

# PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING APPROACH TO DEVELOP ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING SKILLS

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## PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING APPROACH TO DEVELOP ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING SKILLS

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### Abstract

For EFL learners, writing an argumentative essay is more challenging than writing other genres for instance descriptive, narrative, and expository. This is due to the fact that in this type of writing, a writer has to have a clear position on a certain issue, acknowledge the other side, and persuade the readers to agree with his argument. For this reason, the writer should have the skills in presenting an argument in addition to being knowledgeable of the organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics of an essay. In fact, many learners are struggling with how to provide a strong argument which convinces others to agree with his position. This article proposes a Problem-based learning approach as an alternative teaching and learning strategy which can facilitate EFL learners to develop their skills in writing argumentative essay. The model of Problem-based learning approach is also provided based on the result of a thorough research. It consists of problem presentation, problem analysis, research, reporting, application, drafting, revising, and peer editing which puts learners work cooperatively. This notion rests on the notion of social constructivist perspective derived by Lev Vygotsky who posits that human development is basically a social activity that exploring information to construct knowledge and interacting with other individuals are essential. The model can be adapted and modified based on learners' characteristics as an effort to facilitate EFL learners in improving their writing skills particularly argumentative writing.

**Key words:** *Problem-Based Learning, argumentative, writing skills*

### Introduction

For EFL learners, writing an argumentative essay is more challenging than writing in other genres for instance descriptive, narrative, and expository. As has been found in research by Davies (2003), Alagozlu (2007), and Suhartoyo (2014), argumentative writing is difficult for EFL students wherein their writings show the lack of arguments and evidence. Furthermore, their writings contain irrelevant conclusions and even worse some writings are descriptive rather than argumentative. In fact, having the argumentation skill is crucial as it is the

manifestation of critical thinking skills, the skills which are very necessary for today's life.

In argumentative writing, the writer has to have a clear position on a certain issue, acknowledge the other side, and persuade the readers to agree with his argument. For this reason, the writer should have the skills in presenting an argument in addition to being knowledgeable of the organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics of an essay. In fact, many learners are struggling with how to provide a strong argument which convinces others to agree with his position.

Pertaining to this, a teaching-learning approach which stimulates and engages students in critical thinking is needed. Especially with the skills of proposing solution and the argument, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is potential to develop the skills (Fithman & Shah, 2013; Li, 2013; Jumariati & Sulistyono, 2017). Hence, PBL is proposed to be implemented in the teaching and learning process particularly the teaching and learning of argumentative essay writing.

### Characteristics of Problem Based Learning

PBL is originally developed by the educators of medical field in Mc Master University in Canada in the 1960s. At that time, PBL is developed to improve students' knowledge on the content of the medical field courses and their critical thinking skills towards the medical issues (Savery, 2006; Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009). The implementation shows positive result which then widens its application in other fields such as science, engineering, business, education, law, and language learning.

PBL can be categorized as inquiry-based learning approach rooted in the constructivist theory particularly the works of Piaget, Dewey, and Vygotsky. It encourages critical thinking skills wherein students analyze a problem, ask questions, do research, analyze the data, interpret the data, and create a possible solution (Bell, Urhahne, Schanze & Ploetzner, 2010; Wilhelm & Wilhelm, 2010). In that way, students become active learners that they work independently only with minimum guide from the teacher to construct knowledge on the issue, exploring resources to find the cause and effect, propose possible solutions, decide the most possible solution, and propose the reasons.

In order PBL to be effective, studies recommend that teachers use open-ended problem from real-life issues with suitable difficulty level and relevant with the learning objectives (Knowlton 2003; Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006; Hung, 2009; Jonassen, 2011; Dole, Bloom & Kowalske, 2015). It is also stated that a good problem for PBL classroom should be interesting, relevant, real-life issue, appropriate with the lesson objectives, in suitable difficulty level, clearly presented, comprehensible, require more than one solutions, and debatable (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006; Sockalingam & Schmidt, 2011; Jonassen, 2011; Larsson, 2001).

PBL also incorporates cooperative learning approach which enables students to work cooperatively and help each other in the process of learning. By working with their classmates in PBL group, students reduce the burden of working alone to understand the issue, find the causes and the effects, and propose possible solution. In that way, they develop the characters of being cooperative and responsible with the team work.

### **PBL and Argumentative Writing**

There are several types of argumentative essay two of which are the academic argumentative and the public argumentative. These types differ in the sources of evidence a writer uses; the academic argumentative requires evidence from academic sources like documents whereas the public argumentative utilizes facts, experience, and logic as the sources of evidence. The format commonly taught in undergraduate level is the five-paragraph essay which consists of an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph that is organized following either the classical (pro-contra) pattern or point-by-point pattern. The difference between the two patterns is on the way the writer organizes the reasons to support their claim and the way they refute opponent's views. In the classical (pro-contra) pattern, the body paragraphs consist of two paragraphs for the writer's reasons and supporting evidence and a paragraph for stating the opponent's view and the refutation. Meanwhile, in the point-by-point (contra) pattern, the body paragraphs consist of the opponent's first, second, and third argument each of which is refuted by the writer by providing reasons and relevant evidence.

There are micro skills in writing argumentative essays which include the skills in making a good claim, providing relevant reasons, providing evidence, acknowledging counterclaim, refuting counterclaim, and providing reasons to refute (Johnston, 2000; Smalley, Ruetten & Kozyrev, 2001) These micro skills can be developed by the implementation of PBL since PBL consists of the stages of problem presentation, problem analysis, research, and reporting each of which helps students in learning. The stages of problem analysis and research facilitate students in understanding a problem (issue) by finding the causes and the effects. By having adequate knowledge on the issue, they will be able to decide their stand and make a clear claim (Johnston, 2000; Smalley, et al., 2001).

PBL which puts students in collaborative learning to solve a problem offers students the chance to build their knowledge on an issue, find the causes of the problem, generate solutions to the problem, and find the consequences of the solution. When these learning stages are implemented in writing classrooms, students have the opportunities to explore an issue before they start writing a draft. These characteristics are not evident in traditional writing classrooms where

students are given a topic to write and then work individually to compose a piece of writing.

As it is found in a quasi experimental study by Jumariati and Sulisty (2017) in undergraduate level of argumentative writing, PBL is more effective than guided-writing instruction in improving students' argumentative writing skills particularly in the components of organization, vocabulary, and grammar. The notes on direct observation revealed that students of PBL worked together to build knowledge on an issue by finding the cause and the effects. Further, the notes on students' worksheets revealed that they learned to explore essential points to comprehend the problem. The students also worked cooperatively to find possible solutions to the problem and propose the most viable solution. In short, the procedures of PBL facilitated the students in developing the argumentation skills.

A similar result is found in the research by Othman and Shah (2013) and Li (2013). In the study by Othman and Shah (2013), the result of the pre-test and the post-test of the experimental group (PBL) showed significant difference whereas in the control group with conventional teaching, the difference was not significant. Moreover, the PBL students improved their skills in argumentative writing in the aspects of organization and content. Meanwhile, the quasi experimental research by Li (2013) which integrated the model of PBL and the process writing, the findings showed that PBL contributed to the improvement of students' skills in writing.

Research has also been conducted to investigate students' perceptions on the implementation of PBL. An investigation by Chappell (2006) on Geography students' perception revealed that they perceived PBL positively as the strategy developed their collaboration skills and increased knowledge on the content. Similarly, a research by Hallinger and Lu (2011) which investigated Business undergraduate students and teachers in Thailand revealed positive perceptions on PBL because students were engaged more in the teaching and learning process. A longitudinal study carried out by Elizabeth and Zulida (2012) in a Malaysian university also found that the students showed positive perceptions. They admitted that PBL developed collaboration skills and they felt more motivated in learning. Finally, a study by Jumariati and Irawati (2017) exploring students' perceptions on the implementation of PBL showed that students enjoyed learning with PBL. The majority of the students thought that the members had equal contributions (46.43%), respected different opinions (57.14%), and negotiated ideas (60.71%). The majority of them also perceived that the discussions were focused (64.29%), helped to build strong claim (64.29%), helped to propose reasons (82.14%) as well as evidence (57.14%), and helped to build logical reasoning (60.71%). Finally, the students perceived that the problems were interesting, relevant, real-life issues, appropriate with the lesson objectives, in suitable difficulty level, clearly presented, comprehensible, and required more than one solutions, as well as debatable.

To conclude, Problem-Based Learning can develop critical thinking skills for it requires students to comprehend an issue (problem), analyze the problem, generate possible solutions, understand consequences, and propose the best solution to the problem by giving the arguments and evidence to support. As it is postulated in the theory that PBL "...enhances students' learning outcomes by promoting their abilities and skills in applying knowledge, solving problems, practicing higher order thinking skills, and self-directing and reflecting on their own learning" (Hung, 2013:31). PBL is potential in developing students' critical thinking skills which actualized in argumentative essays writing.

### Model of PBL in EFL Writing Classroom

This article proposes a model of PBL to be implemented in a classroom to teach EFL writing skills for undergraduate students. The model is an adapted version by modifying the model proposed by Burch (2000) which originally consists of problem presentation, problem analysis, research, and reporting. The modified version has been applied in a quasi experimental study conducted by Jumariati and Sulisty (2017). The model is displayed in Figure 1.

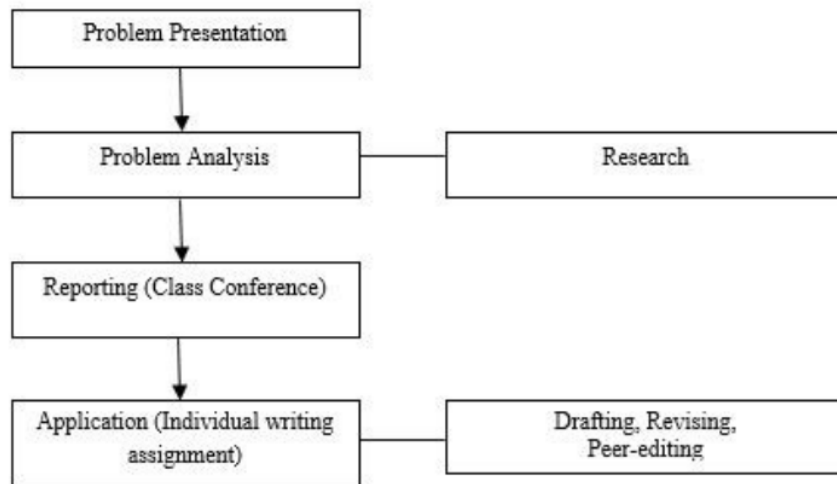


Figure 1 Model of PBL to teach Argumentative writing

The procedures of teaching and learning with PBL displayed in Figure 1 are carried out by considering two approaches in writing which include process approach and product approach. This is meant to facilitate students to produce a good piece of writing. The detailed procedures are as follows.

- 1) Problem Presentation: In this stage, a problem is introduced to the students by displaying pictures or videos and asking the questions: (1) what do you see in

the picture? (2) what do you learn from the pictures/video? (3) what is the problem? Then, the problem was displayed in a text format to ease the students in accomplishing the task.

- 2) **Problem Analysis:** Subsequent to problem presentation, the students were directed to analyze the problem. During the stage, the lecturer monitored the groups and asked some leading questions: (1) what do you think the causes of the problem are? (2) what are the effects? and (3) what information do you need to explore more? Then, the students worked together and made agreement upon who would be responsible to do certain tasks which included finding the causes, searching the effects, exploring more information, writing down notes on research and writing the report.
- 3) **Research:** The research was meant to explore resources that could enrich students' knowledge on the issue. It was carried out along with the stage of problem analysis. During the research, students read any resources in the Internet which were relevant to the problem. To focus the research, the students were equipped with a research guidance sheet to record relevant pieces of evidence. They were also encouraged to write the details of the information and the sources to strengthen their argument and avoid plagiarism.
- 4) **Reporting:** During this stage, the students share the results of their discussions and listened to others' ideas in a class conference. In the end of the presentation, the lecturer guided the students to sum up the discussion and reminded the students that there was no best solution for the problem which meant that any solution might have its consequences.
- 5) **Application:** the students worked individually to write an argumentative essay based on the topic relevant to the problem they had discussed in PBL groups. In the essay, they should propose the best solution to the problem, argue why the solution was the best and explain why other possible solutions might not be effective. To facilitate the students, models of argumentative essay were displayed as well as the patterns of organization and the worksheets such as the outlining, revising, and peer-editing sheets. This stage was carried out in two meetings to give students sufficient opportunities to outline, draft, revise, and edit their essay drafts.
- 6) **Process writing: drafting, revising, peer editing.** To enable each individual writes an argumentative essay, the stages of writing were integrated in the PBL model. Theoretically, writing stages such as planning, drafting, responding, revising, editing, and sharing facilitate students to make a piece of writing (Seow, 2002).

The model displayed in Figure 1 had been implemented in the teaching and learning of Academic Writing courses in English Department of Lambung Mangkurat University. The findings of the study showed that PBL was more

effective in improving students' skills in writing argumentative essay compared to guided writing. Moreover, PBL contributed to the improvement of argumentative essay in the components of organization, vocabulary, and grammar.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

Research and theories show that PBL is effective in improving students' skills in argumentative writing. It allows for the development of critical thinking skills in which students comprehend an issue, analyze the problem, generate possible solutions, and propose the best solution as well as the reasons and evidence to support. Hence, PBL is potential to be applied in EFL classrooms to develop students' critical thinking skills which are necessary for today's learning.

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