

Contributions of Project - Based Learning in EFL Writing Classes

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Abstract: *The aim of this investigation was to determine whether there were challenges and benefits of applying project-based learning (PjBL) in teaching English. Another aim was to identify the students' attitudes towards writing classes where project-based learning was implemented. Qualitative research method was used in order to collect information. Student reflection sheet, researcher's field note, and weekly student reflection sheet were used, and descriptive analysis was carried out. The findings of this study showed that most of the learners had positive views about using PjBL in English writing classes.*

Keywords: Project; Writing Attitude, Project Based Learning, PjBL

1. Introduction

With the advent of globalization and the era of knowledge, the importance of educating contemporary students, who can adapt to the fast-changing world and keep up with the times, is increasing. In order to realize contemporary education, education programs prepared based on certain philosophies and theories of learning are changing or changing radically (Çiftçi, Sünbül & Köksal, 2013). An approach or method that serves this understanding is also required in English education. It is seen that the traditional teaching methods followed for the individual to reach the existing knowledge do not have enough equipment and are lacking in this regard. Contemporary teaching approaches should be used to overcome this deficiency. Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is one of the contemporary teaching approaches that enable individuals to learn new information through experiences based on their own knowledge. Project-based learning, as emphasized by Krajcik & Blumenfeld (2006), is a learning model where students plan their own learning, carry out activities where they can develop their creativity, bring real life to the classroom, solve problems collaboratively, and participate in the learning process. According to Thomas (2000), PjBL is learning and teaching method in which the learner goes from passive to active in the learning process, reaches information by researching and examining, and solving the problems he encounters by using this information.

Although work has been done on the effectiveness of project-based learning (PjBL) in education, seeing how it will contribute to students, especially in writing English, will help the shortfall in this area. Therefore, this research was important to identify students' attitudes towards writing in project-based learning classes and determine whether PjBL had challenges and benefits in those learning environments. While some studies have been done in this field, the area of study still needs more significant data. The result of this study can provide more insight into the extent to which PjBL will be used in writing classes for prospective instructors, teacher trainers, and program development units

and the findings will contribute to an ever-changing and increasingly diverse atmosphere for learning. Findings in this study can contribute significantly to EFL pedagogy in general, and to the application of PjBL in particular. Teachers face growing challenges every year, especially in developing countries such as Turkey. Consequently, research undertaken in this field may address some challenges faced by teachers and provide data to improve the effectiveness of their teaching strategies and give them a different point of view.

2. Literature Review

Although there are not many studies in the field of foreign language, especially about writing, some studies done in Turkey and abroad are presented in this section. The projects provided the students with the opportunity to improve their external motivation and improved their ability to work in a collaborative group setting. Korkmaz (2001) in his research concluded that there was a significant difference between the students in the classroom where the project-based learning method was applied in terms of creative thinking, problem-solving skills and academic risk-taking levels and the students who were applied the direct instruction method. Doppelt (2003) set important goals for teachers and students in order to advance low achieving students, and then conducted original projects where students took advantage of their special talents and abilities. As a result of the study, project-based learning increased students' motivation and self-concern at all levels, and most importantly, enabled effective learning. Many low-achieving students achieved far more success than high-achieving students in the proficiency exams held at the same school. Gültekin (2007) aimed to evaluate how the project-based learning method was applied in a primary school with a qualitative case study. The data were collected by participant observation, interview and analysed descriptively. According to the results of the research, it was revealed that the projects motivated the students and their learning was more permanent. In addition, it was determined that students' individual responsibilities increased, they learned by having

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fun, their creativity and hand skills improved, they used more than one subject area knowledge in their projects and they had real-world experiences. In a study conducted by Tims (2009), he aimed to identify the contribution of project-based learning to adults' learning English as a second language. At the end of the research, PjBL was chosen as the most appropriate method. According to the results, PjBL improved ESL adult learners' learning and contributed to the four language skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. In terms of language abilities, Fragoulis and Tsiplakides (2009) discovered that PjBL improved EFL learners' desire to learn language. Particularly, the findings of their study revealed that PjBL improved all four language skills McClurg (2009), in his study to investigate the effect of project-based learning on students' reading success applied PjBL and used archive information students who were educated with traditional methods in the previous year as a retrospective comparison. As a result of the research, it was discovered that the students in the PjBL group performed better than the other group. Furthermore, Poonpon (2011) discovered that PjBL increased students' English skills in a study of 47 undergraduate students.

As a result of the literature review, the effect of project-based learning on student success and attitude in foreign language classes and other classes has been emphasized and it has been seen that it generally produces more positive results than the traditional method. It has been emphasized that in the classrooms where project-based learning is applied, the students are more willing and have more positive attitudes towards the lesson compared to the classrooms in which the traditional method is applied. In this case, it was concluded that the success of the students in the classes where PjBL was applied is higher than the traditional method.

3. Statement of Purpose

It is of great importance that students acquire basic language skills in foreign language learning. Although it is foreseen that the four basic language skills should be taught in coordination with each other, the writing skill is the skill that students have the most difficulty in developing (Yulandari, Rahman 2019). In a study carried out with 60 students in Malaysia by Etemadzadeh, Seifi & Far (2013), the findings revealed that when compared to other skills, most students stated that writing was the most challenging skill due to lack of grammar and vocabulary. In this research, it was aimed to reveal the attitudes of the students towards writing classes at the beginning and end of the study, and whether there were benefits or challenges of applying project-based learning in English language teaching.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study was conducted with a qualitative method utilizing descriptive analysis. Qualitative research facilitates the process of developing a research plan and carrying out the investigation. It enables the development of new methodologies and approaches at each step of the research, as well as adjustments in the research design based on the

context (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008). The data obtained from the application were interpreted using the descriptive analysis technique. It has been stated that descriptive analysis is a frequently used method for researchers to obtain summary information about different phenomena and events they want to study (Buyukozturk, Cakmak, Akgun, Karadeniz and Demirel, 2008).

4.2 Setting and participants

This study was conducted at a foundation university in İstanbul, Turkey during 2020- 2021 academic year. The participants of the study consisted of students whose ages between 18-19 studying at the intermediate level in English preparatory school. All the students in the class were placed according to the results of a placement test administered at the beginning of the academic year. As a result, all of the participants were presumed to be at the same language proficiency level. A total of 12 participants, consisting of five male and seven female students, took part in the study.

4.3 Instrument

Throughout the research, the data were obtained through three instruments. These were student reflection sheet, researcher's field note and weekly student progress reflection sheet. The participants were given student reflection sheet at the beginning and end of the study. In the weekly meetings, weekly student progress reflection sheet was used by the participants. They were asked to answer a total of five questions mentioned in italics in the data collection and analysis section. After collecting the students' sheet, the researcher made necessary suggestions to them, especially about the problems they experienced. For this purpose, researcher's field note was used to write the evaluations and suggestions that he had from these meetings.

4.4 Data collection and analysis

In the study, qualitative research approach was adopted because it was a study based on the emotions, thought changes and situations of the students who made up the working group with the project-based learning method. The data obtained from the application were interpreted using the descriptive analysis technique. At the beginning and end of the study, student reflection sheet was used. According to the responses gathered from this sheet, the researcher used researcher's field note and shared the necessary suggestions with the participants for the project to progress well. In the student reflection sheet, the students were asked their feelings and attitudes towards writing classes. They were also asked their strategies to learn the writing classes better. Every week, project progress meetings were held by the researcher and the participants were asked to fill in weekly student progress reflection sheet including the following questions:

- 1) What problems do you face?
- 2) What has been going well so far?
- 3) What are the topics you understand and do not understand in the writing course you attended?

- 4) Do your group mates work effectively? Why or why not?
- 5) Can you work effectively in the group? Why or why not?

5. Discussion

Student reflection sheet was used at the beginning and end of the project. Firstly, the participants were asked “What are your feelings about the writing courses that you have attended in general? Is it easy or difficult?” At the beginning of the project, 83 percent of the participants stated that they found writing difficult while 17 percent stated that it was easy. When asked the same question again at the end of the project, 42 percent of the participants said they found it still difficult while 58 percent said it was easy. As can be seen from this, the feelings of the participants changed positively. Secondly, their attitudes towards writing classes were asked at the beginning of the study and 58 percent of the participants reported negative views but at the end of the study, this number was analysed as 33 percent. This showed that project-based learning contributed to the learners’ attitudes in a positive way. Finally, their strategies to learn the writing better was asked and at the beginning of the study, some examples were given such as writing a diary or

story and improving vocabulary. But at the end of the study, some of the students mentioned having feedback from the teacher or using games, unlike the earlier answers. While five students out of 12 participants gave the game answer, two people responded as feedback. This reveals that giving feedback to the participants about their work and allowing them to create a game to be used in writing classes affected their opinions during project based learning implementation.

The findings from weekly student reflection sheet are also summarised with negative and positive codes in Table 1. As can be seen in Table 1, it is clear that the negative opinions are due to too much homework, the intensity of the education given at school or the online education that had to be done due to the current pandemic conditions. Suggestions were given to the students and it was determined by the researcher that these complaints decreased in the following meetings. On the other hand, in the meetings, compared to negative opinions, positive opinions gained importance especially in recent weeks. This meant that the students who spent time with the project-based education model and got used to this approach could present positive rather than negative opinions.

Table 1: Findings from Weekly Student Reflection Sheet

Content of the Questions	Codes	Quotations
What problems do you face?	Intensive Course Homework Exams	“There was too much homework” “Our busy schedule is the biggest problem nowadays”
What has been going well so far?	Creativity Collaboration Motivation Group work Activities Relationship Productivity	“Group members have creative ideas.” “I believe it improves my creativity and we will complete the project soon” “We are working as a group and everyone does their duty”
What are the topics you understand and do not understand in the writing course you attended?	<u>Positive Negative</u> Topic sentences Finding main Expressions idea and writing Transition introduction	“Writing classes are fun and I learned a lot of new expressions” “Finding the main idea in a paragraph is difficult for me.”
Do your group mates work effectively? why or why not?	<u>Positive Negative</u> Punctual Homework Reliable Busy Schedule Disciplined Honest Compatible Respect	“Yes, everyone feels responsible and does their duties.” “No, we have lots of homework....” “Yes, My friends are very compatible so we can work smoothly.”
Can you work effectively in the group? why or why not?	<u>Positive Negative</u> Dutiful Online education Responsible Homework Open-minded Friendly Responsive Group work Creativity	“I can’t work effectively because I have a lot of homework.” “Yes, I can work. Because, we do our job on time and planned.” “No, there should be a face-to-face environment for me to work more effectively.”

6. Conclusion

In this study, the attitudes of the students towards writing classes were investigated. According to the result, it was observed that student attitudes changed from negative to positive. At the beginning of the research, while many students reported negative opinions, it was determined that this number decreased at the end of the research. Secondly, it was investigated whether project-based learning was

beneficial in teaching English. Based on the findings, it can be said that project based learning had many benefits for learners. For instance, students' self-confidence developed and a positive attitude was displayed. They acquired and developed high-level skills such as critical thinking. It also promoted cooperation among peers. Finally, it was investigated whether project-based learning had challenges in teaching English. According to the result, there were some challenges while implementing it. For example, students complained about intensive course schedule, too

much homework and online education. If these problems are overcome, project-based learning might be implemented in classes more effectively. However, if more studies regarding this field could be conducted, we can have more information and share it with the professionals who are interested in this approach.

When project-based learning approach and writing education were evaluated together, it was seen that scientific studies were insufficient. The studies related to PjBL were conducted mostly in fields such as mathematics and science, and in social sciences such as social studies and geography. In the light of this information, a small number of writing studies and research in other fields are presented in this section. The results of the present study show similarity with the results of Hasani, Hendrayana & Senjaya (2017). In a quantitative study with 32 students, it was investigated whether project-based learning had an effect on writing classes. It was stated that project-based learning improved students' writing abilities. Furthermore, this approach promoted student learning while also contributing to their academic growth. In Iran, research was conducted with 70 EFL students by Aghayani & Hajmohammadi (2019). They wanted to investigate the effect of PjBL on the student's writing skills. According to the findings, it was observed that project-based learning had a considerable effect on the students' writing skills. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that project-based learning promoted collaboration among peers.

To summarize, it was seen that the project-based learning approach contributed to the students' positive attitudes towards writing classes and arouse their desire to write. It was observed that working in cooperation contributed to the development of social skills and also to the development of individuals who can express themselves easily in spite of certain challenges.

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