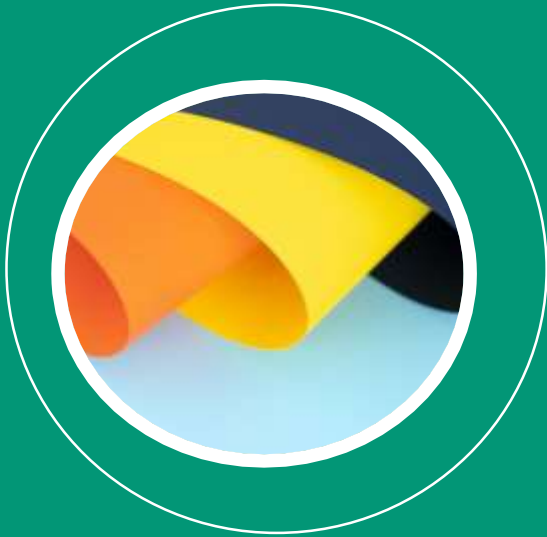


Challenges in Developing Critical Thinking Skills through Essays Writing: EFL Learners' and Teachers' Perceptions



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Background of the Study



Having critical thinking skills in the context of EFL learning is important (Nejmaoui, 2019; Fahim & Sa'ee pour, 2011; Beaumont, 2010). These skills can be trained and developed during the learning process, for example through problem-based learning activities, collaboration-based learning, discussion, reading and writing (Alsaleh, 2020; Jumariati, Amelia, Elyani & Mahendra, 2021) and through cooperative learning (Rimiene, 2002).

Students are involved in presentations, debates, making posters, and writing expository or argumentative essays based on factual problems that need to be solved. Through these activities, students learn how to explore a problem, analyze every aspect of the problem, find alternative solutions to problems, consider the consequences of each alternative solution, and propose the most appropriate solution according to their points of view.



This study tried to reveal students' and teachers' perceptions on the implementation of PBL in Advanced Writing course, particularly on the challenges they face during the teaching-learning process. PBL was applied during one semester using Learning Management System.



The study utilized interview guideline and documentation to collect the data. The interview was focused on the subjects' perceptions in the area of (1) group work management, (2) difficulty levels of the issues, (3) time management, and (4) technical issues dealing with online classes. The documentation collected was students' essays which had been scored.

The research subjects were 6 students and 2 teachers in the English Department of FKIP ULM who were selected to ensure that they were suited to the research objectives.



FINDINGS ON THE INTERVIEW TO THE STUDENTS

1) *You've worked to solve some problems provided by the teacher. Do you think the problems are easy, average, or difficult?*

“The problems are easy because they happen around us but one problem is quite difficult that is about wetland diversion. I'm not familiar with it so it took time to read the sources.” (S1)

“Well, the problems are familiar and easy to analyze except wetlands diversion. It's a bit difficult because we are not quite familiar with it.” (S2)

“Yes, they are but the wetland diversion is the most challenging issue. We're not familiar with it and need much time to read sources to comprehend the issue.” (S3)

“The problems are easy because we can find the literature form the internet. I think the problems about flood and forest fire are much easier than wetlands diversion because we experienced it.” (S4)

“The problems are familiar and it's easy to find the reading sources so it helped us comprehend the problems.” (S5)

“Yes, the problems are quite easy because they are factual but the issue about wetlands diversion is a bit difficult and I'm not sure that I understand every aspect of the issue.” (S6)

FINDINGS ON THE INTERVIEW TO THE STUDENTS

2) Which stage of the group work that you think is challenging? Why?

“I think proposing solutions to the problems, because we need to understand the consequences of each solution before we recommend it. I mean, we should have good understanding on the issue before giving solution.”(S1)

“I think to produce solutions is not easy, because we can disagree with others’ opinions so that we need to discuss to find the best solution. It needs understanding between the group members.” (S2)

“Well, I think analyzing cause-effect is not easy because we have to understand the issue. To do that, we need to read sources first, the good sources, and then share our understanding with group members, it takes time especially when the sources are difficult to read, too technical I mean.” (S3)

“I think giving solutions to the problem is difficult if we work in group, because every member may have different opinion. In my group, we disagree with one solution and then we need to read the sources again and discuss. It’s a bit difficult.” (S4)

“The group work is not difficult, I mean it’s better than working alone to analyze the issue.” (S5)

“Analyzing cause effect is a bit difficult because we have to read the sources first. Every member reads different article and we may misunderstood the content.” (S6)

FINDINGS

3) *Do you enjoy solving problems in group? Why?*

"Yes, I prefer working in small groups than alone because we can share ideas that helped us understand more and find the best solution." (S1)

"I found it beneficial because I can listen to others' ideas that may improve my knowledge. It also make me learn how to argue and consider many aspects before deciding the solution." (S2)

"Well, honestly I prefer working alone because it's efficient. Discussing with the group is actually good but not in online classes because some members had trouble with the internet. It wasted time and made the sharing not effective." (S3)

"Yes, because we can share responsibility in reading sources and then share our comprehension. It's really helpful than reading the sources alone and building comprehension alone." (S4)

"I enjoy working in groups because it helped me understand the issue more. If I work alone, I'm afraid that there are some points that I missed." (S5)

"I like discussing the issue in group because we can argue and correct each other so that we can understand the problem and propose solution." (S6)

FINDINGS



4) *Is there any trouble you face during group works?*

“No, except the internet connection. I was disconnected a few times and it made my group discussion not run well.” (S1)

“Well, a bit challenging with making agreement on the solutions to propose. Sometimes we disagree and negotiate which one is the solution. Luckily, we wrote the essay individually so I can decide which to take.” (S2)

“Some members had trouble with the internet connection making them on and off. It wasted time and made the sharing not effective. So only the rest of us continued the discussion.” (S3)

“No, because we have shared the responsibility like who is reading what, until we can accomplish the group works.” (S4)

“I think no, our group worked well, I mean, everybody read the sources assigned and shared information and then we can decide the solutions. When we disagree, we discuss until we find agreement and finish the assignment.” (S5)

“Well, some members could not find the right sources to read so we need to take over the task. It’s a bit time consuming but luckily we can finish the assignment.” (S6)

FINDINGS



5) Is the time allotted enough for exploring the literature and sharing ideas?

“Yes, my group can used the time. Maybe because we’re allowed to mix English and bahasa Indonesia so the discussion run well.” (S1)

“Well, it’s a bit thight because we should read the sources first to comprehend the issue and then share ideas. We also should settle the disagreement occurred. But overall, we can make it.” (S2)

“The time is quite limited especially in my group some members had trouble with the internet connection. So, we should wait for them to join again. But finally we can finish the discussion.” (S3)

“Yes, it’s enough for my group because every member did the task so we can continue sharing idea and propose solutions.” (S4)

“I think it’s enough but not for deep discussion. So we directly share ideas while referring to sources and then propose solution. We also used bahasa Indonesia to clarify meanings and settle disgareement. Maybe that makes the time enough.” (S5)

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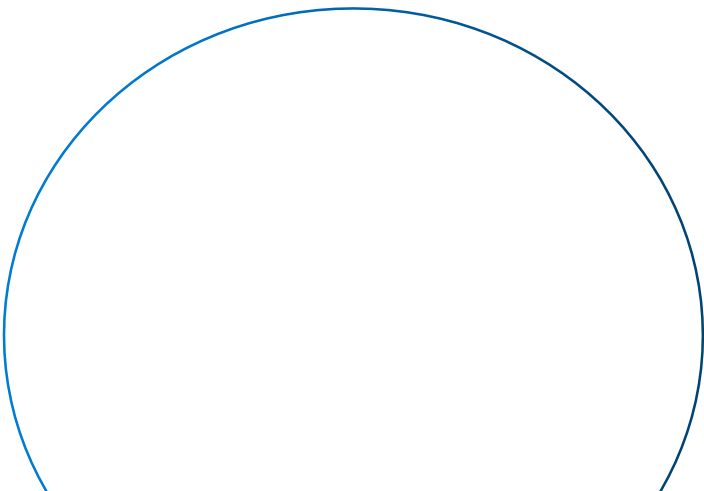
FINDINGS



6) *You mentioned about disagreement in your group. How did you handle it?*

“Well, the disagreement occurred when we want to propose solutions. Some of us think that this is the best solution while the others do not think so. Then, we refer to the reading sources again and discuss about the cause and effect relationship, I mean, we talk about why it happens. After that we consider which solution is the most suitable with the situation.” (S2)

“We do a kind of question and answer. When some of us disagree with Solution A, we ask questions about its feasibility. If we can't answer it, we cross the solution and move to the next solution. We also refer to reading sources so nobody can argue anymore because it has the foundation. Well, it's a bit time consuming, as I said before.” (S5)



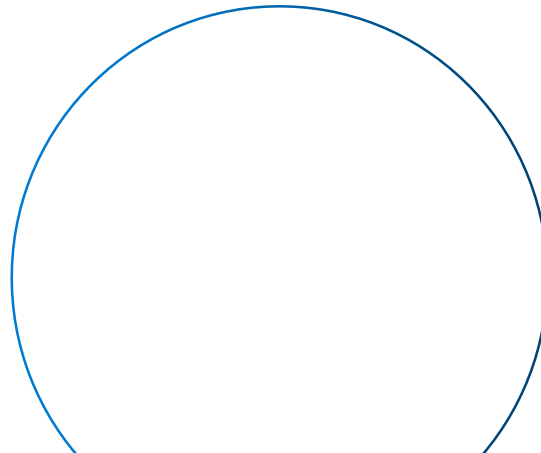
FINDINGS ON THE INTERVIEW TO THE TEACHERS



1) You applied PBL in Advanced Writing Course. Is there any trouble that you or your students experienced?

“Well, I must admit that monitoring the groups is challenging. I need to enter the break out room one by one hoping that each group continues the discussion once I left the room. I also noticed that a few students were on and off due to unsteady internet connection. So this condition could affect the group work in terms of the quality of the discussion and final work.” (T1)

“I think selecting the right issue is a bit complicated. We need to ensure that our students know the issue so they will be motivated. And I also felt that managing the group work is uneasy. You can imagine, I enter the break out room one by one making sure that every member participates in the group discussion and that they could comprehend the issue. Also, some of my students had problem with the internet connection. But overall, PBL is worth applying.” (T2)



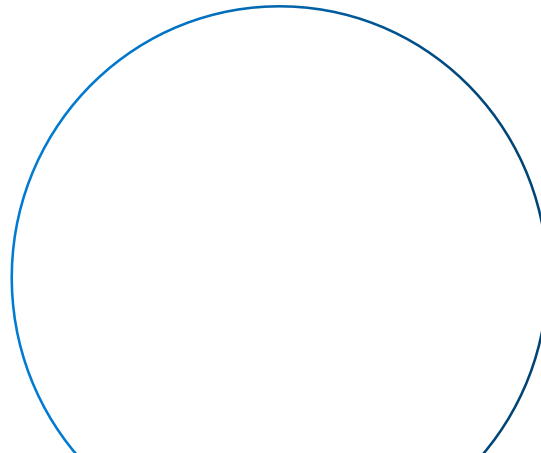
FINDINGS ON THE INTERVIEW TO THE TEACHERS



2) How did you group the students? Was it difficult?

“I grouped them in 4 consisted of high, medium, and low achievers based on their scores in the previous writing course. I assume that they need to help each other so I try to make the members heterogenous. But, I don't think that the proficiency levels are balanced because the numbers of students in each class are not balanced between the high, medium, and low. So, normally I put 2 or more medium students in one group with one high achiever.” (T1)

“Well, grouping the students is challenging because their writing ability levels is not balanced, so I cannot have high, medium, and low achievers in one group. Mostly the students are medium level so this category is dominant in each group. It makes the grouping uneasy.” (T2)



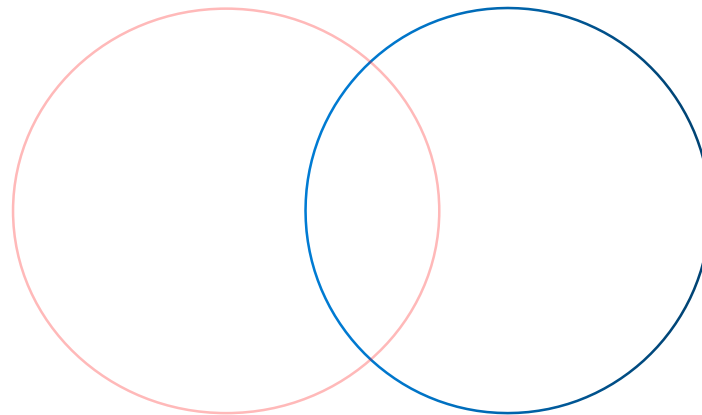
FINDINGS ON THE INTERVIEW TO THE TEACHERS



3) How did you decide the issues to be discussed in the PBL groups? Was it challenging?

“We used factual issues that happen in our society to make the students feel motivated and meaningful. We also consider the availability of sources that students can consult to improve their knowledge. So, it took extra time to select the issues.” (T1)

“We selected real life issues that happen in the society so that the students will be familiar and motivated to work. But later on I found out that one topic is challenging because the students are not quite familiar. So I guess we need to consider about it next time, maybe by involving students in choosing the issues they like.” (T2)



DISCUSSION

(1) The difficulty level of the issues

- The issues are easy except one: wetlands function diversion because the subjects are not quite familiar with this topic.
- The teachers had selected factual issues in the society.

Studies recommend to use factual, unsolved issues to help learners develop their higher order thinking skills (Sockalingam & Schmidt, 2011; Dole, et al, 2015).

(2) Group management

- The subjects shared responsibilities which made the comprehension better.
- They settled disagreement by using Q&A and referring to the sources to clarify things.
- The groups consisted of high, medium, low achievers.

Studies suggest that group formation should consider task division and heterogeneity (Johnson & Finucane, 2000; Alfares, 2017)

(3) Time allotment

- Majority of the subjects stated that the time is limited.

Studies show that group works need sufficient time depending on the task's level of difficulty and mode of learning. (Sockalingam & Schmidt, 2011)

(4) Technical Issues

- Unsteady internet connection made the discussion not effective.

Previous research showed that internet connection is one of influential factor in online classes (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020; Hijazi & Alnatour, 2021)



DISCUSSION

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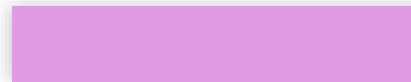
Majority of the subjects stated that it is not enough due to internet connection & classmates' capability in finding sources.

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(4) Technical Issues

Some subjects had trouble with the internet connection that made the discussion not effective.

Previous research showed that internet connection is one of influential factor in online classes (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020; Hijazi & Alnatour, 2021)



CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

The study concludes that the implementation of PBL in EFL online writing classrooms face several challenges both for the learners and the teachers, regarding the difficulty level of the issue, group management, time allotment, and technical issues.

These suggest careful preparation before applying PBL. Teachers need to select the issues considering students' characteristics, pay attention to the group dynamics, and provide sufficient time allocation for them to construct knowledge and propose solutions.





Thank You



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