



International Journal of Advanced Research in Future Ready Learning and Education

<https://www.akademiabaru.com/submit/index.php/frle/index>

ISSN: 2462 - 1951



Empowering ESL Learners: Unleashing Autonomy through Project-Based Learning

Sharina Saad^{1,*}, Berlian Nur Morat¹, Amelia Abdullah², Yasmin Farani³

¹ Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara Kedah Branch, 08400 Merbok Kedah, Malaysia.

² School of Educational Studies, 11800 Minden, Universiti Sains Malaysia Pualau Pinang, Malaysia

³ Universitas Merdeka Malang, Jalan Terusan Dieng No. 62-64, Malang 65146, Jawa Timur, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The growing interest in learner autonomy is propelled by the swift advancement of information technology and globalization. Embedded within the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB 2013-2025), Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) is promoted to elevate language proficiency among students. Traditional educational methods are declining in relevance for preparing learners for contemporary workforce demands, prompting a shift towards a self-directed approach. Educators are currently tasked with fostering individuals who can continually learn and excel in a rapidly evolving global economy driven by knowledge. Consequently, project-based learning (PBL) emerges as a powerful tool for educators to foster learner autonomy in ESL classrooms. This qualitative study explores the impact of project-based learning (PBL) on learner autonomy and personal development among first-semester Diploma students majoring in Business Administration at Universiti Mara Kedah Branch. The study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to delve into students' perceptions of PBL and its influence on their learning experiences, outcomes, and self-improvement. The research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how PBL fosters learner autonomy, aligning with the overarching goal of promoting self-directed learning. The study involved 30 first-semester Diploma students, who collaborated in teams on a poetry writing project centered around a theme of solidarity with Palestine. Data collection included open-ended survey questions to gather detailed insights into students' perceptions of project work, learning outcomes, and personal development. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed key themes such as positive attitudes towards project work, enhanced problem-solving skills, effective communication, and personal growth. These findings underscore the transformative effects of PBL on students' autonomy and confidence, emphasizing the importance of integrating PBL approaches in ESL classrooms to empower students for success in a dynamic global economy.

Keywords:

English language teaching, learner autonomy, life-long learners, project-based learning

Received: 20 February 2024

Revised: 18 March 2024

Accepted: 24 March 2024

Published: 6 May 2024

1. Introduction

Educators and students are increasingly embracing innovative approaches that extend beyond traditional classroom boundaries in the evolving landscape of education. Project-based learning (PBL) has emerged as a prominent method, recognized for cultivating students' critical thinking,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sharina854@uitm.edu.my

collaboration, and problem-solving skills Smith and Clark [1]. PBL empowers students to tackle real-world challenges directly, promoting learning through hands-on exploration and creative problem-solving. This approach emphasizes not just knowledge acquisition but the development of essential skills for success.

In language education, learner autonomy holds significant importance for enhancing learning outcomes. Research indicates that employing language learning strategies contributes to improved learning efficacy and language proficiency development Oxford [2] and, Wong and Nunan [3]. Additionally, learner autonomy has been linked to increased student motivation, active engagement in learning activities, and enhanced language proficiency Dörnyei and Csizér [4], Dincer et al., [5], Dafei [6], and Mohamadpour [7]. Aligned with learner autonomy, PBL encourages students to take control of their learning journey Benson [8] and Little [9]. In PBL, students are given opportunities to make decisions, set goals, and manage their time effectively as they engage in authentic projects. This fosters independence, self-direction, and critical thinking among learners which are persistent in the learner autonomy learning concept Benson [10].

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB 2013-2025) highlights the use of Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) to improve language proficiency among students. Unfortunately, autonomous learning which remains a crucial element is found to be missing from English language classrooms due to the exam-oriented system, as well as traditional teacher-centred approaches, widely persisted in Malaysia Yunus and Arshad [11]. Thang [12-14] reported in her studies that in the Malaysian context, undergraduates of the National University of Malaysia (both distance learners and on-campus learners) are very teacher-centred which is no longer fit in this 21st century teaching and learning. In addition, according to a study by Mahamood *et al.*, [15], 218 undergraduates in private higher learning in Sarawak stated that the university lecturers used a teacher-centred approach and sometimes student-centred approach as their teaching methods. Many learners have a pre-conceived perception of their lack of skills and low self-esteem in taking responsibility for empowered learning. As a result, they display negative attitudes towards self-directed learning. Wang [16] underscores the dominance of knowledge transmission by teachers in these settings, hampering students' ability to manage their own learning and develop problem-solving skills Mulis as cited in Lengkanawati [17]. Consequently, educators are urged to adopt methodologies that empower learners with greater autonomy, enabling them to enhance their independent learning capabilities.

The issue at hand underscores the need for teachers to relinquish control and empower learners to take charge of their learning process. Teachers must explore techniques or approaches that afford learners more independence in learning. This necessitates both teachers and learners recognizing the importance of learner autonomy. Teachers should facilitate learners in assuming responsibility for various aspects of their learning, including setting objectives, selecting learning activities, accessing resources, choosing assessment methods, and engaging in reflection. Essentially, teachers must actively involve learners in the learning process to promote learner autonomy.

Project-based learning seems to be significant in promoting and fostering learner autonomy in English language classrooms. Trinh [18] utilized a project-based approach to curriculum design to stimulate learner autonomy, particularly in terms of self-regulation. Integrating project-based learning into educational programs or curricula is suggested as an effective means to promote learner autonomy. However, this aspect remains underexplored in the context of Malaysia, particularly within teacher-centred English language teaching environments. The present study addresses this gap by employing a poetry project as a central task to promote learner autonomy in ESL classrooms. Thus, investigating students' engagement in project-based learning activities and understanding how learner autonomy influences their behaviours during these activities is crucial for informing effective teaching practices.

1.2 Research Questions

The study is conducted to seek answers to the following questions

1. How do students perceive the poetry writing project?
 2. What learning outcomes do students attribute to their participation in writing poetry as a project?
 3. In what ways do students perceive personal growth and improvement as a result of participating in the poetry writing project?
2. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate students' perceptions of project-based learning and its impact on their learning experiences, outcomes, and self-improvement. Descriptive qualitative research aims to provide a comprehensive summary or description of a phenomenon, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives Thorne [19], Sandelowski [20] and, Lambert and Lambert [21].

The purpose of this study was to gather evidence on whether project-based learning enhances students' perceptions of their learning experiences, outcomes, and self-improvement among first-semester Diploma students majoring in Business Administration, with the overarching goal of promoting learner autonomy. By employing this research design, the study aimed to explore the phenomenon of project-based learning within an authentic classroom setting, focusing on its potential to foster learner autonomy.

2.1 Population and Sample of the Study

The population for this study comprises Diploma students who were taking English Language Proficiency courses at Universiti Teknologi Mara Kedah Branch. The sample was purposively selected from this population. Specifically, the study sample consists of 30 first-semester Diploma students majoring in Business Administration during the October 2023 – February 2024 semester.

The students were organised into teams of 4-5 members each, with a total of 30 students forming the sample for the study. Each team collaborated on their project for the semester, focusing on a shared goal related to a poetry writing project.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were collected through open-ended survey questions administered to first-semester Diploma students majoring in Business Administration. These questions aimed to elicit detailed responses from participants regarding their perceptions of project work, learning outcomes, and personal development. Participants were encouraged to provide comprehensive insights based on their experiences.

Following data collection, qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions were thematically analysed to gain deeper insights into students' experiences and perspectives. The thematic analysis involved identifying patterns and themes within the responses to uncover common trends and recurring ideas, providing a rich understanding of students' perceptions of project work and its impact on learning outcomes and personal development.

2.3 The Project

The project was a poetry writing project in solidarity with Palestine. The project was carried out in pairs. The students themselves decided on the theme of their video. However, they were advised by the class instructor to include materials and topics from the syllabus content. This is to make sure the students re-activate their prior knowledge and employ the linguistics skills they had acquired during their language course.

The project lasted for about a semester (14 weeks) and consisted of three stages, planning, implementation and presentation stage. The students uploaded their videos to their Facebook closed group. Figure 1 summarises the sequential steps involved in the Poetry Writing Project.

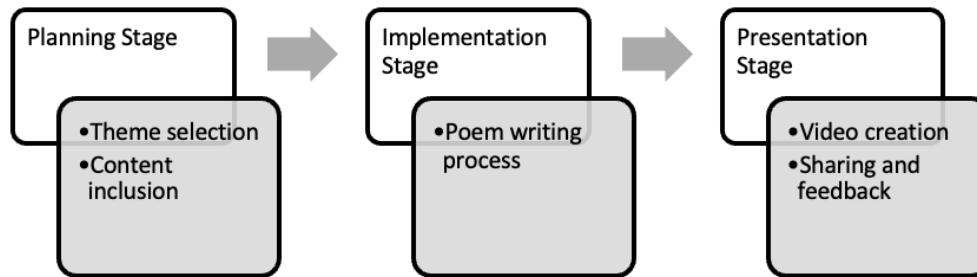


Fig. 1. Key steps in the Poetry Writing Project

3. Results

The learners' answers to the open-ended questions were analysed using a thematic analysis. The analysis was based on the research questions.

3.1 Research Question 1 - How do students perceive the poetry writing project?

To answer this question, the students need to provide their opinions on the poetry writing project. A few themes have been revealed based on the analysis.

3.1.1 Positive attitudes

Students expressed positive attitudes towards the project work.

I think I like this kind of project work because it is about Palestine.

I think I love doing project work with my partner.

I find it interesting and fun to do because not only I can share my ideas with my partner, but I can also improve my social and communication skills.

3.1.2 New experiences

The students recognised the project work as an avenue for experiencing new tasks and gaining valuable experiences.

Project work will help you do some tasks that you never do it.

I think the project work can gain experience for me

3.1.3 Enhancing social issue awareness

The students also viewed the project work as a means to spread awareness about the lives in Gaza, how support to Palestine, and highlight the interest in the collective concern for the issue.

I think the project work has successfully spread awareness about the lives in Gaza.

I think it's good for me because I can show my support for Palestine by doing this project.

I think it is interesting to see everyone care about Palestine.

3.2 Research Question 2 - What learning outcomes do students attribute to their participation in writing poetry as a project?

To answer this question, the students were asked what skills, knowledge, or lessons they learned through their participation in the project work. Based on the student's answers, a few themes have been discovered such as:

3.2.1 Skill development

Several students emphasized the acquisition of various skills through project work:

I can also learn to be a creative student in implementing a project.

The project work makes me learn how to manage projects and assignments more effectively and efficiently.

I learned many things such as I already know how to edit videos, know to handle when doing work in a group and manage my time to finish this project work.

3.2.2 Responsibility and accountability

Students also recognized the significance of responsibility and accountability in project works:

I learn that we need to be more responsible in terms of projects especially in group project.

Honestly, I learn to manage my time very well to complete the group project.

I learn how to actually meet deadlines and soft skills such as editing, etc.

3.2.3 Soft skills acquisition

Moreover, students acknowledged the acquisition of soft skills through project works:

It makes me learn to communicate effectively, solve problems together, and share ideas and responsibilities.

I learn how to work in a group, how to actually meet deadlines and soft skills such as editing, etc.

3.3 Research Question 3 - In what ways do students perceive personal growth and improvement as a result of participating in the poetry writing project?

To answer this question, the students were asked to describe the personal growth and development they experienced as a result of their engagement in the poetry project work. Based on

data analysis, several themes emerge related to the self-improvement experiences students attribute to their engagement in project work:

3.3.1 Skill enhancement

The following excerpts underscore the role of project work in enhancing students' research, communication, time management, and creative skills:

I improve myself by watching and seeking information online, do research about certain topics.
I have improved myself in writing, speaking, and mostly in vocabulary by doing the project work as students need to present their works in front of everyone in the class.
I improve myself by embracing more of the creativity I never thought I had by doing a lot of work projects with my friends.

3.3.2 Confidence building

Some students also mentioned an increase in confidence as a result of project work, particularly in terms of expressing oneself and presenting in front of others:

By doing this project work, I find myself having become more confident and expressive.
I improve my confidence level because before this I was scared to talk in front of people, now I have gained my confidence a little bit.

3.3.3 Collaboration and learning from others

Based on the excerpts as well, students acknowledged the value of collaboration and learning from peers to enhance work quality and skills:

I improve myself by doing project work with asking some advice and opinion from my group members to improve my work quality.
I improve myself by learning from other people.

4. Conclusion

The findings from the students' perceptions of the poetry writing project in the context of project-based learning align closely with the principles and perspectives put forth by some scholars Holec [22], Borg and Busadi [23], Nunan [24], and Oxford [25] in the realm of learner autonomy. Holec [22] emphasized the importance of learners taking control of their learning processes, making decisions, and assuming responsibility for their learning outcomes. In the context of the poetry project, students expressed positive attitudes towards the project work, indicating their active engagement and ownership of their learning experiences. This reflects Holec's notion of learners as autonomous agents who are actively involved in shaping their learning journey.

Borg and Busadi [23] highlighted the role of experiential learning in promoting learner autonomy. The students' recognition of the poetry writing project as an opportunity for experiencing new tasks and gaining valuable experiences resonates with the following reference Borg and Busadi's [23] emphasis on the importance of hands-on, practical learning experiences in fostering learner autonomy. In addition, Nunan [24] emphasized the significance of learner-centered approaches to

language teaching, where learners are actively involved in their learning process and have opportunities for meaningful engagement. The project-based nature of the poetry writing project aligns with Nunan's vision of learner autonomy as learners actively participate in authentic, real-world tasks that are relevant to their interests and needs. Furthermore, Oxford [25] highlighted the multifaceted nature of learner autonomy, encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The students' reported personal growth and improvement, including skill enhancement, confidence building, and collaboration, align with Oxford's [25] view of learner autonomy as involving not only cognitive skills but also affective and social-emotional aspects.

Overall, the findings from the students' perceptions of the poetry writing project within the framework of project-based learning align closely with the importance of learner autonomy in promoting positive attitudes, fostering skill development, and empowering students to take ownership of their learning within authentic, meaningful contexts. Future research could continue to explore the effectiveness of project-based learning approaches in enhancing student learning outcomes and preparing them for success in an ever-changing world. Apart from that, this study significantly contributes to the growth of learner autonomy in Malaysia by highlighting student's empowerment in ESL classrooms environment. These resources can be effectively employed by educators to offer students genuine and immersive English language learning opportunities.

Acknowledgements

The researchers extend their sincere gratitude to the class lecturer for her invaluable assistance throughout the project. Additionally, heartfelt thanks are extended to all the students who enthusiastically participated in the study, contributing their insights and experiences.

References

- [1] Smith, K. A., and A. M. Clark. "Project-based learning: A review of the literature." *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1-17.
- [2] Oxford, Rebecca L. *Teaching and researching language learning strategies: Self-regulation in context*. Routledge, 2016.
- [3] Wong, Lillian LC, and David Nunan. "The learning styles and strategies of effective language learners." *System* 39, no. 2 (2011): 144-163.
- [4] Dörnyei, Zoltán, and Kata Csizér. "Ten commandments for motivating language learners: Results of an empirical study." *Language teaching research* 2, no. 3 (1998): 203-229.
- [5] Dincer, A., S. Yesilyurt, and S. Hede. "Investigating the role of personality traits, self-regulated learning strategies, and motivation in predicting academic achievement." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 47 (2012): 1024-1029.
- [6] Dafei, D. "The development of learner autonomy in Chinese language learning: A sociocultural perspective." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Essex, 2007.
- [7] Mohamadpour, S. "Autonomy, motivation, and learning strategies: A study of Iranian EFL learners." *TESOL Journal* 4, no. 1 (2013): 57-76.
- [8] Benson, P. *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Pearson Education, 2001.
- [9] Little, D. *Learner autonomy: Definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin, Ireland: Authentik, 1991.
- [10] Benson, P. *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Pearson Education, 2011.
- [11] Yunus, M. M., and M. Y. Arshad. "The impact of the examination-oriented education system on the teaching-learning process at the university level." *Journal of Education and Practice* 5, no. 32 (2014): 126-131.
- [12] Thang, S. M. "Learning approach, learning preferences, learning strategies and learner autonomy: A study of Malaysian undergraduates." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Essex, 2001.
- [13] Thang, S. M. "Self-regulation in Malaysian distance language learners." *Distance Education* 24, no. 2 (2003): 195-212.
- [14] Thang, S. M. "Learning approach, learning preferences, and learning styles among Malaysian students: A review of the literature." *Educational Research for Policy and Practice* 4, no. 2 (2005): 147-156.
- [15] Mahamood, S., L. W. Low, N. Ismail, and N. Arshad. "Teaching practices and readiness towards learner autonomy: A case study." *e-BANGI: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2009): 136-151.

- [16] Wang, Dan. "The dilemma of time: Student-centered teaching in the rural classroom in China." *Teaching and teacher education* 27, no. 1 (2011): 157-164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.07.012>.
- [17] Lengkanawati, Nenden Sri. "Teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and its implementation in Indonesian EFL settings." *Language learner autonomy: Teachers' beliefs and practices in Asian contexts* (2016): 134-149.
- [18] Trinh, T. Q. "Project-based language learning: Student perceptions in a college EFL environment." *Asian EFL Journal* 7, no. 4 (2005): 98-120.
- [19] Thorne, Sally, Sheryl Reimer Kirkham, and Janet MacDonald-Emes. "Interpretive description: a noncategorical qualitative alternative for developing nursing knowledge." *Research in nursing & health* 20, no. 2 (1997): 169-177. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1098-240X\(199704\)20:2<169::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-I](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1098-240X(199704)20:2<169::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-I).
- [20] Sandelowski, M. "Focus on research methods: Whatever happened to qualitative description? Research in Nursing dr Health, 23 (4), 334-340." (2000).
- [21] Lambert, Vickie A., and Clinton E. Lambert. "Qualitative descriptive research: An acceptable design." *Pacific Rim international journal of nursing research* 16, no. 4 (2012): 255-256.
- [22] Holec, Henri. *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. 1981.
- [23] Borg, Simon, and Saleh Al-Busaidi. "Learner autonomy: English language teachers' beliefs and practices." (2012).
- [24] Nunan, David. "Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy." In *Autonomy and independence in language learning*, pp. 192-203. Routledge, 2014.
- [25] Oxford, R. L. "Language learning styles and strategies." In *The handbook of second language acquisition*, edited by C. J. Doughty and M. H. Long, 383-409. Blackwell Publishing, 2003.