Improving Distance Learners’ Writing Skills Through Comic Strip Creation: A Project-Based Learning

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Abstract

Students’ difficulties in mastering writing skills are exacerbated by teachers’ limited instruction in writing classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study aims to find out whether Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is effective in increasing distance learners’ writing skills and motivation to learn. This study employed the Classroom Action Research (CAR) method involving 13 students of twelfth-grade SMKN 1 Bungaraya, chosen through one-stage cluster sampling. This research was conducted online, synchronously, and asynchronously. The questionnaire, observation, and test results show that the PjBL approach allows students to be more engaged and creative in distance learning. The implementation of PjBL through comic strip creation has also driven students to increase their writing skills. It was evidenced by the increase in the student’s scores. The pretest score was 60.53, which increased after post-test I to 70.77, and continued to increase to 80 at the end of Cycle II.

Keywords: Distance Learners, PjBL, Writing Skills, Comic Strip.
INTRODUCTION

Mastering the four skills of language, which are reading, speaking, listening, and writing is a basic requirement for a learner to be considered successful in learning English (Soffiany & Purbani, 2020). In learning English as a foreign language, learners are expected to be able to communicate by using the target language. At this point, they should be able to communicate both through the spoken and written forms of the language (Harmer, 1998). Therefore, writing is claimed as just as important as other language skills. It allows students to have more attempts to process besides the other activities involved in reading, speaking, and listening.

Despite its importance in an English as a Foreign Language class, most students found it difficult and challenging to be mastered (Harmer, 1992). Such difficulties in writing skills mastery then make students to be less motivated in participating learning activities and therefore limit their creativity in producing a creative piece of writing (comic strips, posters, greeting cards, etc.). Besides, during the COVID-19 pandemic, students must carry out distance learning or what is commonly called PJJ (Pembelajaran Jarak Jauh) so that the teachers have limited access to explain and provide immediate feedback in writing. Therefore, the selection of suitable methods for organizing writing instruction is urgently needed. At this point, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is one of the proper methods that has been proven to be able to motivate students more and therefore improve their creativity and mastery of writing.

PjBL is one of the engaging ways to enhance the students’ ability in educational practice. PjBL is considered to be an encouraging method for improving student learning (Pengyue et al., 2020). By implementing the PjBL, the student can have the chance to take part in solving problems and achieve the construction of knowledge in a real-world professional setting. Furthermore, PjBL seems to be an inquiry-based instructional method that involves students in the construction of knowledge by requiring them to complete meaningful projects and create real-world products (Brundiers, K., & Wiek, 2013).

Moreover, in PjBL the students have a big role in designing the plan, creating the way how the project wanted to be done by teamwork, and the meaningful feedback that they got so that they can achieve the best result the outcome for the students and teacher role is the instructor. It encourages student collaboration, with the teacher serving only as a guide throughout the project (Greenier, 2020). So it created an effective relationship between the students and teachers. PjBL is beneficial for students especially in enhancing their writing skills because various interesting project ideas can be done in written form such as book chapters, magazines, and comic strips. Thus, these activities can create creative and critical thinking in solving and finishing the project from the students by implementing the PjBL.

Several studies show positive results of PjBL implementation (Argawati & Suryani, 2020; Praba et al., 2018; Salsabila, 2018; Soffiany & Purbani, 2020; Wibowo & Aji, 2017). Related to students’ low writing creativity and non-suitable learning method, a study has implemented the use of PjBL by asking students to produce a piece of writing in the form of a greeting card (Wibowo & Aji, 2017). Data were collected through questionnaires, observation, and tests. In this study, students showed an improvement in writing, especially in writing a greeting card, as the positive impact of their class is delivered through PjBL. Reviewing their writing outcome, which was a greeting card, it was revealed that they have achieved a considerable increase in terms of creativity in writing.

Besides, in a study done in Junior High School (JHS), three steps of data collection are undergone by the researchers which are classroom observation, students’ writing outcome observation, and interview (Salsabila, 2018). In this study, students claimed that they saw an improvement in their writing skills, specifically in writing procedure text. Interestingly, the statement was claimed by students from various levels of English ability starting from the high, mid, and low achiever. This is in line with another previous
study done by Praba et al. (2018). The study on JHS students revealed that students’ writing skill is extremely improved because of the PJBL instruction.

In line with this study, a study also has been done to find out whether or not the implementation of PjBL can be more effective compared to direct instruction in a writing class (Soffiany & Purbani, 2020). As the result, it was revealed that PJBL has outweighed the effectiveness offered by direct instruction. Moreover, in the PJBL class, students with high creativity were found to be able to produce a better piece of writing compared to those who have a lower one. Furthermore, a study revealed that students were being more active in the class where PJBL is being implemented (Argawati & Suryani, 2020). Besides, it also supports students in producing a good piece of writing. Moreover, the project given in the PJBL class encouraged them to be engaged in solving a real problem.

Referring to the previously mentioned studies, the current study was conducted to fill the gap by taking distance learners into account as its research subjects. The research questions were formulated as follows:
1. Does PJBL effective in increasing distance learners' writing skills?
2. Does PJBL increase the distance learner's motivation in learning English?

In addition, this study focuses on improving the students’ writing skills through the creation of comic strips as a means to improve the students’ creativity. Thus, the subjects would be required to produce comic strips as their writing project. At this point, the present study expected that the implementation of PJBL by creating comic strips can enhance students’ writing skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

This present study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR), which aims to improve the process and learning outcomes in distance learning classes. The action research is based on the idea that theory can be used in a real situation, and theory is only useful when it is put into service and practice focused on achieving positive change (Meesuk et al., 2020). There are four basic components applied in CAR, those are planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, described as the followings:
1. Planning: at this stage, the researchers planned and prepared thoroughly. First, they developed lesson plans that teach interpersonal text material using the PJBL method, and comic strip creation as the learning strategy. PowerPoint slides were created as learning media to deliver teaching material about offering service/help. Additionally, the researcher created the appropriate instruments, such as students’ worksheets, observation sheets, assessment instruments, and rubrics.
2. Acting: at the main activity, the researchers conducted some learning activities following the steps of the PJBL method, which are: a) starting with the essential question; b) designing a plan for the project; c) creating a schedule; d) monitoring the students and the progress of the project; e) accessing the outcome, and f) evaluating the experience.
3. Observing: at this point, the researchers with their collaborator observed the actions of the students, from project design through the final results, and recorded them on observation sheets. In the meantime, students were invited to complete a questionnaire regarding their learning.
4. Reflecting: based on the results of observations, questionnaires, and tests, the researchers were able to determine the technique's effectiveness in resolving the specified problem. The data used are divided into qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data are derived from the results of observations and questionnaires, whilst quantitative data are derived from the results of student tests in each cycle.

In this instance, the cycle was stopped if the students reach the average score, of 75 as Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal (KKM) in the post-test. The results of the first cycle are used to determine the needs for the following cycle until the problems during the intervention get solved by the additional strategies.
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The population of this Classroom Action Research were 101 students of twelfth-grade SMK Negeri 1 Bunga Raya consisting of five majors: Agribisnis Tanaman Perkebunan (n=18); Agribisnis Pengolahan Hasil Pertanian (n= 10); Teknik Komputer dan Jaringan (n=28); Teknik dan Bisnis Sepeda Motor (n=24); and Akuntansi dan Keuangan Lembaga (n=21). Employing one-stage cluster sampling technique, 13 students were grouped and took a part in this current study, involving: Agribisnis Tanaman Perkebunan (n=2); Agribisnis Pengolahan Hasil Pertanian (n= 2); Teknik Komputer dan Jaringan (n=4); Teknik dan Bisnis Sepeda Motor (n=2); and Akuntansi dan Keuangan Lembaga (n=3).

The study was carried out during the first semester of the 2021/2022 academic year synchronously by using web meetings, namely zoom. In addition, the learning was also carried out asynchronously by using Edmodo virtual class and WhatsApp Group to facilitate communication between the researcher and the students. In getting the data, questionnaires, observations, and tests were used. The data used were classified into qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data was taken from the result of observation and questionnaires, while the quantitative data was taken from the result of the students’ tests in each cycle. In doing the observation, the researcher together with an experienced teacher as a collaborator observed the activities carried out by students from project planning to the results that have been made by each group, and recorded them on the observation sheets. Meanwhile, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire related to the learning that has been done.

To analyze the data gathered from the questionnaire, a table of percentages was used by using the following formula:

\[ \% = \frac{n}{N} \times 100\% \]

Whereas:

- \( n \) = the number of respondents who answer ‘yes’
- \( N \) = the total number of respondents

Further, the data of the students’ tests in each cycle were put into a table and calculated in quantitative data analysis. The mean score of the students’ test was calculated in each cycle. If the results of these calculations were not matched with the objective of the study, the next cycle was required. Hence, the researcher had to identify the problems and difficulties that occurred in the previous cycle as well as find proper solutions to be implemented in the next cycle.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The improvement of distance learners’ writing skills through PjBL

The current study employs an innovative learning strategy to improve students’ writing skills that is fit with the features of 21st-century students: the project-based learning model. In taking the actions, the researcher grouped the students consisting of four to five-person to create a comic strip project by using a comic strip maker application. This application is available for free download on Playstore, for example, ‘comic strip creator’, ‘comic page creator’, ‘web comics’, and others. The implementation of the PjBL learning model using comic strips in making interpersonal texts was carried out in a distance class using the Zoom, Edmodo, and WhatsApp group platforms. Zoom was employed in this instance as an interactive medium for explaining materials and projects; the WhatsApp group was used to facilitate questions and answers with students regarding difficulties in making projects and monitor the extent to which projects have been carried out. Meanwhile, a learning management system, Edmodo was used to upload teaching materials and collect student assignments, both individually and in groups. Additionally, individual assessments are conducted to verify that students’ writing skills can be enhanced through the use of PjBL learning strategies. Before the implementation of the PjBL (pre-test) and after the implementation of the PjBL at the end of each cycle (post-test), the students had to take a written test on the composition of interpersonal texts.
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Before the implementation of the action, twelfth-grade students with a total of 13 students were selected as purposive sampling. It was a group consisting of six male and seven female students assigned to do a pretest in making a dialogue about the interpersonal text. Based on the result of the text, the students obtained an average score of 65.53, which is lower than 75 at the KKM. There were only 4 students (30.77%) get success and 9 students (69.23%) were not successful. One of the causes of the low student achievement is the lack of motivation to learn; most of the students were less enthusiastic in making learning interpersonal text. For this reason, a learning strategy called the comic strips project was applied.

The data of the students’ tests in each cycle were put into a table and calculated in quantitative data analysis. Herein, the mean score of students’ tests was calculated in each cycle. To construe students’ scores, a scoring rubric was used to assess students' writing skills and to increase their reliability. The assumption is that this research could be declared successful if the average score of the students reaches a value of 75, which is the minimum completeness criteria in learning English at SMKN 1 Bunga Raya. The comparison of the mean scores of pre-test, post-test cycle I, and post-test cycle II can be seen in the following figure.

![Figure 1. The average scores of pre-test and post-test](image)

Based on Figure 1, the students' average pre-test score was 60.53, this score is still far from the KKM. In this cycle, the students still have problems acquiring tale ideas because the theme has been established by the researcher. For this reason, in the next cycle, the researcher provides further explanations and examples of expressions in interpersonal texts on the material offering services/help. In addition, each group is given the flexibility to decide the topic of their own story in generating a comic strip featuring dialogue giving services/help. In other words, various adjustments were made and further remedial actions were decided to be done in the second cycle. After being treated in the first cycle, the average score of students increased to 70.77. However, this value is still below the KKM. Therefore, advanced strategies need to be developed by teachers to overcome the difficulties experienced by students, and as a medium to achieve predetermined learning objectives (Soedimardjono & P., 2021). After additional treatment was carried out in cycle II, the average score of students became 80, which means that the average value of students has exceeded the KKM value. Thus, the findings proved that the use of comic strips project can improve students’ writing skills in composing interpersonal texts and indicated that the objectives of this study have been achieved.

This finding is relevant to Zulaeha and Marpaung's study (2020), which revealed that PjBL is one of the best practices for improving students’ writing skills. English teachers should facilitate their students in completing English writing projects through target setting, motivational giving, as well as positive comments and constructive feedback to help students gradually improve their writing skills (Lu, 2021; Tamburro & Harris, 2016). Also, Shanti and her colleagues (2018) discovered that one of the PjBL model's stages—monitoring students' progress, is the most significant and crucial step in enhancing students’ writing skills. In
this phase, the teacher always monitors the progress of students in working on projects and provides constructive responses based on the difficulties experienced by the students. This way, the students can recognize their shortcomings and continue to make progress to write better.

**The increase in distance learners’ motivation in teaching writing through PjBL**

After the implementation of activities in the first cycle, the researcher collected and analyzed the data instruments, they were an observation sheet and questionnaire to see the changes in student behavior for each cycle. The results of this study were carried out by the researcher and a collaborator, an experienced English teacher with 10 years of teaching. Herein, they monitored the actions carried out by the students from project planning to the project results, and documented them on the observation sheets, as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

| Observation sheet results | Frequency | Result | Gain (%) |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------|----------|
| **Aspects**               | **Cycle I** | **Cycle II** | **Cycle I** | **Cycle II** |
| **The activity of the students:** | | | | |
| a. Students actively ask the questions | 7 | 8 | 53.84 | 61.54 | 7.70 |
| b. Students actively answer the questions | | | | |
| **Collaboration:** | | | | |
| a. Having a good cooperation | 10 | 12 | 76.92 | 92.31 | 15.39 |
| b. Having a good communication | | | | |
| **Discipline:** | | | | |
| a. Attending zoom meeting | 12 | 13 | 92.30 | 100 | 7.70 |
| b. Coming on time | | | | |
| **Assignment:** | | | | |
| a. Responsible for doing the individual task | 9 | 12 | 69.23 | 92.31 | 23.08 |
| b. Responsible for doing a group project | | | | |

*Source: researchers’ data analysis*

The results of the above observations indicate an increase in student activity from the first cycle to the second cycle from various aspects, including: (1) students’ activity and discipline, both increased by 7.70%; (3) students’ collaboration, which increased quite significantly as much as 15.39%; and (3) students’ assignments, increased very significantly by 23.08%. These findings suggest that the PjBL approach allows students to be more engaged and creative, and to collaborate more with their peers. This result is by the findings of a study conducted by Yusri and friends (2021), who reported that the project-based learning model has an advantage over the guided writing procedure learning model; the tasks assigned by the teacher are useful for finding solutions to problems in learning to write by engaging students in gathering, analysis, and reporting the information. In addition, group discussions on the PjBL model make students more active since the activities emphasize student-centered learning. Similarly, Sholihah (2018) found that assigning students to work in groups can increase student participation in writing classes; this makes the classroom situation livelier and encourages students to be more active in discussion (Anggara, 2018). Besides, the PjBL model is found to be effectively used to increase students' creativity (Christian, 2021), and motivation (Sukmana & Amalia, 2021) during the pandemic. Therefore, this practice not only is very effective for the writing classroom environment both in terms of knowledge and mastery of writing competence, but also increases students' active participation, creativity, and motivation in distance learning classes.

Furthermore, a questionnaire was distributed to students at the end of each cycle to find out students' opinions, perspectives, and self-assessments on the implementation of PjBL through comic strips in learning interpersonal text. Table 2 below presents a comparison of the questionnaire results of the two research cycles.
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Table 2
The results of students’ questioners

| Aspects                                      | Frequency Cycle I | Percentage (%) Cycle I | Frequency Cycle II | Percentage (%) Cycle II | Gain (%) |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|---------|
| Feel excited about the learning activities   | 11                | 84.62                  | 12                | 92.31                  | 7.69    |
| Comprehend the materials well                | 7                 | 53.85                  | 10                | 76.92                  | 23.07   |
| Able to make a dialogue about offering service/help | 6                | 46.15                  | 11                | 84.62                  | 38.47   |
| Love working in a group                     | 11                | 84.62                  | 12                | 92.31                  | 7.69    |
| Interested in making comic strips           | 12                | 92.31                  | 12                | 92.31                  | -       |
| Satisfied with the result of the project    | 6                 | 46.15                  | 10                | 76.92                  | 30.77   |

Source: researchers’ data analysis

The above data showed that most of the students were enthusiastic about the whole learning activity. It can be seen that 12 (92.31%) students felt interested and enjoyed making dialogue in the form of comic strip projects, both in the first cycle and the second cycle. Although in the first cycle only six students (46.15%) were satisfied with the result of the projects, however, this aspect increased in the second cycle increased significantly by 30.77%. In addition, in the first cycle, seven students (53.85%) still felt puzzled about the order of ideas in making the dialogues; but, in the second cycle, the students seemed to have more innovative ideas (84.62% of students were able to make the dialogues). Moreover, initially, students found it challenging to generate digital comic strips using smartphones. However, in the second cycle, they seem to have nailed the features of the comic strip application. Thus, the students felt more satisfied with the results of the products that have been made, and their level of satisfaction increased by 30.77%.

The implementation of the PjBL method in this current research collaborates with information technology, which is considered the most efficient tool in helping distance learning. Petrozitskaya and colleagues (2021) found that the incorporation of new and modern information and communication technologies into the educational process improves the quality of students; they would think more logically, work intellectually, possess independent work skills, and have a significant impact on students’ learning motivation. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Kuimova and friends (2018) who revealed that mobile learning offers flexible learning, encourages collaborative learning, supports distance learning, increases student excitement by doing something new, encourages students to be active learners, contributes to student engagement with content and builds a thirst for knowledge. Thus, new teaching practices such as the use of mobile learning that are in sync with the ongoing development of technology are required among teachers to make language learning more engaging (Soedimardjono & P., 2021). Accordingly, the use of information and communication technology in distance learning classes has a vital role. With the development of technology, this project-based method can also be implemented easily in remote classes. To sum up, teaching writing through PjBL is very effective in increasing students’ motivation in distance learning classes; this can be seen from the increasing level of students’ active participation and learning interest as seen in the observation and questionnaire results.

CONCLUSION

The current study revealed that, after the implementation of PjBL, students’ average scores post-test increased as much as 19.47 compared to their pre-test scores, which was starting from 60.53 to 80. Besides, the PjBL approach allows students to be more engaged, creative, and collaborative in working with their peers. Furthermore, it proved that assigning students to work in groups can increase students’ participation, make the classroom situation livelier, and encourage students to be more active in discussions that take place in writing classes. Other than that, during the pandemic, PjBL was also found to be effective in increasing students’ creativity and motivation. Moreover, the implementation of PjBL has driven students to be more enthusiastic in engaging themselves in the whole learning activity. Although they had some difficulties
creating comic strips in the first cycle, they ended up being able to cope with it in the second one. To sum up, continuous guidance and monitoring performed by the researcher during the construction of a project not only can enhance students’ comprehension of composing an interpersonal text but also make them more creative and innovative.

In conclusion, this study confirmed that improving students’ writing skills through the creation of comic strips as a means to improve the students’ creativity is effective. That is to say that the requirement of comic strip creation in a writing class can enhance students’ writing skills which was proved by the increase in their pre-post test scores, as well as their motivation to learn. At this point, further research might want to have a larger sample from schools with different backgrounds to find out whether or not the same method would generate similar results.

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