Learning autonomy in writing class: Implementation of project-based learning in English for specific purposes

G N Ayu Sukerti*, Ny Yuliantini
Electrical Engineering, State Polytechnic of Bali, Bukit Jimbaran Kuta Selatan, Bali, Indonesia 80361
*Email : nyoman.ayu_sukerti@yahoo.com

Abstract. This research was aimed to analyze students’ attitude on learning autonomy through the implementation of project-based learning (PBL). Writing has been considered one of the most difficult competencies to master as it incorporates several integrated language skills. Thus, teaching writing in English for Specific Class posts a huge challenge as students often feel discouraged by the complex series of processes involved in producing a well-structured piece of writing. This research implemented PBL as the learning model to boost students’ learning outcomes and construct self-directed learning. Participants were 25 second semester students enrolled in a three-year undergraduate program in Informatics Management. The implementation of PBL in writing class contributed real advantages since it allowed students to collaboratively arrange outline in order to produce individual drafts and final essays. The study revealed that students were able to be involved in a more deep and autonomous learning as they helped each other during group discussion. The students autonomously engaged in the completion of the project in a more positive attitude. They also acquired more knowledge in the aspect of grammar and learned how to use language in proper context based on the feedbacks they got during revising their writing.

1. Introduction
Teaching English in vocational education emphasizes the need to shape students’ practical skill in order to produce qualified output required by work environment and related industry. The work environment has several requirements when it comes to the process of selecting applicants to fill the vacant posts including individuals with responsibility, self-management, interpersonal and project-management, teamwork and leadership skills. In vocational education, these requirements are expected to be made integral to the courses that the students take during their study. English classes are of no exception in this case. This condition inevitably posts a different level of challenge as boosting students’ motivation to learn English (which is not their core courses) alone is a huge task on its own. Hence, a new approach needs to be applied in order to meet the required outcomes. Implementation of PBL in ESP class especially in teaching writing can be seen as an answer to this challenge because it encourages students to develop higher critical thinking, enhances deep learning and motivates students to be autonomous learners. Students need to be given more opportunities to develop generic attributes besides disciplinary knowledge. Generic attributes include communication skills, problem-solving skills, computer literacy, information literacy, ability and willingness to learn, and teamwork. Undeniably, knowledgeable and skilled graduates are highly demanded for any job requirements. Project based learning contributes to the development of many soft skills with applications to the workplace which apparently will fulfill the needs of the 21st century job market [1].
Two of the most important skills, which should be improved, are written/oral communication and teamwork skills [2].

Many definitions of project-based learning have been proposed by various authors. PBL is defined as an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop [3]. As is discussed in [4], project-based learning (PBL) is a model that organizes learning around projects which are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems, involving students in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities; giving students the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminating in realistic products or presentations. When the students take English course, the ability to composing essays is of great importance because it provides space for teachers to highlight not only students’ ability in expressing ideas but also to shape skills needed in completing scheduled task through series of phases. Composing essay using project-based learning method highlights the necessity to work well in a team in order to produce individual result. By implementing PBL in English classes, it is hoped that students will gain more comprehensive outcome in their language learning including the competence in four basic skills of English. As dealt with in Stoller [5] PBL provides opportunities for the natural integration of all four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Project-based learning has been implemented in classroom as an instructional approach that presents learners with problems to solve or products to develop. Project-based learning is a dynamic approach to teaching in which students explore real-world problems, issues and challenges, are inspired to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they are studying and more likely to retain the knowledge gained through this approach far more readily than through traditional textbook-centered learning [6]. Project based learning is an approach carefully selected to show the form today’s education systems should take. Project based learning, which considers the project not as an aim but a tool emphasises the process aspect of learning rather than the product aspect [7]. By focusing on the process of learning, the students develop confidence and self-direction as they move through both team-based and independent work. Many of the skills developed through PBL are those which employers usually seek: teamwork spirit, the ability to work well and get along with others, make informed decisions, take initiative, and solve real-world problems. With its distinctive features, PBL has drawn a lot of attention and support from educators, teachers and learners. Research has provided evidence for more of its benefits than drawbacks. Most of the past studies showed that project based learning has proved to be a successful approach in improving students’ personal competence, learning outcomes and cooperative skills in general [2], [8], [9], [10], and [11]. Furthermore, project-based method is a topical issue at many seminars and conferences worldwide and it is intensively used in teaching foreign languages. The method can be successfully implemented in teaching foreign language for specific purposes as it aims for hands-on outcomes, accommodating students’ needs and satisfying their interests [12].

In line with the scope of this study, PBL has also particularly given positive impacts in enhancing students’ writing skills in the context of learning English as foreign language. Molina [6] conducted a research on effects of project-based learning method to the report-writing skills of major in English students. The results in this study showed that project-based learning method and the lecture method were not equal. Based on the findings, there was a significant difference between the mean gain scores in the pretest-posttest performances of the experimental group and control group. The experimental group performed far better than the control group which showed that the PBL method was better than the use of the traditional lecture method. In light of all those researches which shown positive impact of PBL in improving students’ writing competency, this present study aims to elaborate students’ attitude on learning autonomy when they were assigned to compose essay in writing class with PBL setting. Completing tasks in PBL setting possibly gives a wide opportunity for students to foster their learning autonomy as they have to be fully responsible for every stages of the project completion. Fostering learner autonomy may be defined in simple terms as helping learners to become more independent by
training them to use language learning strategies effectively in their language learning process, thus taking the responsibility to control, evaluate and monitor their language learning process [13].

2. Research Methods

In collecting the data to describe the implementation of PBL, the researchers use their observation in class. The researchers followed [14] on classroom observations by observing the process of the implementation. In accordance to [15], information was collected and was interpreted in this study. Projects were given in a form of structured tasks and the final outcome was five best essays to be presented in front of the class. After the theme and final outcome of the project are defined, the students and teacher figure out project details that guide students from the opening activity to the completion of the project. At this step, students consider their roles, responsibilities, and collaborative work groups. After negotiating a deadline for project completion, students arrange the timing for gathering, sharing, and compiling information, and then presenting their final project.

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Students were given instructional guidelines of writing cause and effect essays. The draft was evaluated in peer review (in groups) and was evaluated by the lecturer with checklists and rubric of grade. Students did reflection based on the evaluation. Students got necessary comments and suggestions in their essay to help them construct a final piece of writing. The students reflect on the language mastered and the subject matter acquired during the project. They are also asked to make recommendations that can be used to enhance similar projects in the future. The teachers provide students with feedback on their language and content learning. At the end of the process, students were given a questionnaire and an interview was conducted in order to describe the students’ reflections about the process and the final products in order to highlight students’ attitude towards learning autonomy in completing writing task using PBL approach.

3. Results and Discussions

English as a foreign language has been taught with different approaches in State Polytechnic of Bali. However, there has been little application of the Project-Based Learning in teaching apart from its increasing popularity in these recent years because PBL has several benefits in second and foreign language settings. Based on the observation throughout the process, this section will elaborate (1) the implementation on PBL in writing class, (2) the students’ attitude toward the project which reveals the advantages and feedback of this approach.

3.1 Implementation of Project Based Learning

The students gained knowledge and skill in writing essay by working in collaborative groups, each of which consisted of 5 randomly chosen members with different level of skill.

3.1.1 Modelling

In order to introduce the structure of essay with multiple causes, I gave the students example of essay on “The Causes of Bullying”. Students were asked to analyze how the ideas was developed in the essay by drawing a mind map and answer ten theoretical questions based on content of the essay to get a deeper comprehension on the criteria of well-structured essay. Once the students done completing the tasks, they were assigned to evaluate the essay and gave points based on checklist and scoring rubric. These activities were assigned with a purpose to help students construct their comprehension through an independent examination on a given example. Students within each group were responsible for their own learning on the structure of essay with multiple causes and reflected on the standard of good essay by independent evaluation.

3.1.2 Project agreement

After the modeling stage, we set up an agreement by discussing the topic which the students had to develop into individual essay as the final product. Fried-Booth [16] states that the process leading to the end-product of project-work provides opportunities for students to develop their confidence and independence. Hence, the students were given wide opportunity to express their idea in the process of determining topic and deadline. By giving space for students to talk about their interest and need, I was aiming at creating a sense of responsibility and arousing students’ awareness of their own learning.
3.1.3 **Outlining phase** Once the topic and deadline were chosen, students worked together in their group to construct essay outline based on the illustration we gave as their main guideline. The purpose of providing guideline was to assist students in constructing a well-structured outline and aids the evaluation process through peer review, lecturer evaluation and self-reflection. In project-based learning, learners evaluate themselves continuously. In this phase, each groups was assigned to produce one outline to be later developed into individual essay.

3.1.4 **Presenting Group Outline and Plans** Students presented their outline in groups in order to gain feedbacks from the lecturer and other groups. While presenting their outline, students were elaborating the thesis statement dan main ideas for each paragraph that they wanted to develop. In doing so, students were motivated to do a brainstorming session by listening to others’ ideas and providing comments. We also encouraged them to present plans they wanted to execute including conducting necessary research to support their arguments and doing interviews to their friends outside the classroom to gain insight of the topic given.

3.1.5 **Drafting dan Evaluation** Feedbacks that the students got were used to improve the quality of their outline. To ensure that students had a good outline to develop is a crucial thing because the results of the questionnaire indicated that most of them felt reluctant and anxious when dealing with writing task because they were confused of where to start and how to develop ideas into a well-structured piece of writing. With the advancement of technology, research for ideas could be hampered by the fact that students ideas were going whereabout. Through the process of carefully constructing outline, we expected the students to have better confidence in expressing their thoughts. The drafts were evaluated in peer review where each of the students gave comments on their friends’ drafts within one group based on the given writing rubric and checklists. Students also got the evaluation from the lecturer with the same scoring tools. When students got the complete assessments of the drafts, students were assigned to do self-assessment and revised their drafts according to the feedbacks.

3.1.6 **Finishing Final Essay** Students were motivated to finish their writing into a final essay by carefully taking into a consideration the feedbacks given by their friends and lecturer through self-assessment. We continuously encouraged my students to discuss their obstacles with their team members in order to gain better understanding towards the learning and assist them in revising the drafts. Following the finishing product phase was the reflection section, which encourage students to describe their attitude along the process of making this project. Reflection is an important step of this project because without careful reflection the significance of one’s experience may be overlooked. The flowchart of this process can be seen as follow.

This process developed learning environment where students internalized information by creating questions, finding evidence, generating logical reasoning, sharing their information and helping their classmates. The next section elaborates how the students responded to these stages of PBL.
3.2 The Students’ Attitude towards Learning Autonomy in the Stages of the Project

This section elaborates students’ attitude on being autonomous learners throughout the phases of project-based learning. Given the fact that the English classes thought in Informatics Management have time constraints as they are only thought once a week on the first year of three year undergraduate program, my main purpose of utilizing PBL is to foster students’ abilities for lifelong learning through contextualizing learning by presenting them with problems to solve in collaborative sense. In doing so, we hope students can show an improvement in terms of motivation and enthusiasm, problem-solving abilities, research skills, sense of collaborations, resource management skills, and progress in language use awareness in natural context. Enjoyment and motivation may also derive from the fact that classroom language is not predetermined, but depends on the nature of the project. The purposeful and meaningful use of language will make language learning more fruitful as it encourages authentic learning experience that will help to motivate students to independently seek knowledge and continuously improve their language ability; it stimulates autonomy and life-long learning in addition to increasing English language competency [17]. In brief, we aimed to get the students used to be responsible for the progress of their own learning and may turn their autonomous learning into lifelong learning experience. Thus, they can continue studying English after the formal English classes based on their own learning decision.

The result of this study shows that students feel an increasing self-esteem in completing task that was previously seen as a task with complex stages to face. The students demonstrate increased self-esteem, and positive attitudes towards self-directed learning and being autonomous learners. This finding is in line with Skehan who argues that processes involved in PBL can help to enhance students’ autonomy especially when they are actively engaged in project planning (e.g. choice of topic). During class observation, students with different level of skill worked together to solve the problems they face during the process of composing outline, drafting and completing their final essay. Autonomous learning is promoted when the students become more responsible for their own learning. The students engage in purposeful communication to complete authentic activities - tasks with real world relevance and utility; they thus have the opportunity to use language in a relatively natural context and participate in meaningful activities which require authentic language use. The authentic activities can provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, enhance collaboration and reflection, and allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome [15].

Based on the questionnaire, most of the students gave high score (range 4 or strongly agree) to the questions on items including the improvement on skills in composing outline, draft and essay after the implementation of PBL. The questionnaire also highlighted the fact that students gain better concept of grammatical dan language use through the process of revising based on the feedbacks they got in the series of peer review, lecturer’s evaluation and self-reflection. A study conducted by Kaya [18] also emphasized the same finding as participating students in the research expressed that project based learning contributed to their presentation skills and augmented their self-confidence. Furthermore, they enjoyed getting feedback from their friends and instructors and these feedback contributed their improvement.

Usually, writing is a skill that people do individually. However, peer collaboration and group work could be extremely stimulating for students especially when they have the freedom to express themselves. They also felt personal growth in terms of elevated self-esteem in contributing ideas in group discussion because they had shared the same background knowledge on the topic. The shared background knowledge gained in the process of conducting research and interview proved to strengthen students’ confidence in actively participate as group members. Hence, it helped students to acquire collaborative skill. Coleman [19] discusses a benefit relating to students’ increased social, cooperative skills, and group cohesiveness. Adopting PBL projects in the classroom also helps reinforce social relationships among team members. PBL enhances collaboration among learners, between learners and the teacher. Thus PBL provides learners with opportunities to learn collaborative skills, such as relying on the work of peers and providing thoughtful feedback to peers. By actively participate giving ideas in group discussion, students had developed their skill to work in a team and...
becoming autonomous learners. Students provided positive feedbacks as seen in the following interview transcripts:

1) Helping friends are really fun because I can see the errors in their writing eventhough there will be revision from lecturer
2) Group discussion is really helpful because by having discussion, I can get a lot ideas so I get different references and the essay can be developed well and good to read
3) Group discussion is really helpful because I can make sure whether the topic being discussed has already appropriate or not. It can also help to reduce errors
4) I tried to listen to the other’s ideas, and when I made suggestion, I asked the other about their opinion regarding the suggestion that I made. Also, when I had trouble to develop an idea, I asked the other about it, and I tried to help the other about their trouble too.

These reflections show students’ positive attitudes toward PBL, which provided them with learning environment where they could work together to overcome their difficulties and interpret feedbacks to improve the quality of their writing. Students became highly motivated and was responsible for their own learning because they were put in an environment where achievement in learning was totally depended on their own willingness to be fully involved in completing task. Data (1) shows that the students could learn from their friends’ mistakes, data (2) shows that students learned to use references and opinions from their friends to develop their individual essays, data (3) shows that group discussions helped them to reduce possible errors and data (4) shows the students had a mutual relationships in helping each others to solve problems they faced during the process of writing essays. Those data emphasized that students were motivated to rely on their experience in group discussion to improve the quality on the essay that they have to submit as the final product. Most of the students liked working collaboratively to develop a product. The finding that the number of the participants with positive views about the overall picture of PBL implementation is higher than that of those with negative comments is significant as it suggests that PBL may be adopted as an alternative to traditional teaching methods used commonly at schools [8]. PBL proved to increase students responsibility and motivation in learning as they had to meet certain target according to the proposed plan and deadline. Thus, it can positively lead to the process of shaping students into becoming autonomous learners. Learner autonomy, learner responsibility and motivation are always related with each other as no one can learn new things if they are not enough motivated [20]. Pertaining students’ motivation to learn English in vocational education means a lot more than just gaining practical skills. But most important, as suggested by the finding of this study, is to prepare students with interpersonal and collaborative skills because it can lead to learning autonomy and positive attitude towards lifelong learning.

4. Conclusion
This study highlights that the implementation of project-based learning enhance students’ motivation, engagement and enjoyment because project progresses according to the specific context and students’ interests. From amotivational perspective, projects being authentic tasks are more meaningful to students, increase interest, motivation to participate, and can promote learning. Assigning students to perform concrete tasks in pairs and groups is a common practice for foreign languages training as this practice stimulates cooperation and knowledge exchange amongst students in one group and it encourages individual students to talk more. Participation in PBL projects aids to fully develop students’ skills in decision-making and improve their initiative as they have to make many important decisions on their own throughout the completion of the project: from selecting topic, designing plan, discussing the deadline, outlining, drafting, evaluating their works, and finishing the task. In brief, the positive attitude exhibited by the students towards collaborative learning and learning autonomy development suggests that PBL may produce better results compared to the monotonous teacher-led language education which still dominates the English language teaching in Indonesia.
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