STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING APPLIED IN AN ESSAY WRITING CLASS: CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

Persepsi Mahasiswa terhadap Pembelajaran Berbasis Masalah yang Diaplikasikan dalam Kelas Menulis Esai: Tantangan dan Manfaatnya

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate how students perceived Problem-Based Learning (PBL) when applied in an essay writing class of an EFL classroom. The study focused on understanding the challenges and benefits that students observed during the PBL process. The study used survey research with a one-shot design. The procedures followed included planning, defining the population, sampling, constructing the instrument, conducting the survey, and processing the data. The study was conducted in an English Language Education Study Program of a public university in Central Kalimantan Province (Indonesia). A total of 37 students from an Intermediate English Writing class participated in the study. A questionnaire with closed- and open-ended questions was distributed to collect the data. The results showed that despite facing challenges, the majority of the students viewed PBL positively. The challenges that students experienced during the learning process included limited knowledge and experience in the conceptual mastery, problems and solutions, lack of critical thinking and creativity, and being unfamiliar with PBL. However, students also agreed that PBL was important to be implemented, as it contributes to the quality of life and helps develop soft skills essential for now and the future. Additionally, students found PBL helpful in completing the essay assigned for the subject.
Keywords: benefits; challenges; EFL Learners' perception; essay; problem-based learning; writing class

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menginvestigasi bagaimana mahasiswa memahami Pembelajaran Berbasis Masalah ketika diaplikasikan di kelas menulis esai di ruang kelas pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing. Fokus penelitian ini ialah memahami tantangan dan manfaat yang mahasiswa amati selama proses pelaksanaan PBL. Penelitian ini menggunakan penelitian survei dengan desain *one-shot*. Prosedurnya meliputi merencanakan, mendefinisikan populasi, menentukan sampel, menyusun instrumen, melaksanakan survei, dan mengolah data. Penelitian ini dilaksanakan di Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris dari salah satu universitas negeri di Provinsi Kalimantan Tengah (Indonesia). Sebanyak 37 mahasiswa dari kelas Menulis Bahasa Inggris Terampil berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Kuesioner yang berbentuk pertanyaan tertutup dan terbuka disebarkan untuk mengumpulkan data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa walaupun menghadapi tantangan pada saat pelaksanaan pembelajaran, mayoritas mahasiswa memiliki pandangan positif terhadap PBL. Tantangan yang dihadapi mahasiswa selama pembelajaran meliputi pengetahuan dan pengalaman yang terbatas pada penguasaan

konseptual, masalah dan solusinya, kurangnya berpikir kritis dan kreatif, dan tidak terbiasa dengan PBL. Namun, mereka juga setuju bahwa PBL penting untuk diimplementasikan karena berkontribusi pada kualitas hidup dan membantu mengembangkan keterampilan lunak yang berguna untuk kehidupan. Sebagai tambahannya, mahasiswa menganggap PBL dapat membantu mereka juga mendapatkan bantuan untuk merampungkan esai pada mata kuliah tersebut.

Kata kunci: manfaat; tantangan; persepsi; pembelajaran berbasis masalah; kelas menulis

INTRODUCTION

Teachers around the world are nowadays required to apply approaches to learning which promote student-centered environment. At the same time they equip their students with lifelong learning skills applicable not only to their teaching and learning activities during the semester, but also to students' lives in the future. In other words, the learning process should contribute to building the skills needed for lifelong learning, for now and in the future. One of the learning approaches applied is problem-based learning (PBL). It is a kind of learning in which students are encouraged to find real problems around them and collaborate with their peers in their group to solve the problems.

PBL was originally formalized by medical educators in the 1950s and 1960s (Boud, 1985), and then gained popularity in undergraduate science and engineering classrooms (Woods, 1985), humanities and social sciences (Duch, B., Groh, S. E., and Allen, 2001) and has branched out in all disciplines (Savery, 2006; Walker & Leary, 2009). In PBL, instead of giving lecture, teachers act as facilitators of a problem solving process (Malin & Rind, 2022; Saad & Zainudin, 2022) and ill-structured problems are presented to have potentially multiple solutions (Leary et al., 2019). In PBL problems, not all the information needed is provided; therefore, learners should actively search for information and explanation regarding the case being discussed. Thus, through this process, learners' self-directed learning is trained and development of conceptual framework is nurtured (Leary et al., 2019). Regarding the lifelong learning skills mentioned previously, PBL is applied based on the consideration that it can facilitate the construction of soft skills, such as research skills, negotiation and teamwork, reading, writing, and oral communication (Allen et al., 2011). All these skills are essential to be developed as they belong to global skills that prepare learners for lifelong success personally, academically, and professionally (ELT Expert Panel, 2021).

PBL is considered an effective method in teaching and learning as it benefits content learning, process skills, and student engagement (Almulla, 2020; Lu, 2021; Miller & Krajcik, 2019). Research shows that PBL positively influences integration of new knowledge with existing knowledge as some positive outcomes have been reported, such as gains in physic courses (Williams, 2001) and biology course (Pelaez, 2002), conceptual mastery in biology during the post COVID-19 pandemic (Amanda et al., 2022), and improving learning outcomes of geography in the new normal learning era (Aristin et al., 2023). PBL, through the collaborative group discussions, also promotes the growth of students' soft skills that bring about positive attitudes towards learning such as critical thinking (ELT Expert Panel, 2021;

Rochmahwati, 2015; Susanti et al., 2023), self-directed learning (Leary et al., 2019), cooperative learning and effective teamwork (ELT Expert Panel, 2021).

Research was also conducted on homogenous vs heterogenous collaborative learning in PBL (Farahani et al., 2019) which recommends that language teachers should assign homogenous groups in PBL since heterogenous groups may not be useful for all learners. In addition, as PBL provides activities that challenges students academically and offer opportunities for interaction and collaboration, it leads students to deeply involved in their group work and, therefore, increases their engagement with the learning (Almulla, 2020; Lu, 2021; Miller & Krajcik, 2019). Other research also report the valuable experiences on the use of flipped classroom in the PBL curriculum of medical education during the COVID19 pandemic (Nugroho & Hermasari, 2023), and the positive effect of PBL towards the teacher's competence of Senior Islamic High School in teaching (Tambak et al., 2023). Concerning TEFL, a study was conducted on the integration of PBL into ELT and PBL could initiate civic literacy and configure the framework for civic learning and democratic values (Gheith, 2014). PBL was also reported effective in teaching vocabulary (Elahe & Alireza, 2018) and speaking skills (Kassem, 2018; L. A., 2017). However, the number of research conducted on the implementation of PBL in ELT is still very limited; thus, it becomes one of the reasons for conducting this current research.

The previous research on PBL and ELT have been conducted focusing on the vocabulary teaching and speaking skills; however, research on PBL implemented in EFL writing classes are hardly found. Therefore, this current research fills the gap by conducting a research in an essay writing class at an English Education Study Program of a public university in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, and the objective was to investigate how the learners perceive Problem-Based Learning (PBL) applied in their classroom concerning the challenges and benefits that they encounter during the process. Essay writing, especially argumentative and reflective ones, requires students to have sufficient knowledge and experiences on the topic assigned and this writing activity can encourage thinking (A. Sharadgah et al., 2019; Ramlal & Augustin, 2020). Therefore, it is enticing to observe when PBL is applied in this kind of setting. The characteristics promoted by PBL match with materials or topics students can be exposed to and the skills needed to be developed in essay writing. Hopefully, this research would benefit instructors or facilitators of English writing classes by giving information on learners' perception towards the implementation of PBL in their class; therefore, instructors can consider what to prepare when they want to apply similar approach in their teaching and learning activities.

RESEARCH METHOD

Survey research was chosen since it collects peoples' opinions, beliefs, or perceptions about a current issue. In this research, EFL learners' perceptions towards the implementation of PBL in an essay writing class were gathered and one-shot survey design was employed as a questionnaire was delivered to the learners at one point in time to gather their perceptions about the current issue (Lodico et al., 2010).

This study was conducted at an English Language Education Study Program of a public university in Central Kalimantan Province, Indonesia and students of the fall semester of 2023 were the population of this research. This research was held on one subject namely Intermediate English Writing for the third-semester students that focuses on developing skills in essay writing. This subject has three classes with 124 students as a whole; however, only students of one class were taken as the sample and the number was 37 students. This research used convenience or available sampling as the sample selected was convenience for the researchers for the availability and easy accessibility (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The sample was the students of the

university class of the researchers who conducted this research.

In order to investigate EFL learners' perceptions towards the implementation of PBL, the data needed were students' responses collected through a questionnaire developed by the researchers by using Google Form. Data collection was conducted on the October 3rd, 2023. The researcher came to the class and then the link of the Google Form was given to the students through WhatsApp and they filled it in using their mobile phones or laptops. Students' responses recorded through the Google Form were set to be automatically calculated and put into percentages directly after students submitted their responses. All items in the questionnaire were also set to be answered by the respondents. Likert-style items were used and there were four options in every statement (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree) due to the concern that certain respondents might use the middle category (neither agree nor disagree, not sure, or neutral) to avoid making a real choice (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). In order to convince that the correct data were gathered, the researcher was present in the classroom during the data collection to guide and to give assistance when needed. After the students finished filling in the questionnaire, the researcher checked whether all responses were already recorded in the Google form. After the researchers were sure that all respondents submitted their responses, the Google Form link was closed.

After the data collection, data analysis was conducted, and it took for about two weeks in the second and third week of October 2023. The data analysis resulting from the questionnaire was carried out in two ways. First, the percentages of students' responses to close-ended questions were calculated. The result in the form of percentages indicates the students' difficulties in essay writing, the challenges and benefits of PBL applied in an essay writing class, and how they perceive the contribution of PBL to essay writing. Next, the students' responses to the open-ended questions are used to explain the percentages of the closed-ended questions.

Students' reasons are grouped into points that indicate their perception towards the challenges and benefits of PBL applied in an essay writing class.

In the first dimension, the researcher can locate the students' perception on problematic area in English essay writing according to the percentages of the responses. The second dimension consists of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The responses for the closed-ended questions were analyzed first as they seek for definite answers; and then, the responses from open-ended questions were used to support the responses in closed-ended questions. The second dimension reveals students' perceptions towards PBL. Finally, the third dimension was analyzed and similar procedures done in analyzing the second dimension were repeated. After the analysis was completed, the discussion elaborates the result of the analysis to answer the research question on the students' perception towards the challenges and benefits of PBL applied in the essay writing class. Finally, the conclusion was drawn.

The steps of survey techniques proposed by Ary et al (Ary et al., 2014) were used in conducting this research. The first step was planning the research question concerning the students' perception towards PBL. The second step was defining the population to whom the survey was distributed followed by the third step, selecting a sample from the population. This research used convenience or available sampling as the sample selected was convenience for the researchers for the availability and easy accessibility (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

The class had three meetings for implementing the PBL. The students were given a topic about food and environment and each student was assigned to find a problem around him or her related to the topic and discussed the solutions possible with their peers. Before the PBL meetings, each student was assigned to prepare an outline of his or her essay that consists of a thesis statement and three topic sentences for each body

paragraph. The example of the outline is provided in the following figure.

```
Student's name      : A
Student's no.       : 1

ESSAY OUTLINE
Essay Tittle         : Fast food impact to our environment
Thesis Statement  : Fast food not really looks good as it look because fast foods have some bad
impact
                     to our environment such as creating waste, increase greenhouse gas effect,
and gives
                     health hazard.
Topic Sentence 1  : Fast food creates waste from productions and packaging
Topic Sentence 2  : Fast foods can increase greenhouse gas effect
Topic Sentence 2  : Fast food gives health hazard to our environment
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Figure 1 Example of a student's essay outline

During the treatment, the students were assigned into three big groups consisting of 12, 12, and 13 students and each student had a role of both as a presenter and a reviewer. As a presenter, each student must present his or her outline to the group and other students in the group then would act as reviewers to give comments and feedback orally to the presenter's outline. Before continuing to the next student presenter, all other students in the group (reviewers) had to give written feedback in a Google form provided by the facilitator. The following figure shows the content of the reviewer's feedback given in the Google form.

Reviewer's Feedback

Email
_____
Date
_____
Presenter's Name:
_____
Reviewer's Name:
_____

1. The thesis statement is …..
    o   arguable (you can agree or disagree with)
    o   not arguable (just about fact)
2. The scope is …..
    o   too narrow
    o   too broad
    o   suitable
3. Do the topic sentences support the thesis statement?
    o   yes
    o   no
4. Does the essay have unity (discussing one main idea from beginning to the end)?
    o   yes
    o   no
5. Do you understand everything the presenter explains? Please give your comment.
    _____

Figure 2 Reviewer's Feedback

These activities of presenting and reviewing during the group discussions were adopted from the previous research on critical thinking and community dialogue (Sim, 2021; Yulitriana et al., 2023). These activities were facilitated by the teacher to make sure that each student contributed to the discussions. The big group was chosen instead of the small one since through a community dialogue in the form of conference peer feedback, students can receive more feedback as valuable input to improve and develop their essays (Sim, 2021; Yulitriana et al., 2023). This is also the way the teacher facilitates the learning to be more well-structured and each student has the opportunity to share their work and listen to other members in the group and work together to achieve the learning goals.

The fourth step of the survey research was constructing the instrument to gather the data from the sample. A questionnaire with close-ended and open-ended questions was developed. According to Lodico et al (Lodico et al., 2010), the researcher could establish the content and face validity of the survey through a panel of experts examining the survey items. Therefore, in order to establish the validity of the questionnaire, the researchers asked their colleagues to judge the items in the questionnaire to determine whether they had covered all information needed in the study.

The close-ended questions have the purpose of getting definite answers from the students and they had to choose an answer based on the options provided while the open-ended questions provide the students' opinions on the reasons for the definite answers. There were 37 questions developed (22 closed-ended questions and 15 open-ended questions). The questions were grouped into three dimensions, namely Students'

Difficulties in Essay Writing, PBL: Challenges and Benefits, and PBL and Essay Writing. For the first dimension, students were asked to determine the difficulties they experienced in essay writing. There was one question about students' difficulties in essay writing and ten options were provided for the students to choose by giving a checklist. For this number, students could have more than one answer. The second dimension concerns Problem Based-Learning (PBL) especially the challenges and benefits when it is applied in an essay writing class. Finally, in the third dimension, students give their perception towards PBL implemented in the class and its contribution to essay writing. Once the questionnaire was ready, the survey was then conducted (the fifth step).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire results are grouped into three dimensions: students' difficulties in essay writing, challenges and benefits of PBL, and PBL and essay writing. **Table 1** shows the data on students' difficulties in essay writing and the highest percentages refer to grammar (81.1%), vocabulary (75.7%), and writing a thesis statement with a strong argument (64.9%). It is assumed that the students still have difficulties in the basic elements of English (vocabulary and grammar) and the basic structure of an essay (thesis statement). Next, developing the essay, keeping the unity, and having limited knowledge regarding the topic given are still problematic for more than half of the students in the class. The percentage of difficulty on writing an essay which is based on or oriented to problems is also quite high (40.5%) which shows that many of the students are not accustomed to deal with problems around them.

Table 1 Students' Difficulties in Essay Writing

No.	Statement	Percentage
1	Give checklists to the difficulties you experience in writing an essay.	
	a. Writing an essay which is based on / oriented to problems.	40.5%
	b. Writing a thesis statement with strong argument (something you can compare as there are similarities or differences, or something that other people can agree or disagree with).	64.9%

c.	Differentiating between opinions and facts	16.2%
d.	Essay scope which is too broad or too narrow.	43.2%
e.	Writing topic sentences that support thesis statement	29.7%
f.	Keeping the unity	54.1%
g.	Having limited knowledge regarding the topic given	48.6%
h.	Difficulties in developing the essay	59.5%
i.	Lack of vocabulary	75.7%
j.	Difficulties in grammar	81.1%

Table 1 shows the students' perceptions regarding the challenges and benefits of PBL. Most of the students agree that PBL is difficult to apply and it is a new kind of learning for them. There were some reasons the students gave to explain their opinions. First, they did not have sufficient knowledge and experience on the problems given. They might understand the problem, but it was often hard to find the solution. It is in in line with the previous research that stated that in PBL, ill-structured problems are presented to have potentially multiple solutions (Leary et al., 2019). It means that students should learn to take steps in working for the problems even though they are not sure whether they will work or fail. Second, since students had to deal with complex problems in PBL, creativity and critical thinking were needed. To be creative and critical was not easy for most of the students as they were used to traditional teaching in which they depended on the teacher a lot for information and explanation needed. One previous research also reported similar case that some students still preferred to use traditional approach to PBL since they were not comfortable with the idea of having knowledge on their own (Cintang et al., 2018). Third, since PBL was a new kind of learning for them, it took time for them to get used to it.

Next, despite the challenges they experience in the PBL, they consider PBL interesting and important to be implemented. It is also supported by the previous research that PBL can engage students in learning (Almulla, 2020; Lu, 2021; Miller & Krajcik, 2019). Even the percentages for these statements (statements no. 3 & 4) are higher than the statement for the difficulties (statement no. 1). It is supported by the next responses in which the students agree that PBL helps them to identify problems around them, to think more critically, to be more concerned with the problems as well as to learn to find solutions for the problems (statements no. 5, 6, 7, 8). Some reasons are presented by the students to explain why PBL is interesting and important. First, it is a new thing. Being the opposite of some students who feel uncomfortable with something new, some students perceive a new thing as a magnet to make them have a closer look and learn more about it. Second, PBL is based on problems the students encounter in their everyday lives and they could find them in their environment. They did not need to go far away to look for problems, they just needed to be more sensitive and concerned about what was happening in their surroundings. It encourages students to look at problems in deeper ways and at the same time train their problem-solving skills. Third, it trains students to see things from different perspectives, they become more critical and creative. They learned to deal with it when their opinions were challenged. These all approve the previous research that PBL trains learner's self-directed learning (Leary et al., 2019) and promotes the growth of soft skills that bring about positive attitudes towards learning (ELT Expert Panel, 2021; Leary et al., 2019; Rochmahwati, 2015; Susanti et al., 2023). Furthermore, the students consider that collaboration is highly needed in PBL, especially a big group discussion which is considered more effective than a small group discussion (statements no. 9, 10, 11). It confirms the previous research on community dialogue that the more complicated the problems are, more opinion and feedback are needed from the group members (Sim, 2021; Yulitriana et al., 2023). The students realized that they needed feedback from their peers.

Through collaboration, they would get more information and experience from their peers, so they could see the problems from different perspectives and decide the best solutions. They could also learn from their peers' work through the discussion. However, some students also reported that the discussion was not effective when some students were just passive listeners and did not contribute by giving their questions or opinions. On the contrary, if there were too much feedbacks or opinions, the students could also find it difficult to digest the information and decide on the solutions.

In addition to the benefits of PBL, the students agree that during the implementation of PBL, they became more independent learners. They were more active learners as the teacher's role was shifted to be the facilitator of the learning instead of giving lectures to students (Malin & Rind, 2022; Saad & Zainudin, 2022). They should learn to be responsible for their own learning and search for information needed independently. More importantly, they think that PBL makes the learning more meaningful. It is in line with the students' opinions that PBL makes them more critical and open-minded, so they can have a more profound understanding on the problems being discussed. They did not only find problems, but also learned to solve the problems. Finally, their communication skills also improved as they collaborated with their peers. The discussions encouraged them to speak to people they were not familiar with and they interacted with each other to solve the problems. Through the discussions, they learn to be confident to share and give ideas.

The last statement in Table 2 gives information on whether the use of media related to technology, such as WhatsApp Group and Google forms during the implementation of PBL could facilitate learning. Most of the students agree that WAG and Google forms were suitable for learning as WAG and Google forms function to share and store their responses to each other. They were easy to use and not time-consuming. In conclusion, the students did not only have spoken discussion, but also have written feedback towards their essay outlines. WAG was used to share their outlines during presentation, so if the group members missed some information concerning the outlines, they could check in the WAG. The Google Forms were used to give written responses after each student finished presenting his or her essay outline and having review from peers in the group (see Figure 1). The written responses through Google form must be given by each member of the group, so everyone was automatically required to contribute to his or her friend's work. The written responses could summarize students' review and feedback for their friends' work.

Table 2 Problem Based-Learning: Challenges and Benefits

No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	PBL is difficult to apply.	8.1%	54.1%	35.1%	2.7%
2	PBL is new for me.	10.8%	67.6&	18.9%	2.7%
3	PBL is interesting.	13.5%	75.7%	10.8%	0%
4	PBL is important to be implemented.	21.6%	73%	5.4%	0%
5	PBL helps me to identify problems around me.	35.1%	64.9%	0%	0%
6	PBL helps me to think more critically.	43.2%	56.8%	0%	0%
7	PBL helps me to be more concerned with the problems around me.	29.7%	67.6%	2.7%	0%
8	PBL helps me to learn to find solutions for the problems around me.	45.9%	51.4%	2.7%	0%
9	PBL needs collaboration (group discussion).	24.3%	73%	2.7%	0%
10	Big group discussion is effective for PBL.	13.5%	70.3%	13.5%	2.7%
11	When implementing a PBL, big group discussion is more effective than small group discussion.	10.8%	64.9%	24.3%	0%

12	By implementing PBL, I learn to direct myself, so the learning is more independent.	13.5%	67.6%	18.9%	0%
13	By implementing PBL, students are more active and the teacher is the facilitator.	18.9%	73%	8.1%	0%
14	PBL makes the learning more meaningful.	8.1%	75.7%	16.2%	0%
15	PBL trains my skills to communicate with other people.	29.7%	67.6%	2.7%	0%
16	The use of media such as WhatsApp Group and Google form helps to facilitate my PBL.	21.6%	73%	5.4%	0%

Table 3 discusses PBL and essay writing. It gives information on whether PBL could facilitate students' needs in essay writing. According to the responses for the first statement, most of the students agree that PBL helps them to find an idea to write. By implementing a PBL in an essay writing class, the students learned that they could write an essay about a real problem around them and the solution. They could also get support from their peers through the discussion. Their peers could provide the insight needed related to ideas to be developed in their essays. However, they realized that they should be critical and creative to compose a problem-solution- oriented essay and PBL provides the opportunities to grow in the skills needed (Allen et al., 2011; ELT Expert Panel, 2021).

By having a problem as a topic for their essay, automatically the students should learn to understand the problems more deeply, for instance, they could find a cause-effect relationship for the problems encountered and write an essay about it. Moreover, through PBL, they not only find a topic to write, but they can also develop their essays. Previous research has approved that PBL trains the students' critical thinking and creativity. Therefore, when they were more critical and creative, it was assumed that they should be more capable of developing their essays. The students also mention that the group discussions also contribute in developing their essays as their peers could provide constructive feedback that they need.

Table 3 Problem Based-Learning and Essay Writing

No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	PBL helps me to find idea for writing.	27%	62.2%	10.8%	0%
2	PBL helps me to develop the essay that I am writing.	24.3%	64.9%	10.8%	0%
3	PBL helps me to find more qualified and meaningful idea to write.	16.2%	73%	10.8%	0%
4	PBL helps me to enrich my vocabulary.	35.1%	59.5%	5.4%	0%
5	PBL helps me in grammar.	24.3%	64.9%	10.8%	0%

In the third statement of Table 3, the majority of the students agree that PBL helps them to find more qualified and meaningful ideas to write. According to the students' responses, deep understanding on the problems, critical thinking and creativity became the essential elements that contributed to the quality and meaning found in their essays. Additionally, students' responses also show that they got feedback on grammar and vocabulary during the discussions which means that they also got assistance from their peers for language elements through the discussions. These are

also supported by the previous research that stated that PBL facilitates the construction of soft skills, such as research skills, negotiation and teamwork, reading, writing, and oral communication (Allen et al., 2011).

Based on the results presented, the students' perception towards the Problem Based-Learning (PBL) applied in the essay writing class is discussed in the following sub-sections. The discussion covers both the challenges and benefits of PBL implemented in the classroom.

The Challenges of PBL Applied in an Essay Writing Class

The students in the essay writing class agree that PBL applied in their classroom brings both challenges and benefits. There are some points found concerning the challenges. Firstly, the challenge comes from the language they are learning. When the PBL was implemented in the class, the students still experienced problems related to vocabulary and grammar or how to write a well-structured essay. PBL does not directly teach students how to fix the problems, but through self-directed learning and the group discussions, they could receive feedback they need to improve their essay. It is proved by students' responses that they received feedback on grammar and vocabulary through the discussions. However, it requires the students to be actively involved in the discussions, and learn to communicate well with their peers in the group, so they can get assistance as needed.

Having limited knowledge and experience related to the problems being discussed becomes the second challenge students face. Previous research reported that PBL is equipped with ill-structured problems to have potentially multiple solutions (Leary et al., 2019). As a result, it is often hard for students to identify the real problems. Moreover, most of them were not accustomed to identifying problems around them, thinking about them deeply, and writing essays about them. Therefore, some students perceived PBL negatively as it brings them out of their comfort zone. In PBL, they should learn not to be ignorant, but sensitive to their surroundings and how to bring about things to solve the problems encountered. The third challenge is that PBL needs critical thinking and creativity. For students who prefer to have a teacher-centred environment, this can be quite hard. They should change their mindset in order not to be overwhelmed by this learning. In this part, the facilitator's role in introducing the new perspective of this learning to the students is essential. For instance, the facilitator shows the fact that problems are real and avoidable, but they could do something about it. When they experience that it is hard to deal with;

therefore, they need collaboration, and so on. The fourth challenge is it is a new kind of learning and students are not accustomed with it. Hopefully, by applying it in the classroom, students will practice more and have more knowledge and experience.

The Benefits of PBL Applied in an Essay Writing Class

Despite challenges which can hinder the students to be successful in the learning, there are more benefits worth considering when applying the PBL. First, according to the students, PBL is interesting and it is important to be applied. For some students who tend to avoid a new thing, PBL becomes an obstacle. However, for some students who are interested in a new thing, PBL can provide an alternative for a new challenge they can explore and enjoy. This approves the previous research that confirms that PBL is an effective method in teaching and learning as it benefits content learning, process skills, and student engagement (Allen et al., 2011). The problems might not be new, but identifying and thinking about them more deeply and working hard to solve them could bring the students to another level of experience. In this case, their process skills are nurtured and developed. Before the implementation of PBL, some of the students might not think about writing an essay about the real problems encountered in everyday life. It changes the common perspective that problems should be avoided. In PBL, problems provide a valuable idea to write about and even to be developed into a meaningful piece of writing.

Following the importance of PBL that students mention in their responses, the second benefit emerges. Having the nature that PBL does not only concern with the problems, but also seeks for concrete solutions makes the purpose of this learning is definitely to improve the quality of life. Along the process, learners are trained not to be ignorant, but to be more concerned to their surroundings. They are not only problem seekers, but more importantly, they are also solutions makers. Next, the third benefits of PBL is that it nurtures the soft skills needed for life now and

10

the future (Allen et al., 2011). Those skills involve critical thinking (ELT Expert Panel, 2021; Rochmahwati, 2015; Susanti et al., 2023; Tiwari, A., Lai, P., So, M., and Yurn, 2006), creativity (ELT Expert Panel, 2021), self-directed learning (Hung, W., Jonassen, D. H., and Liu, 2007; Leary et al., 2019), collaboration (ELT Expert Panel, 2021), and communication (Allen et al., 2011; ELT Expert Panel, 2021). The third benefit resulting from the highly developed soft skills is better and qualified learners who are well-prepared for both today's and future's challenges.

Concerning essay writing, the fourth benefit is related to PBL's contribution to facilitating students in developing their essays. As students observe problems, they could have idea to write in their essays and through the discussions, they got a lot feedback to develop their essays. As a result, their essays should be more qualified and meaningful as they were developed based on deep engagement with the problems, critical thinking, and creativity. Through the discussions, students received a lot of feedbacks concerning vocabulary and grammar used in their writing, so their essays could be improved in terms of grammar and vocabulary. It approves the previous research that through PBL the conceptual framework is also nurtured (Hung, W., Jonassen, D. H., and Liu, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Students' responses suggest that Problem Based-Learning (PBL) could be used appropriately in an essay writing class. PBL has both challenges and benefits; however, according to the students' perception, the benefits outweigh the challenges. If learners' mindset of leaning is still focusing on teacher as the source of information and knowledge, they will focus too much on the challenges and PBL will be hard to deal with and it does not give any advantages. However, when students focus on the benefits they could gain through the learning, they can develop the skills needed and write essays assigned to them meaningfully. This research reports on students' perception towards the learning; thus, more research could be conducted on how PBL affects performance in writing classes. In addition, it would also be interesting to observe how PBL can be implemented in other types of writing and how PBL affects the learning in EFL or L2 classrooms.

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