

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE TEXT

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ABSTRACT

Project-Based Learning (PBL) has been widely promoted as an approach that supports meaningful writing instruction in English as a Foreign Language classrooms, yet how teachers actually carried it out in teaching descriptive text remained insufficiently explored through qualitative inquiry. The purpose of this study was to explore how the English teacher applied PBL to the teaching of writing descriptive text. Working within a single Madrasah Tsanawiyah classroom, this qualitative case study traced one English teacher's enactment of PBL across three meetings of a descriptive writing unit on animals, drawing on classroom observation, a semi-structured interview, and students' Canva poster products. The teacher built her cycle around an essential-question stimulus using a familiar visual object, heterogeneous small-group planning, a deliberately time-boxed in-class drafting stage extended into a week-long take-home digital design task, a public presentation paired with peer classification of grammatical elements, and a closing reflective correction session. Findings show this sequence functioned as more than a procedural checklist: it operationalized a socially mediated learning process in which the teacher repeatedly scaffolded students within their zone of proximal development, while peer presentation created accountability that shaped how carefully students composed their sentences. Time pressure on digital design was the main structural constraint, resolved by shifting that stage outside class hours. The study concludes that effective PBL implementation rests less on strict fidelity to a fixed model than on a teacher's situated, adaptive translation of its core elements into workable classroom decisions.

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning, descriptive writing, scaffolding, classroom implementation, EFL teaching*

ABSTRAK

PBL (Project-Based Learning) belakangan ini sering disebut sebagai jalan keluar untuk membuat kelas menulis English as a Foreign Language (EFL) jadi lebih hidup. Masalahnya, bagaimana persisnya guru mempraktikkan model ini untuk mengajar teks deskriptif di sekolah masih jarang dibongkar lewat riset kualitatif. Riset studi kasus ini mencoba menjawab celah tersebut dengan mengamati langsung seorang guru bahasa Inggris di Madrasah Tsanawiyah. Selama tiga pertemuan tema deskripsi hewan, aktivitas kelas direkam utuh melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, hingga pemeriksaan poster Canva buatan siswa. Menariknya, siklus proyek tidak berjalan kaku. Guru memulai kelas dengan memantik diskusi lewat objek visual yang dekat dengan siswa, membagi kelompok kecil yang heterogen,

lalu membatasi waktu pembuatan draf di kelas. Karena waktu mendesain poster digital di Canva sangat mepet, guru memindahkan porsi teknis itu sebagai tugas rumah selama seminggu. Di ujung proyek, siswa wajib presentasi sambil mengoreksi tata bahasa temannya, lalu ditutup dengan sesi evaluasi bersama. Hasilnya membuktikan bahwa rangkaian ini bukan cuma formalitas di atas kertas. Di sini, terjadi interaksi sosial nyata saat guru memberikan bantuan (scaffolding) yang pas ketika siswa kesulitan di dalam zone of proximal development mereka. Sesi presentasi di depan kelas juga sukses membuat siswa lebih hati-hati dan tanggung jawab saat menyusun kalimat mereka. Hambatan utama memang ada pada manajemen waktu saat mendesain digital, tapi strategi menggeser tugas ke luar jam sekolah terbukti ampuh. Akhirnya, riset ini menyimpulkan bahwa kunci sukses PBL bukan pada kepatuhan buta pada teori dasar, melainkan kelihaian guru dalam memodifikasi langkah proyek agar sesuai dengan kondisi kelas nyata.

Kata Kunci: Pembelajaran Berbasis Proyek, menulis teks deskriptif, perancah, implementasi kelas, pengajaran EFL

A. Introduction

Project based learning (PBL) has been the main focus of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because it enables students to be active participants, interact and apply language to authentic purposes. In writing learning, especially writing in the form of descriptive text, the application of PBL makes it easier for students to engage in communicative activities in relation to real situations, in contrast with only grammar drills which are not done in relation to real situations (Andargie, Amogne, & Tefera, 2025). PBL is considered to be student-centered and inquiry-based in theory, but in practice, it takes different forms based on teacher understanding and practice of the theory (Ummah et al., 2026). This

difference between the model written and the model taught is the initial problem that this study seeks to address.

A number of great studies conducted from various angles have come out recently about the importance of PBL for writing instruction. Chao, Rahman, and Soon (2025) and Fadhillah, Sudjarwo, and Habsari (2023) found that PBL made the students motivated and skilled in writing meanwhile Argawati and Suryani (2020) and Kusuma (2022) found students could arrange their ideas more creatively and logically during PBL. Even though teachers' understanding and implementation are still not optimal, they are still considered as major obstacles that hinder the effectiveness of PBL (Ratu

et al., 2025), which is supported by limited teacher resources, class size, and time allocated for the teaching and learning of social studies (Angraini, Sulistiyo, Haryanto, & Pratama, 2025). Azman, Rahman, and Goh (2024) explored the application of PBL in the classroom, but their focus was the classroom application of PBL only, while Andargie et al. (2025) and Arga (2025) showed that pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) of teachers had an influence on the degree of inquiry in a writing project or its superficiality. Arochman et al. (2024) and Mukhlisin, Supardi and Usuludin (2023) validated the score improvement of writing skills in PBL cycles but only on writing outcomes and not the process, while Kaldi and Zafeiri (2023) believed that teachers' adaptation of PBL was in accordance with their beliefs and not actual observation. Wideasari, Raja and Nurweni (2024) applied PBL and guided writing, which made it difficult to separate the contribution of PBL.

As a whole, these studies show that PBL can be used to improve writing results, but do not detail the classroom mechanics of PBL. Harmer (2001) and Larmer, Mergendoller and Boss (2015) locate PBL's success in

the scaffolding of planning, drafting, and revising, and Vygotsky (1978) Zone of Proximal Development frames that scaffolding as socially mediated. Because PBL implementation is interpretive and bound to context, a qualitative approach is needed to capture how a teacher enacts the model rather than only whether it works. Accordingly, this study addresses research question; how does the teacher implement Project-Based Learning in teaching writing descriptive text? The study aims to describe, through classroom observation and a semi-structured interview, how one EFL teacher enacts PBL in descriptive writing

B. Method

The method of this study was descriptive qualitative approach which was designed using single case study design to analyze the implementation of PBL in descriptive writing by a teacher. The decision to use this approach came from Creswell and Creswell (2018) who argued to use the approach to examine the meaning the teacher gave to her pedagogical choices in a natural classroom environment, and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) in relation to the theme of the

classroom as a bounded system in its context. The study was also situated within Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist paradigm that considered knowledge and meaning to be products of continuous social interaction instead of content that can be transmitted. The study was carried out in one Madrasah Tsanawiyah in the city of Jakarta, where PBL has



been used as a learning approach for the first time. The participant, Ms. The teacher was chosen by purposeful sampling, as the classroom of A (10 years of English teaching experience) had enough information about the phenomenon under study. Three complementary approaches were used to collect data. The teacher was asked to share her thoughts on the rationale for implementing PBL and her experience with the project cycle in a semi-structured interview that was conducted on 8 May 2026 and lasted about 45 minutes. The teacher's

scaffolding and classroom decisions were observed during the five phases of the PBL cycle: Introduction of project, planning and organization, project work, feedback and revision, and presentation and evaluation; the observations were captured by using a checklist developed in alignment with the five phases. To verify the information from the interviews and observations, the documents were analyzed (Bowen, 2009) which included lesson plans, teaching materials and student project artifacts. All data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006), moving from familiarization with the data through coding, theme searching, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting, within the case study framework established by Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

C. Results and Discussion

Findings on the Teacher's Implementation of PBL in Descriptive Writing

The teacher's implementation of PBL unfolded across three classroom meetings, and the sequence closely followed the seven essential elements

outlined in the Gold Standard PBL framework of Larmer et al. (2015).

Figure 1. Gold Standard PBL

The first meeting opened not with a direct explanation of descriptive text mechanics, but with a challenging question. The teacher projected an image of a giraffe and asked students to name its physical traits orally in English, a strategy she said was



deliberate. As she put it, she designs her essential question around objects close to students' everyday experience so vocabulary can surface naturally before the writing stage begins. This opening choice matters more than it first appears. Rather than starting from grammar rules, the teacher started from a shared visual problem that every student, regardless of proficiency, could contribute to.

From there the class moved into small groups organized by animal (lion, elephant, penguin, monkey), each tasked with brainstorming identification, physical traits, food, and habitat before drafting sentences on

paper. The teacher fixed a narrow time window for this in class drafting and assigned the digital Canva poster as structured homework for one week. She explained her reasoning directly: she split students into small groups by animal name so they would stay focused, used the giraffe stimulus to draw out active vocabulary, and because classroom time was tight, capped the initial draft at thirty minutes before pushing the Canva design work home as a one-week assignment. This decision reveals something the Gold Standard literature does not always make explicit, that sustained inquiry in a real school does not mean unlimited time. It means the teacher had to compress the in class stage while preserving the project's depth by extending it into a homework cycle.

During this planning stage the teacher also moved between groups correcting subject verb agreement in third person singular forms and pointing struggling groups toward a pocket dictionary she had prepared in advance. Notably, students asked questions freely and without apparent hesitation, suggesting the classroom climate treated asking for help as a normal part of writing rather than a sign of weakness.

Figure 1. One of the student groups presenting their work

The second meeting shifted to the public product and peer assessment elements. After all four groups submitted their Canva links, presentations rotated at the front of the class while the rest of the students filled out a Peer Listening Worksheet, identifying and classifying adjectives, nouns, verbs, and identification sentences from their classmates' posters. This is a meaningful design decision because it means the writing was not evaluated by the teacher alone but read and dissected by an actual peer audience, which is precisely the public audience dimension Larmer et al. (2015) treat as central to genuine PBL. A logistical problem surfaced here too, since students at the back could not read the projected text. The teacher's response was immediate. She recalled that when the audience groups complained the projected text was too small, she shared the Canva file directly to their devices so they could zoom in and keep the peer listening activity moving. This small adjustment shows that monitoring in PBL is not confined to academic correction. It extends to keeping the physical

conditions of critique and revision workable, something the framework assumes but rarely spells out at this level of classroom detail.

The third meeting closed the cycle with evaluation. The teacher returned the worksheets, reprojected each poster, and led a whole class discussion to check the accuracy of word classifications. Where students disagreed, particularly on the line between nouns and adjectives, she worked individually with specific students at their seats before finishing with a short classical reinforcement on the grammar points that had caused the most trouble.

Discussion: The Implementation Through Social Constructivism

Viewed collectively, these three sessions provide a clear pedagogical demonstration of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist approach that suggests that higher cognitive function will occur during the social interaction and then be internalized by the individual learner. The teacher was able to play the role of the "more knowledgeable other" (Vygotsky, 1978) throughout this instructional cycle. She did not use generic teaching techniques, such as one-size-fits-all adjustments to subject-

verb agreement; she used the pocket dictionary and individualized instruction to help students with the selection of nouns and adjectives. Every action clearly focused on a task that the students could not do independently, but could do with expert support, directly operationalising the principles of the zone of proximal development.

This also clarifies why the Gold Standard elements should not be read as a checklist that happens to produce good writing on its own. In this classroom they functioned as the mechanism through which a Vygotskian environment was built. The giraffe stimulus created joint attention that pulled the whole class into one shared linguistic problem before anyone had to write alone, lowering the barrier for less confident students to borrow vocabulary from peers who spoke up first. The small group drafting stage pushed this further, since negotiating a description as a group forces a student to put an idea into words for someone else, not just for themselves, which Vygotsky (1978) treats as the condition that actually accelerates language development. Placing a stronger and a weaker student in the same animal

group, something the teacher did on purpose, effectively built a peer level zone of proximal development where the less confident student could approximate what a more capable classmate produced, under conditions with no grade attached yet.

The presentation and peer listening stage extends the theory one step further, since it turns the audience itself into part of the learning mechanism. Classifying a peer group's adjectives, nouns, and verbs is exactly the kind of external, socially situated grammatical work that Vygotsky (1978) argues comes before a learner can reliably do that classification alone in their own writing. The final reinforcement stage then brings that socially built understanding back down to individual correction, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) expectation that scaffolding is gradually withdrawn as independent capability grows.

Taken as a whole, this process addresses a gap the existing PBL literature tends to leave open. Studies on PBL in writing instruction have established that it helps motivation and outcomes, but they rarely describe, meeting by meeting and decision by decision, how a teacher

actually builds that outcome in a real classroom with real time constraints. The sequence documented here, essential question, structured small group planning, time boxed drafting extended into homework, public presentation, peer assessment, and reflective reinforcement, shows that the Gold Standard framework and Vygotskian scaffolding are not two separate theoretical lenses applied after the fact. In this teacher's practice they operated as one integrated method for turning a descriptive writing task into a socially constructed, audience aware activity rather than an isolated grammar exercise.

D. Conclusion

This study found that the teacher implemented PBL through a structured sequence of an essential question stimulus, small group planning, timed drafting extended into homework, public presentation, peer assessment, and reflective reinforcement, closely mirroring the Gold Standard framework of Larmer et al. (2015). Implementation was not rigid but adapted to real classroom constraints, particularly limited instructional time, which the teacher managed by shifting the digital design

stage to a weeklong assignment. As a single case study, these findings describe one teacher's practice and cannot be generalized across settings. Future research should extend observation across multiple PBL cycles and multiple teachers or schools to determine whether this sequence of implementation choices, and the adaptive strategies used to sustain it, reflect a broader pattern rather than one teacher's individual response to her classroom's specific limitations.

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