

Analyzing English Reading Skills Through Project Based Learning Approach in EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach in improving reading comprehension skills among students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The research focused on fourth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at the University of Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang who had engaged in reading instruction using the PBL approach. A descriptive qualitative method was employed, with data collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The findings revealed that PBL enhances students' active engagement, motivates them to read, and supports the development of reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, making inferences, and identifying main ideas. The most effective aspects of PBL included group work, discussions, and project presentations, all of which significantly contributed to improving academic reading comprehension. However, the study also identified challenges such as unequal task distribution, limited time, and ineffective group coordination. The results suggest the need for more intensive lecturer guidance, training in critical reading strategies, and the integration of technology into PBL implementation. Overall, PBL is considered a relevant and effective approach for enhancing reading skills in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Reading Skills; EFL Classroom, Project Based Learning

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, reading comprehension plays a crucial role in the development of students' language skills. It serves as a foundation for acquiring vocabulary, enhancing grammar understanding, and improving overall communication abilities. However, many students in EFL contexts face challenges in reading comprehension due to various

factors, including a lack of engagement, insufficient vocabulary, or ineffective teaching methods. Traditional methods of instruction often fail to fully address the diverse needs of students, leading to suboptimal learning outcomes.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a learning method that uses problems as the initial step in collecting and integrating new knowledge based on experience through real-life activities. According to Saefudin (2014), PBL is designed to help, encourage, and guide students to focus on collaboration by involving group work and helping students concentrate on their individual development. This approach provides a shift from traditional learning methods, as students become active participants in their learning process. In line with Goodman and Stivers (2010), PBL can be defined as a teaching approach built on learning activities and real tasks that challenge students to solve problems related to everyday needs through group collaboration. The emphasis is on task-based learning, where students apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations, promoting active involvement and critical thinking.

PBL promotes student-centered learning, which enables in-depth investigations into a specific topic. Students engage in explorations or in-depth learning by using a research-based approach to address problems or questions that are meaningful, real, and relevant. Grant (2002) further emphasizes that PBL encourages students to take ownership of their learning, transforming the classroom into a dynamic, inquiry-driven environment. PBL has emerged as an innovative approach to teaching, one that fosters active learning through the completion of real-world projects. This method is particularly beneficial in EFL classrooms, where language acquisition is the goal. By integrating PBL, educators aim to enhance students' reading comprehension skills by offering them context-driven tasks that require the application of essential reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and making inferences.

Research suggests that PBL can improve language proficiency by promoting student engagement and motivation. The hands-on nature of PBL encourages students to interact with the language in a practical and meaningful way, contrasting with traditional methods that often rely on rote memorization. Moreover, PBL provides an environment conducive to collaborative learning, where students support each other and engage in discussions, thus reducing language anxiety and fostering a sense of confidence. Furthermore, PBL offers the flexibility to address various learning styles and preferences. Incorporating multimedia and technology into projects can engage visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners, providing a personalized and inclusive learning experience. This flexibility allows students to progress at their own pace, ensuring a deeper understanding of the material and fostering critical thinking skills necessary for reading comprehension.

Despite its potential benefits, PBL's implementation in EFL classrooms remains limited, especially in non-Western educational settings. There is a need for more research to explore how PBL can effectively improve reading comprehension

among EFL students. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the role of PBL in reading instruction and its impact on students' comprehension skills within an EFL context. The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform and transform EFL teaching practices. By examining the effect of PBL on reading comprehension, this study aims to provide educators with a viable alternative to traditional methods and contribute to the development of innovative teaching strategies. Furthermore, the findings may offer valuable insights for curriculum developers, policymakers, and educational institutions seeking to improve language learning outcomes, making this study an important addition to the field of language education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Analysis is a critical component of qualitative research, helping researchers make sense of the data collected and draw meaningful conclusions. According to Michael McCarthy (1991), analysis involves breaking down a complex subject into smaller parts to better understand its elements. This approach is central to interpreting qualitative data, which may come from interviews, group discussions, or other forms of interaction. Robin Wooffit further elaborates that analysis is a key methodological approach, encompassing both conversation analysis and discourse analysis. This process helps researchers identify patterns and insights that address the research question. In the context of this study, the analysis of data involves revisiting and immersing oneself in the gathered information to uncover significant patterns, thus providing answers to the key issues related to reading comprehension in an EFL context.

Reading is a fundamental skill in language acquisition, as it enables students to access and interpret knowledge. Nunan, as cited in Fisher (2016), defines reading as a fluent process where readers interpret information from a text and combine it with their prior knowledge to derive meaning. Johnson (in Asrifan et al., 2018) also emphasizes that reading is essential for students to improve their writing, grammar, and vocabulary skills. In reading activities, students engage in dynamic interactions with the text, which helps them develop critical thinking skills and enhance their language proficiency. Thus, reading is not just about decoding words but about actively constructing meaning through the combination of prior knowledge and textual information.

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process that allows readers to derive meaning from texts. Boardman (in Ibrahim, 2017) asserts that reading comprehension involves the interaction between the reader and the text, influenced by the reader's background knowledge. Hans and Emmanuel (in Musdalifa, 2018) describe reading comprehension as the level at which a reader understands a text, including the ability to discern meaning, identify the purpose, and extract the main idea. As Duke (in Gilakjani, 2016) notes, comprehension requires a combination of prior knowledge and experience to make sense of a text, and Wynne (in Amril, 2021) adds that it is a strategic process where readers adjust their approach based

on the reading purpose. Therefore, reading comprehension is not just about identifying words; it's about understanding the deeper meaning of the content.

Reading comprehension involves various cognitive components, including understanding the main idea, vocabulary, references, inferences, and detailed information. King & Stanley (in Rahmawati et al., 2020) highlight that understanding the main idea is essential for grasping the central theme of a text, which may be stated explicitly or implied. Vocabulary knowledge is another critical factor; without an extensive vocabulary, students may struggle to comprehend complex texts (Alqahtani in Susanto, 2017). Furthermore, references and inferences are crucial for making connections between parts of the text and deriving implicit meanings. Detailed information supports the main idea and provides specific examples to help readers understand the text better (Behne in Sirait et al., 2020). These aspects collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of a text.

Teaching reading comprehension requires educators to implement effective strategies that engage students and improve their reading skills. According to Brown (as cited in Dwiningtiyas et al., 2020), the goal of teaching reading is to enable students to read effectively and efficiently. Harmer (in Dwiningtiyas et al., 2020) argues that teaching reading is a challenging yet rewarding task, as it requires creative methods to keep students engaged. Effective teachers use a variety of strategies to address the diverse learning styles of students and ensure they become proficient readers. Teachers must guide students through the reading process by providing strategies that enhance comprehension and motivate them to engage actively with the text. The role of the teacher is crucial in helping students overcome the challenges associated with reading comprehension.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a student-centered approach where students engage in real-world tasks that require them to collaborate, investigate, and apply knowledge. According to Mahasneh and Alwan (2018), PBL fosters creativity, critical thinking, and teamwork, all of which contribute to a deeper understanding of subject matter. PBL encourages students to work on projects that promote problem-solving and inquiry-based learning, which are essential for enhancing reading comprehension skills. By participating in PBL activities, students become more engaged in the learning process and develop a sense of ownership over their education. This approach helps students apply the reading strategies they have learned in meaningful contexts, leading to improved comprehension.

Numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing reading comprehension. For example, research by Thomas (2000) demonstrated that PBL increases student engagement and motivation, leading to improved language skills, including reading comprehension. Similarly, a study by Chen (2014) found that students who worked collaboratively on reading projects showed better comprehension and retention of the material compared to those who worked independently. Studies have also shown that PBL fosters critical thinking skills, as students analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information from texts.

Furthermore, the integration of technology in PBL has been shown to enhance comprehension by providing students with interactive, multimodal resources (Zheng et al., 2016). Overall, research supports the idea that PBL can significantly enhance reading comprehension by fostering an engaging, collaborative, and dynamic learning environment.

Despite its benefits, the implementation of PBL in language classrooms presents certain challenges. Beckett and Miller (2006) highlight that teachers often struggle with managing the complexity of PBL projects and ensuring that students remain focused on learning objectives. Additionally, some students may find the self-directed nature of PBL difficult, particularly if they are accustomed to more traditional, teacher-centered approaches. Nevertheless, these challenges can be addressed through proper planning, clear guidelines, and ongoing support from teachers. When implemented effectively, PBL offers a powerful means of improving reading comprehension and other language skills. The collaborative, hands-on nature of PBL makes reading a more engaging and meaningful activity, ultimately enhancing students' ability to comprehend complex texts.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employs a qualitative research design aimed at understanding human experiences in their natural settings. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is used to explore the meanings individuals or groups assign to social or human phenomena. The main purpose of this research is to explore how Project-Based Learning (PBL) influences students' English reading comprehension. This study follows a constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which holds that reality is socially constructed based on participants' lived experiences. It also adopts an inductive approach, allowing theory to emerge from the data, consistent with Wahyuni's (2012) assertion that such an approach helps uncover patterns and themes directly from participant responses.

The selection of participants in this study was conducted using purposive sampling. This non-random technique enabled the researcher to select individuals based on predefined criteria relevant to the study's objectives (Sugiyono, 2013). The participants were fourth-semester students from the English Language Education Department at Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang, who had engaged in English reading activities using the PBL approach. These students were deemed suitable as key informants due to their experience with the instructional method under investigation (Wahyudin, 2010).

Instruments and Procedures

To collect rich and contextual data, the study employed multiple qualitative instruments: a closed-ended questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and

documentation analysis. Patton (2002) emphasizes that qualitative instruments must offer flexibility in exploring participants' experiences. First, a closed-ended questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale was used to capture students' attitudes and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of PBL in enhancing their reading comprehension. The scale ranged from "Strongly Agree (5)" to "Strongly Disagree (1)", providing quantifiable insight into students' general responses.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the same group of students. Based on Sugiyono (2016), this format allowed the researcher to combine pre-determined questions with the flexibility to explore emerging themes during conversations. Interview guides ensured alignment with the research objectives, but the format allowed dynamic probing to elicit more in-depth responses. Third, documentation was analyzed to support and validate data collected through other instruments. Materials such as class recordings, photos, and student project outputs served as objective evidence to enrich the interpretation of students' learning experiences with PBL (Bowen, 2009). To increase the validity of findings, the researcher used triangulation by combining data from interviews, questionnaires, and documentation (Sugiyono, 2015). This approach ensured a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of how PBL influenced students' English reading comprehension.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study followed a qualitative descriptive approach, consistent with Creswell's (2014) view that qualitative analysis is typically inductive. The researcher employed an iterative and reflective process to interpret the meaning behind the collected data. The first step involved data reduction, where irrelevant information from interviews, questionnaires, and documentation was removed. The remaining data were organized into meaningful categories and themes relevant to the research objectives. Following this, the data presentation phase involved structuring the information using tables and narrative descriptions. Questionnaire results were displayed in frequency tables, while interview data were presented through thematic narratives enriched with direct student quotations. Documentation findings were also described to support and cross-check the interpretations made from primary sources. Finally, the researcher proceeded with conclusion drawing and verification. This phase involved rechecking and refining the findings, sometimes through additional data collection, to ensure their credibility. Patterns and themes identified across the instruments helped form the conclusions, which reflect the overall impact of PBL on students' English reading comprehension. By triangulating and verifying results, the study ensures trustworthiness and consistency in its interpretations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach in enhancing reading comprehension skills among fourth-semester

students at Muhammadiyah University of Sidenreng Rappang. Using interviews, observations, and questionnaires, data were collected from 10 students with varying academic backgrounds but unified by their exposure to PBL in an English reading course. The research aimed to understand student perceptions, challenges, and the impact of PBL on critical reading strategies.

Interview results revealed that most students faced challenges in understanding complex academic texts. Difficulties included unfamiliar vocabulary, long sentence structures, and the formal nature of academic English. Students admitted lacking critical reading strategies, and many struggled to distinguish between main ideas and supporting details.

Despite these challenges, students reported that the PBL method significantly improved their reading engagement. They noted that PBL provided a real-world context that made reading activities more meaningful. Group discussions were especially appreciated, as they enabled the exchange of ideas and clarification of misunderstandings. Students emphasized that PBL fostered collaborative learning. Tasks were divided among group members, allowing individuals to focus deeply on specific text components. This approach promoted responsibility and increased motivation since their reading efforts directly contributed to the success of the project.

Several students mentioned that the presence of lecturers as facilitators and the provision of feedback greatly enhanced their reading comprehension. Activities such as post-project reflection and evaluation sessions were also identified as effective components of the PBL process, as they reinforced critical thinking and analytical skills.

However, students also experienced obstacles in implementing PBL, particularly regarding time management and uneven task distribution within groups. Some group members were reported as inactive, which placed more burden on others. Limited access to suitable reading sources was another common issue. To address these challenges, students suggested improvements such as longer project durations, clearer reading rubrics, training on reading strategies, and greater lecturer involvement. They also recommended integrating digital tools like annotation apps to facilitate text analysis and discussion. The findings were supported by questionnaire data. Most students responded positively to statements about PBL improving reading comprehension, motivation, collaboration, and critical thinking. Table 1. below presents the average scores for each of the ten statements used to assess student perceptions:

Table 1. Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

No	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Average
1	Reading comprehension in an EFL classroom is challenging for me.	2	2	0	1	2	3.14
2	Project-Based Learning (PBL) helps improve reading skills.	0	0	1	4	2	4.14
3	PBL provides collaborative environment that enhances reading.	0	0	1	4	2	4.14
4	PBL activities develop better reading strategies.	1	1	1	3	1	3.29
5	Group discussions contribute to understanding reading materials.	0	0	2	3	2	4.14
6	PBL increases motivation to engage in reading tasks.	1	1	0	3	2	3.57
7	Confidence improves after PBL activities.	0	0	0	5	2	4.29
8	PBL helps analyze and interpret texts more effectively.	0	1	1	3	2	3.86
9	PBL makes reading activities more interactive and meaningful.	0	1	1	4	1	3.71
10	PBL should be applied more frequently in reading classes.	0	1	2	2	2	3.71

The results of this study reinforce the effectiveness of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach in developing reading comprehension among EFL students. Most participants acknowledged that PBL helped them overcome challenges in academic reading by encouraging collaborative analysis and real-life application of texts. This aligns with Thomas and Mergendoller's (2000) view that PBL enhances student engagement through active and meaningful tasks.

Students became more involved in the learning process, shifting from passive readers to active participants. Their interaction in group discussions, presentations, and independent research enhanced not only their comprehension but also their communication and critical thinking skills, as proposed by Bell (2010). From a cognitive perspective, the findings support Anderson's (2008) emphasis on active reading strategies. Students applied skills such as skimming, scanning, and inference-making, facilitated by group-based projects. This proves that PBL encourages the development of strategic reading behaviors.

Moreover, PBL integrates well with schema theory (Carrell et al., 1983), wherein prior knowledge interacts with new information to construct meaning. Through discussions and shared experiences, students developed deeper understanding by relating the reading materials to real-world contexts. Nevertheless, challenges observed in this study also revealed areas where PBL needs better structure. Blumenfeld et al. (1991) assumed that PBL naturally engages students, but this study showed some students remained passive or over-relied on peers. Group management and clear individual responsibilities are necessary to avoid uneven participation.

The study also highlighted the importance of lecturer facilitation. When lecturers provided guidance and regular feedback, students became more confident in analyzing texts. The lack of such support contributed to confusion and reduced group effectiveness, showing the need for consistent mentoring in PBL contexts. Students suggested several improvements including rubric-based reading guidance, use of annotation technology, and extended timelines for project completion. These recommendations reflect the importance of scaffolding in implementing PBL successfully, especially in reading-based EFL contexts. In conclusion, this study confirms that Project-Based Learning significantly contributes to the improvement of reading comprehension in EFL learners. While it encourages motivation, critical reading, and collaboration, successful implementation requires structured planning, active facilitation, and continuous evaluation. The findings provide a strong rationale for integrating PBL more frequently and systematically in language education programs.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing the reading comprehension skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The findings revealed that PBL significantly improved students' engagement with reading materials, motivated them to participate actively in the learning process, and helped them apply effective reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and identifying main ideas. The collaborative nature of PBL also fostered peer learning, which further enriched the comprehension process. However, the study also identified challenges in implementing PBL, including issues with unequal task distribution among group members, limited time for project completion, and difficulties in coordinating group efforts effectively. These

challenges highlight the importance of providing adequate guidance from instructors and incorporating structured training for students on how to work collaboratively in PBL settings. Despite these challenges, the overall impact of PBL on students' reading comprehension was positive. The study suggests that PBL, when implemented with careful planning and support, can be an effective pedagogical approach to foster not only reading comprehension but also critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This research underscores the relevance of Project-Based Learning as a powerful tool in EFL classrooms. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature advocating for innovative teaching methods and offer practical insights for educators aiming to enhance their students' language skills through engaging, real-world learning experiences. Further research is needed to explore how to address the challenges identified and refine PBL strategies for better outcomes.

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