportant, unrelated, and redundant data were first removed to filter and reduce the data into essential ones. The essential data were then coded to elicit several key themes based on the research questions. Subsequently, emerging themes were highlighted and supported by essential quotes or excerpts as evidence. Several conclusions were ultimately drawn.

Findings

Drawing on thematic analysis results, the findings of the present study are ultimately obtained. In light of the research questions, the findings are presented based on several emerging themes and sub-themes. Elaboration of the findings will be given for

each theme and sub-theme, and essential excerpts will be provided to support the elaboration and serve as evidence. These excerpts will also offer fresh and fruitful insights, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the findings.

Views on project-based learning in the English academic writing class

The enactment of PjBL for teaching English academic writing in a higher education setting at a non-English department generates several views based on the students and the lecturer's voices. These views are categorized into several sub-themes, including perceptions, advantages, and useful technological tools and media. In general, the participants perceived the enactment of PjBL in the English academic writing class positively. PjBL is viewed as very helpful.

"For me, project-based learning is very helpful. It helps me a lot." (Student B)

In terms of how to work on the project in PjBL, the students are not in consensus about whether it should be carried out individually or collaboratively; they had different views on it.

"Personally, I prefer to write collaboratively." (Student A)

"If I work on the project individually, I already know what I want; I mean that I know what to write and how to write it." (Student B)

Furthermore, the lecturer elaborated on the considerations beyond the decision to enact the project activities in PjBL collaboratively or in groups instead of individually.

"My consideration is that the students are not from an English department, but the outcome of the course must be a scientific paper that is written in English. If I ask the students to write the paper individually, they must feel burdened. Thus, I decided to enact PjBL with project activities that are carried out in groups, enabling the students to work collaboratively with their friends through group project activities." (The Lecturer)

The enactment of PjBL in the English academic writing class has been viewed as advantageous in many ways. At least, there are three advantages of PjBL that are recognized by the students, which comprise minimizing individual tasks, avoiding getting stuck, and accomplishing the project in a well-planned manner. The collection of the following excerpts can illustrate how the students were aware of these advantages.

"The project can be divided into smaller parts, and each student will work on a smaller part, minimizing his individual tasks. This also makes the writing process easier since some students work together on the same project." (Student A)

"When I get stuck or confused about what to write, I immediately obtain suggestions and new ideas from my group friends, thus avoiding getting stuck." (Student C)

"PjBL helps us accomplish the project in a well-planned manner. This provides us with a framework for the final outcome, weekly targets, allotted time, and steps needed to accomplish the project. So, we do not just work hard when the deadline comes near." (Student B)

In addition, the lecturer mentioned one advantage obtained from the enactment of PjBL in the English academic writing class, namely engaging students more actively.

"I was surprised as most students enthusiastically proposed their ideas, resulting in some debates among them. I had never experienced this during group project activities." (The Lecturer)

The students perceived that the utilization of some technological tools and media was beneficial. Kahoot and WhatsApp are identified as advantageous technological tools employed in the enactment of PjBL. Furthermore, examples of academic texts and scientific papers enhance the students' ability to tackle writing tasks. The evidence can be seen in the following excerpts.

"Kahoot seems like an application for learning grammar, vocabulary, and others. This app will show our scores at the end of games. It is really helpful. The learning process becomes more fun, and it gets easier to comprehend the materials." (Student A)

"WhatsApp is really helpful because I sometimes encounter challenges when tackling writing tasks. With the affordances of WhatsApp, I can share my problems with the lecturer and my friends through the WhatsApp group while continuing to write. So, it helps me a lot." (Student C)

"When the lecturer assigned writing tasks, he had already provided examples of academic texts and scientific papers. So, I can accomplish the writing tasks more easily." (Student C)

Hindrances to the enactment of project-based learning

Like other instructional methods, the enactment of PjBL in the English academic writing class encountered several challenges. Since the project activities were carried out in groups, emerging hindrances are mostly associated with teamwork issues, including irresponsible teammates, poor teamwork skills, and the distribution of tasks. Meanwhile, the other two hindrances are categorized as problems in writing. These problems are closely related to two elements of writing, comprising content as well as unity and coherence. The students faced challenges in selecting various ideas and incorporating some pieces of written work into one.

The lecturer asserted that PjBL, in which the project activities were carried out in groups or collaboratively, required the students' collective responsibility and teamwork. This is indicated in the following excerpt.

"In this project-based learning, the students must be able to work together and actively engage in the group project activities. Thus, the group project becomes a collective responsibility." (The Lecturer)

Furthermore, hindrances related to teamwork issues are directly experienced by the students while undertaking the group project. The students mentioned that their teammates were irresponsible and had poor teamwork skills.

"Sometimes, one or two of my teammates accomplished their tasks after the deadline. In other circumstances, their work was not in accordance with the given rules. So, other team members must edit their work first." (Student A)

"Another challenge is that not all students can work well together or collaboratively." (Student A)

The last problem associated with teamwork issues is the distribution of tasks. The students were confused when they had to distribute tasks to all team members. This challenge is evident in the following excerpt.

"The problem typically stems from the distribution of tasks. For instance, I work on which parts, and other members work on which parts." (Student C)

In relation to the elements of academic writing, the students mentioned two challenges. These challenges are associated with content as well as unity and coherence. The students encountered challenges when they had to select various ideas and incorporate some pieces of written work into one. To avoid getting stuck, PjBL enabled the students to generate several ideas simultaneously. Nevertheless, this resulted in confusion and debate among the students when they had to select various ideas. They also expressed their difficulties when they had to incorporate some pieces of written work into one. According to them, it seemed inefficient since they had to work twice to edit their written work again.

"Too many emerging ideas can disrupt the focus of the topic. This could happen because every student might have different ideas, resulting in confusion and debate when they had to select their ideas." (Student A)

"When we attempted to incorporate some pieces of our written work into one, it did not seem in harmony because we never discussed the linkages among ideas and parts. So, we had to work twice to make it unified and coherent." (Student B)

Practical strategies to encounter the hindrances

The students have made some attempts to deal with the hindrances. They employed several practical strategies in their attempts to encounter the hindrances that emerged in the enactment of PjBL. The first strategy is to create a fake deadline before the actual deadline. This aims to prevent one of the team members from sending his work after the actual deadline.

"For example, if the actual deadline is tomorrow, I will say that the deadline is today. If a teammate sends his work tomorrow, we are actually not late in submitting the project because the real deadline is tomorrow." (Student A)

Second, the students attempted to frequently remind their teammates about their own tasks. This aims to successfully collect the work from all team members and submit it before the deadline. This also helps to make irresponsible teammates more responsible.

"To deal with irresponsible teammates, I usually remind them frequently about the tasks that they must accomplish as soon as possible." (Student A)

To tackle the confusion and debates when selecting various ideas, the students held face-to-face discussions, resulting in the negotiation of ideas.

"Although the process may be longer, there must be face-to-face discussions to negotiate the ideas and make decisions together. In class, we also need to discuss the directions for the project together. Class activities should include not only the teaching of materials but also group discussions." (Student A)

The students had also found a way to incorporate some pieces of written work into one. Surprisingly, they solved this by writing together simultaneously. They did not work on different parts individually. Nonetheless, they worked together on one part until they successfully accomplished it. Subsequently, they worked together on the next part. They worked this way until all parts were completed.

"My group works on the project simultaneously. From the introduction and literature review, we work together until we finish the last part, namely the conclusion. We work this way because it allows us to share ideas more easily and enables all team members to comprehend the content in every part." (Student C)

Discussion

As the present study unveils positive findings on the enactment of PjBL in the English academic writing class, many previous studies confirmed that PjBL gained positive views and was determined to be effective for teaching writing. Padmadewi et al. (2023) revealed that PjBL was effective in facilitating students' research proposal writing. Drawing on a mixed-methods study, Yamada (2021) discovered that Japanese EFL students participated eagerly in PjBL and viewed their English language skills as enhanced. Sultan et al. (2023) also revealed that PjBL could foster students' creative writing. From a qualitative lens, PjBL was positively viewed as aiding students in promoting their abilities and creativity to write narrative texts (Syarifah & Emiliyasi, 2019). Furthermore, in a quasi-experimental study, PjBL through blogging promoted students' writing on argumentative essays, and this was not influenced by students' self-efficacy levels (Sa'diyah & Cahyono, 2019). In a similar vein, Aghayani and Hajmohammadi (2019) attested that PjBL significantly enhanced students' writing skills through a collaborative environment. In addition to promoting their writing skills, students viewed PjBL as motivating, challenging, and interesting. It also enhanced students' English language proficiency and creativity (Ilham, 2022). Although previous studies did not yield any findings on students' preferences for working individually or collaboratively on the project, this study suggests the students' mixed opinions and the lecturer's considerations in deciding to carry it out collaboratively.

Considering the advantages of PjBL in the present study, which include minimizing individual tasks, avoiding getting stuck, accomplishing the project in a well-planned manner, and engaging students more actively, previous studies echoed that PjBL offered similar and different advantages as well. Garim et al. (2023) revealed that PjBL fostered students' engagement, motivation, and creativity. Sari et al. (2023) also echoed that it was advantageous in fostering students' creative thinking skills. Padmadewi et al. (2023) added that it increased students' learning autonomy. According to Yamada (2021), PjBL allowed students to broaden their viewpoints and foster their English skills through meaningful interactions with foreigners. It also encouraged passive students to actively engage in classroom activities. In addition to promoting students' creativity as depicted in story lines and illustrations, Syarifah and Emiliyasi (2019) discovered that PjBL facilitated teamwork, collaborative learning, and networking as well. In a similar vein, Ilham (2022) revealed that PjBL allowed students to experience working together in groups and think about a given problem contextually.

In terms of technological tools and teaching media, previous studies suggested their integration into the enactment of PjBL for teaching writing (Asfihana et al., 2022; Ilham, 2022). Padmadewi et al. (2023) asserted that PjBL had to be supported with technological tools—for example, a learning management system (LMS)—and various scaffoldings. Moreover, Ebadi and Rahimi (2017) and Hoang and Hoang (2022) recommended Google Docs be incorporated into PjBL for enhancing students' English academic writing skills through online collaboration and peer editing. PjBL through blogging was also effective in

developing students' argumentative essay writing (Sa'diyah & Cahyono, 2019). Similarly, Ilham (2022) revealed that PjBL through Canva was effective in enhancing students' academic writing. This demonstrates that a variety of different technological tools and teaching media has been extensively incorporated into the enactment of PjBL for teaching writing.

Previous studies also discovered both similar and dissimilar hindrances to the enactment of PjBL for teaching writing. In relation to writing-related challenges, problems associated with grammar and content emerged in research proposal writing. However, since the project was carried out individually, teamwork-related challenges did not occur (Padmadewi et al., 2023). Sari et al. (2023) echoed that students mostly faced problems in developing their ideas into a coherent piece of writing, arranging their writing into a good organization, and employing interchangeable vocabulary to avoid repetition. On the other hand, Sultan et al. (2023) revealed different challenges in the enactment of PjBL for teaching writing, including time management of the project, students' low writing motivation, unintentional dominance over quiet classmates, and the intricacy of incorporating PjBL with the Cambridge curriculum and the school's specific framework.

In the previous studies, different practical strategies were deployed by parties other than students to overcome hindrances to PjBL in writing instructions. According to Padmadewi et al. (2023), the hindrances could be managed by utilizing various scaffoldings and applying PjBL steps systematically. Moreover, Yamada (2021) suggested that English language teachers should infuse value-centered team learning into PjBL since it enabled both teachers and students to learn more from each other through dynamic interactions, overcoming teamwork-related challenges. Sultan et al. (2023) also introduced a weekly forum called SIT (share, inspire, and transform) that was initiated to aid teachers in navigating and solving classroom challenges, particularly those associated with the enactment of new teaching methods.

This study implies that students with higher English language proficiency and general English course achievement, as well as individual personalities, tend to prefer the project to be carried out individually. This may be enacted in English departments, such as English education and English literature departments, where the students focus more on studying a wide range of English courses. Furthermore, other relevant technological tools and teaching media, such as Google Docs, are encouraged to be incorporated into future PjBL courses. Google Docs can be a good tool to facilitate writing simultaneously with more than one PC, laptop, or tablet via the internet. If the project is carried out in groups, the lecturer must often remind the students to build collective responsibility and solid teamwork from the beginning of the course.

Conclusion

The present study generates noteworthy findings that expand on previous relevant studies. As portrayed in the findings and discussion sections, it echoes the findings of previous studies and differs at some points. The students positively perceived the enactment of PjBL in the English academic writing class as very helpful although they were not in consensus on whether the project should be carried out individually or in groups. In sum, the students and the lecturer mentioned four advantages of PjBL, including minimizing individual tasks, avoiding getting stuck, accomplishing the project in a well-planned manner, and engaging students more actively. Technological tools (e.g., Kahoot and WhatsApp) were viewed as beneficial in the enactment of PjBL for teaching academic writing. Examples of academic texts and scientific papers as teaching media could also foster the students' abilities to tackle writing tasks. Furthermore, the hindrances are categorized into two categories: teamwork-related challenges and writing-related challenges. Teamwork-related challenges encompass irresponsible teammates, poor teamwork skills, and the distribution of tasks. The lecturer asserted that PjBL, in which the project was carried out in groups, required collective responsibility and good

teamwork. On the other hand, writing-related challenges comprise selecting various ideas and incorporating some pieces of written work into one as it must have good content as well as unity and coherence. Although the students experienced several hindrances, they strived to take action to overcome them. Their practical strategies include creating a fake deadline, frequently reminding teammates about their own tasks, having face-to-face discussions, and writing together simultaneously.

Albeit its noteworthy findings, this study still has several limitations. First, it only employed semi-structured interviews for data collection and involved a small number of participants (four participants), comprising three undergraduate students and one English academic writing lecturer from a non-English department. Thus, future studies on PjBL in writing classes are encouraged with more participants and data collection techniques, such as observations and documents. Quantitative methods, such as experiments and surveys, can be employed to gain more generalizable results. In qualitative traditions, data analyses beyond thematic analysis, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis and appraisal analysis, are encouraged for use. Future studies should also investigate PjBL, in which the project is carried out individually, since most current studies have already investigated PjBL, in which the project is carried out in groups. Ultimately, other technological tools and teaching media, such as Google Docs, that can be incorporated into PjBL must be highlighted to gain more insights on how these tools and media can foster students' writing skills.

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