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Project-Based or Problem-Based Learning? Unveiling Islamic University Students' Preferences and Experiences in Writing Classes

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Abstract

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) have emerged as the leading teaching methods of this century. Thus, this study investigates the students' preferences and experiences with PjBL and PBL in the development of writing skills at an Islamic university in Indonesia. Utilizing the qualitative analysis framework proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), this research provides an in-depth examination of the students' experiences, preferences, and the pedagogical efficacy of these two approaches. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the students who participated in writing courses that incorporated both PjBL and PBL strategies, allowing for a comprehensive comparison of their impacts on writing skills. The findings reveal that PjBL was particularly effective in enhancing the students' writing abilities by nurturing sustained engagement, enabling thorough content exploration, and supporting iterative refinement through extended project work that integrates research, critical thinking, and feedback. In contrast, PBL proved valuable in promoting critical thinking and concise writing by utilizing structured problem-solving tasks. Overall, the study contributes to the discourse on effective writing instruction in higher education by suggesting that, while PjBL offered a more comprehensive framework for writing development, PBL served as a practical complementary method. The combined use of these strategies could, therefore, provide a balanced framework for enhancing the students' academic writing proficiency.

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Keywords: Islamic education, problem-based learning (PBL), project-based learning (PjBL), quality education, writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the continually evolving educational landscape, traditional teaching methods are being increasingly scrutinized for their effectiveness in preparing students with the essential 21st-century skills. To address this, incorporating technology into English language learning has become a key strategy, as it not only enhances access to diverse resources but also motivates students through iterative and engaging learning experiences. [Sulistiyo et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasized the significance of factors such as attitudes, motivation, and ICT skills in shaping students' acceptance of ICT in language learning, offering a framework for understanding how to enhance effective ICT integration in EFL settings. These components, including communication, IT skills, critical thinking, analytical abilities, and interpersonal relationships, are interlinked and form the foundation of essential skills for modern students. Writing courses, in particular, play a critical role in developing these skills, as they nurture communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. However, conventional approaches that rely heavily on rote learning and passive engagement have been criticized for inadequately preparing students to meet complex, real-world challenges ([Kokotsaki et al., 2016](#); [Prince, 2004](#); [Shah et al., 2024](#)). This critique has driven a shift towards innovative pedagogical methods, such as Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which emphasize active, inquiry-based learning and aim to better equip students for the demands of the 21st century.

Rooted in constructivist theories, these methods support the idea that students actively construct knowledge through experience and reflection ([Piaget, 1971](#); [Vygotsky, 1978](#)). This approach aligns particularly well with writing instruction, where skill development requires not only knowledge acquisition but also the application of that knowledge in real-world contexts ([Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006](#)). PjBL and PBL foster self-regulated learning, where students set goals, plan and monitor their progress, and reflect on outcomes, thereby strengthening the independence needed to handle complex academic writing tasks that matter in university and workplace contexts ([English & Kitsantas, 2013](#); [Stefanou et al., 2013](#); [Wu, 2024](#)).

Researching students' preferences for these methods is essential, as there is a strong link between students' engagement and learning outcomes. According to self-determination theory, students are more motivated and achieve higher learning gains when they have autonomy in their learning choices ([Ryan & Deci, 2000](#)). Understanding students' preferences for PjBL or PBL can provide significant contributions to how these methods support intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement, especially in writing courses where continuous effort is required to refine skills. This is particularly relevant in Islamic universities, where integrating religious and secular education amplifies the need for engagement strategies that resonate with students' cultural and intellectual backgrounds.

Empirical studies underline the efficacy of both PjBL and PBL in enhancing writing skills and critical thinking. For instance, [Arochman et al. \(2024\)](#) found significant pre-post gains in tertiary EFL students' argumentative-writing performance after a PjBL intervention, and [Andargie et al. \(2025\)](#) reported significant improvements in undergraduate EFL learners' writing performance following project-based instruction. These findings support broader research showing that student-centered approaches—including project- and problem-based formats—are associated with higher achievement and stronger motivation in higher education ([Chen & Yang, 2019](#); [Shah et al., 2024](#); [Wijnia et al., 2024](#)).

In Islamic university settings, where students engage with both religious and academic discourses, the relevance of PjBL and PBL is particularly prominent. These methods allow students to engage in meaningful writing tasks that bridge secular and religious knowledge, thereby enhancing their ability to communicate complex ideas across diverse contexts ([Pratama & Abidin, 2024](#)). For example, a PjBL assignment might require students to create a digital platform learning content addressing community-specific issues, while a PBL task could involve

analyzing ethical issues from both Islamic and secular perspectives (Thomas, 2000). Prior research affirmed the effectiveness of these approaches in enhancing independence, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006).

This study focuses on Islamic universities, where the integration of secular and religious education creates a unique learning environment. Students in these institutions are encouraged not only to acquire academic skills but also to deepen their understanding of Islamic values, which guide their ethical and moral development (Maspuroh et al., 2025). This dual emphasis on secular and religious knowledge offers a distinct context in which to explore the effectiveness of PjBL and PBL. Both approaches are well-suited to encouraging critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, thereby supporting students in reconciling their academic pursuits with their cultural and spiritual commitments. Given that Islamic universities aim to prepare graduates to contribute meaningfully to their communities while upholding their religious principles (Aziz & Huda, 2024), examining PjBL and PBL in this setting is particularly relevant. This exploration provides perspectives into how educational methods can be adapted to address the diverse needs of learners in culturally specific contexts.

A preliminary research at Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia, involving interviews with the English lecturers teaching through PjBL and PBL, emphasized the relevance of these approaches. The lecturers noted not only positive impacts on the students' writing skills and critical thinking but also highlighted challenges, such as varying levels of the students' preparedness and the need for structured support. Consequently, this study aims to deepen our understanding of how these approaches impact the students' writing development, offering constructive input into effective pedagogical strategies in Islamic educational settings.

Despite significant research on the effectiveness of PjBL and PBL in various educational settings, the specific preferences and experiences of Islamic university students in writing classes have not been extensively explored. Their perspectives, particularly regarding how PjBL and PBL align with their unique educational context, have largely been absent from the broader discourse. This gap is crucial, as understanding these perspectives is essential for developing pedagogical approaches that effectively meet the dual objectives of Islamic universities, namely, integrating religious and secular education. This study aims to address this gap by examining the preferences and experiences of the Islamic university students in writing classes that utilize PjBL and PBL.

The objectives of this study are to explore Islamic university students' preferences and experiences with PjBL and PBL in writing courses, identify the challenges they encounter, and assess the perceived efficacy of each model in developing writing skills. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the preferences and experiences of the Islamic university students in writing classes utilizing PjBL and PBL?
2. What challenges do the students encounter with PjBL and PBL in writing instruction?
3. Which learning model, PjBL or PBL, do the students perceive as more effective in enhancing their writing skills?

By focusing on this unique student population, the study seeks to provide key understandings that can inform the development of more effective teaching strategies, ensuring that these approaches resonate with the cultural and educational values inherent in Islamic universities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Constructivist theories of learning, particularly those of Piaget (1971) and Vygotsky (1978), have strongly influenced strategies such as Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL). These approaches emphasize students' active knowledge construction through experience and reflection, aligning with writing as a process of discovery rather than simply information transfer (Baaijen & Galbraith, 2018). In the context of Islamic education, where there is a need to integrate both academic and spiritual objectives, PjBL and PBL are

particularly effective. These approaches engage students in real-world problems and extended projects, which not only enhance their writing skills but also cultivate critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities (Gunawan et al., 2025).

2.1 Project-Based Learning and Problem-Based Learning in Writing Classes

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) are closely related pedagogical approaches that share a common focus on active, student-centered learning. However, they differ in their emphasis and structure. PjBL typically involves the completion of a project that spans an extended period, with students working collaboratively to solve a complex problem or create a final product (Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2005). PBL, on the other hand, is more focused on the process of problem-solving, where students are presented with a problem at the outset and then work through a structured process to develop a solution (Jones, 2019).

Both approaches are effective in enhancing the students' writing skills. For example, Tarigan (2021) demonstrated that the application of PBL, combined with direct object observation techniques, significantly improved the news writing skills of high school students in Indonesia. The study found that the students' average scores increased by 9.7 points, from 68.6 to 78.3, following the implementation of the PBL model. Furthermore, the students reported a positive response to the PBL approach, with the majority expressing greater engagement and motivation in their writing tasks.

In the context of Islamic universities, where writing is a critical skill for both academic and professional success, the potential benefits of PjBL and PBL are significant. These approaches not only help students develop their writing skills but also enrich critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities (Cahyono et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2020; Liu & Pásztor, 2022). Moreover, by engaging students in real-world tasks that are relevant to their lives and future careers, PjBL and PBL can enhance their motivation and engagement in learning (Kong & Wang, 2024; Shah et al., 2024).

2.2 The Role of Students' Preferences in Learning Models

Students' preferences play a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes, as these preferences often influence engagement, motivation, and learning effectiveness. Research has shown that when students' personal learning inclinations align with instructional methods, it can enhance intrinsic motivation and satisfaction, resulting in improved academic performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For instance, in the context of online learning, the studies have demonstrated that the factors influencing students' preferences include the availability of adequate resources, the flexibility of learning schedules, and the effectiveness of instructional technology (Nurteti et al., 2023). These factors suggest that adapting education to students' needs can greatly enhance engagement, crucial for PjBL and PBL.

Furthermore, in their investigation of students' preferences in hybrid learning environments, Nurteti et al. (2023) highlighted that the students who were provided autonomy in choosing learning paths were more likely to exhibit sustained engagement and commitment to the academic tasks. This aligns with the self-determination theory, which suggests that autonomy-supportive environments foster greater intrinsic motivation and academic resilience (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By understanding students' preferences, educators can create a learning environment that not only caters to students' academic needs but also supports their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, especially in complex tasks such as writing and research assignments commonly used in PjBL and PBL settings.

In the Islamic university contexts, these insights are particularly relevant as the students are required to integrate secular and religious knowledge within their academic pursuits. The dual focus on secular and religious studies necessitates an understanding of students' preferences, as it affects their motivation and the perceived relevance of tasks to their cultural and intellectual identities. For example, the studies have noted that the Islamic university students were more engaged when the tasks allowed them to explore ethical issues from both Islamic and secular

perspectives (Pratama & Abidin, 2024; Tarigan, 2021). This dual relevance enhances the applicability of learning content to real-world contexts, aligning with students' cultural and educational aspirations. Thus, considering students' preferences is essential to optimize the impact of PjBL and PBL in writing classes within the Islamic educational settings.

2.3 Islamic University Students' Preferences and Experiences

Understanding the preferences and experiences of Islamic university students in writing classes requires consideration of the unique context of Islamic education. Islamic universities are structured to integrate religious and secular knowledge, promoting a holistic educational approach that emphasizes both spiritual and intellectual development (Fatimah & Sumarni, 2024). In this environment, writing transcends mere technical skill and becomes a vital tool for expressing and communicating complex ideas that bridge the realms of religion and secularism. The use of PjBL and PBL in these writing classes presents a unique opportunity for the students to engage in meaningful, authentic tasks that reflect the dual nature of their education. For instance, a PBL task may involve researching and writing about contemporary ethical issues from both Islamic and secular perspectives, effectively merging religious and academic knowledge. Similarly, a PjBL task could involve creating a publication or digital platform addressing issues pertinent to the Muslim community, thereby applying writing skills in real-world contexts.

The research by Tarigan (2021) indicated that the students generally respond positively to these active, student-centered learning approaches. However, the preferences and experiences of Islamic university students may differ from those in other educational contexts. For example, the students at Islamic universities may have a stronger preference for writing tasks that closely relate to their religious studies or allow them to engage with ethical and moral issues from an Islamic perspective. Therefore, while active, student-centered approaches are effective, their implementation in Islamic universities should be adapted to align with students' religious and ethical contexts.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study investigated the preferences and experiences of Islamic university students in writing courses that implemented PjBL and PBL. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research aimed to capture the nuanced effects of these pedagogical strategies on students' writing competencies. A qualitative methodology was chosen for its capacity to reveal the complex and subjective dimensions of students' experiences, particularly in educational contexts where understanding intricate phenomena in a naturalistic setting is essential. As Creswell (2013) emphasized, qualitative research is highly effective in examining socially constructed realities and the personal meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, rendering it well-suited to the objectives of this study. According to Sulistiyo (2019), qualitative research is inherently descriptive and leans towards an inductive analytical approach. It does not rely on statistical methods; instead, it involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to gain deeper insights.

3.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, striking a balance between structured guidance and the flexibility to explore emerging themes. According to Patton (2015), semi-structured interviews are particularly adept at capturing the intricacies of participants' experiences, thereby allowing researchers to probe deeply into the most meaningful aspects of the learning process. In this study, semi-structured interviews facilitated a comprehensive examination of students' experiences, yielding valuable insights into the effectiveness of PjBL and PBL in enhancing writing skills and highlighting the distinctive

challenges and benefits of these methods within the Islamic university contexts. Data collection was guided by a semi-structured interview guide, developed from an extensive review of literature on PjBL and PBL in educational settings. The guide included 15 open-ended questions organized into four main areas: experiences with PjBL, experiences with PBL, challenges encountered with each method, and a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of PjBL and PBL in enhancing writing skills.

3.3 Research Participants

The participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, a common sampling technique in qualitative research, which is particularly suitable when detailed insights from individuals with specific knowledge or experience are required. The sample comprised 15 fourth-semester students from the English Department at Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia, all of whom had completed academic writing courses and participated in the writing classes employing either PjBL or PBL methods. This sample technique was intentionally chosen to ensure that the participants had relevant exposure to both learning approaches, enabling them to offer well-informed comparisons and reflections. Of the 15 students approached, six returned signed informed consent forms, indicating their willingness to participate. While the response rate may appear limited, the qualitative research prioritizes data saturation over sheer participant numbers. [Guest et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Creswell \(2013\)](#) asserted that data saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights emerge, can often be achieved with a smaller participant pool, particularly when participants share comparable experiences. In this study, six participants were sufficient to reach data saturation, providing in-depth qualitative understandings while upholding rigorous ethical standards and voluntary participation.

3.4 Techniques of Data Analysis

The data analysis adhered to the framework proposed by [Miles and Huberman \(1994\)](#), which involves three key stages: data reduction, data display, and drawing/verification or conclusions, as shown in Figure 1. Data reduction dealt with gathering the initial data, while data display was the stage where the data was presented visually. Data reduction is concerned with simplifying and organizing the data, and finally, a conclusion was drawn.

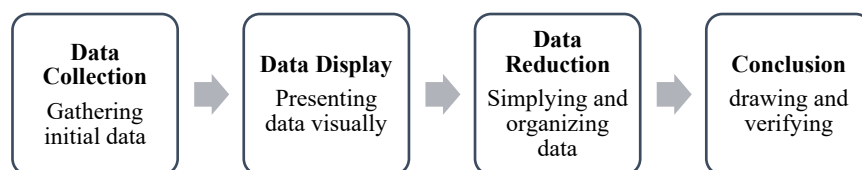


Figure 1. Model of qualitative data analysis (adapted from [Miles and Huberman, 1994](#)).

To enhance the credibility and rigor of the findings, triangulation was rigorously applied. Triangulation entailed utilizing multiple sources, namely, interview data, researcher observations, and relevant literature, to cross-verify identified themes and patterns, thereby bolstering the robustness of the conclusions and mitigating potential researcher bias. Additionally, member checking was employed to validate the accuracy of the interpretations, further reinforcing the trustworthiness of the findings. This comprehensive methodological approach provided a detailed understanding of the impact of PjBL and PBL on writing skills within Islamic university contexts, addressing potential limitations of qualitative research through methodological rigor and systematic triangulation.

The thematic analysis ([Braun & Clarke, 2021](#)) began by systematically reducing data from initial transcripts, filtering out information unrelated to the study's objective of understanding the impact of PjBL and PBL on students' writing skills. Key themes emerged, including preferences and experiences, impact on writing skills, challenges in implementation, comparison, alignment with the Islamic context, and educational principles. Preferences and experiences highlighted how

students found both methods beneficial, while improvements in writing skills were noted in terms of confidence, enjoyment, and skill enhancement. Challenges were identified in implementing both methods, with students facing significant challenges. Comparisons between PjBL and PBL emphasized the effectiveness and engaging nature of each method, while alignment with Islamic values highlighted the importance of cooperation, showing that both methods encourage collaborative learning. Organized in tables and diagrams, the data illustrated how PjBL encourages critical thinking, enhancing writing clarity, while PBL supports independent problem-solving and argument structure. Excerpts from interviews enriched these themes, and findings were validated through triangulation across multiple sources. Ultimately, this comprehensive analysis provided in-depth insights into the distinct benefits of PjBL and PBL in fostering writing skills within the Islamic educational context.

Table 1. Theme and codes identified in students' experiences.

Theme	Code
Preferences and experiences	Having the benefit, impactful
Impact on writing skills	Getting improved, confident Feeling happy, enjoy
Challenges in implementing	Writing struggle, challenge, lack
Comparison	Feeling effective, helpful, focused, engaging
Alignment with the Islamic context	Align the cooperation Educational principles Islamic

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations (Mirza et al., 2023) were meticulously observed throughout the study. Each potential participant received an informed consent form that outlined the study's objectives, procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality measures in place. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence, an essential component in maintaining ethical integrity.

4. RESULTS

The study identified several key themes that emerged from the implementation of PjBL and PBL in the writing classes. These themes are: (1) preferences and experiences in the writing classes, (2) impact on writing skills, (3) challenges in implementing PjBL and PBL, (4) comparison of PjBL and PBL effectiveness, (5) alignment with the Islamic educational context, and (6) recommendations for writing instruction. Each theme revealed distinct characteristics and outcomes related to these pedagogical approaches.

4.1 Preferences and Experiences in Writing Classes

The analysis revealed that the students demonstrated distinct preferences and experiences with both PjBL and PBL. Some participants strongly valued the autonomy granted by PjBL, which enabled them to select the topics relevant to their personal interests and passions. P1 recounted how the freedom to choose topics influenced their engagement and motivation:

- (E1) Writing classes have been really impactful for me. I feel like I gain a lot, especially when I am given the freedom to choose my own topics. It makes the process more meaningful, and I can express myself better because I am interested in what I am writing about. For example, in one assignment, I chose to write about environmental conservation, which is important to me. This motivated me to do more research and made the whole writing process enjoyable. I believe that being able to choose topics boosts my confidence and helps me develop my skills further for future tasks. (P1)

Other students preferred the structured environment of PBL. P3 appreciated the clarity provided by the PBL tasks:

- (E2) I prefer writing classes that provide a clear structure. When I have step-by-step guidance, I know what to focus on and how to improve. Sometimes too much freedom makes me feel lost, but with PBL I can follow the instructions and complete my tasks more confidently. (P3)

This diversity in preference highlights the importance of a balanced curriculum that accommodates both autonomy and structure, aligning with previous findings (Sundari & Febriyanti, 2023) regarding the need to differentiate instruction based on students' individual learning styles and needs. These findings highlight the critical importance of a balanced curriculum that accommodates students' diverse learning styles and preferences. Recent research supports the view that educational approaches must be flexible enough to integrate both structured, problem-solving activities and opportunities for autonomy and creative expression. By incorporating both PjBL and PBL, educators can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment that accommodates students' varied needs. This approach not only enhances the students' engagement but also improves the overall quality of the learning experience.

4.2 Impact on Writing Skills

Both PjBL and PBL contributed to the development of the students' writing skills, albeit in different ways. P4 described how participating in PjBL increased their confidence and proficiency in managing complex writing assignments.

- (E3) I feel more confident in my writing after participating in PjBL. Because the projects lasted a long time, I got used to drafting and revising my work many times. My teacher gave feedback, and I had a chance to improve each version. It really made me pay attention to details and organize my writing better. (P4)

PjBL also enhanced students' awareness of their audience, as elaborated by P4.

- (E4) Before, I only wrote for my teacher. But with PjBL, my writing was shared with my classmates and sometimes published in a class blog. I started thinking about how to make my writing interesting for others and not just get a good grade. It helped me adapt my style and choose better words. (P4).

Meanwhile, PBL was credited for its role in sharpening students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities through concise, evidence-based writing. P2 reflected on their progress.

- (E5) My ability to write has greatly improved since taking this class. The assignments were always about solving real problems, so I had to think quickly and explain my ideas clearly. I learned how to support my arguments with facts and examples, and I feel more confident about writing essays and reports now. (P2)

However, some participants, including P2, noted that the emphasis on problem-solving could limit opportunities for creative or exploratory writing:

- (E6) Sometimes I miss being able to explore different ideas or write stories. PBL is very focused, so there isn't always space to be creative. (P2)

These perceptions confirmed that both approaches raised the important aspects of writing development, but the optimal strategy may involve balancing a structure with the opportunities for creativity. Moreover, the results reveal that both PjBL and PBL play significant roles in developing the students' writing skills, albeit in different ways. PjBL was particularly noted for its ability to foster sustained engagement and deeper understanding of the writing process through iterative drafting and feedback cycles. As described by P4:

- (E7) I feel more confident in my writing after participating in PjBL. Because the projects lasted a long time, I got used to drafting and revising my work many times. My teacher gave feedback, and I had a chance to improve each version. It really made me pay attention to details and organize my writing better. Before, I only wrote for my

teacher. But with PjBL, my writing was shared with my classmates and sometimes published in a class blog. I started thinking about how to make my writing interesting for others and not just get a good grade. It helped me adapt my style and choose better words. (P4)

This experience illustrates the impact of PjBL on both technical and audience awareness, as the students became more attuned to presenting their work to real audiences rather than merely fulfilling assessment requirements. These insights are in line with the findings of [Ariani et al. \(2024\)](#), who observed significant improvements in writing proficiency and engagement when the students participated in iterative and audience-focused writing activities. In contrast, PBL was found to be particularly helpful in enhancing the students' critical thinking and argumentation skills through focused, real-world problem-solving tasks. As explained by P2:

(E8) My ability to write has greatly improved since taking this class. The assignments were always about solving real problems, so I had to think quickly and explain my ideas clearly. I learned how to support my arguments with facts and examples, and I feel more confident about writing essays and reports now. However, sometimes I miss being able to explore different ideas or write stories. PBL is very focused, so there isn't always space to be creative. (P2)

E8 highlights how PBL developed the students' abilities in constructing evidence-based arguments and concise writing, though sometimes at the expense of creativity and exploratory writing. This concern is also echoed by [Muslem et al. \(2024\)](#), who noted that while structured tasks significantly enhance writing skills, they may also restrict the students' opportunities for creative expression.

4.3 Challenges in Implementing PjBL and PBL

While PjBL and PBL offer substantial benefits, their implementation in writing classes is not without challenges. For PjBL, time management emerged as a central issue for many students. As P5 recounted:

(E9) The biggest challenge is the lack of time to complete the projects. Sometimes we have to research, write, and revise several times, but the semester moves quickly. I often feel rushed to finish my drafts, and it's hard to balance everything, especially when other courses also have assignments. Even though the project is interesting, I wish we had more time to do it well. (P5)

E9 emphasizes the need for careful curriculum design to ensure that the students can progress through each writing stage, research, drafting, and revision, without feeling overwhelmed by tight deadlines. Such issues echo findings by [Padmadewi et al. \(2023\)](#), who stressed the importance of effective time management in PjBL settings. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of PjBL projects also posed difficulties for some students, particularly in selecting and narrowing their topics. Without structured guidance, the students sometimes struggled to organize their ideas or maintain focus. As described by P6:

(E10) I struggled with group work due to differing opinions. In my group, not everyone wanted to work on the same topic, and sometimes some members did more work than others. We had disagreements about how to divide the tasks, and it made the project stressful. I felt responsible for making sure everything got finished, even if others weren't as involved. (P6)

E10 illustrates not only the challenge of open-ended projects but also the complexities of group dynamics, where unequal participation and interpersonal conflicts can arise. These experiences are mirrored in the research of [Inderawati et al. \(2024\)](#), who identified workload imbalance as a source of tension in collaborative learning. Now turning to PBL, the main difficulty reported by the students was the complexity and abstract nature of some problems. Younger or less experienced students, in particular, struggled to grasp intricate scenarios, which limited their ability to produce thorough written responses. Rapid problem-solving demands within tight timeframes often resulted in surface-level analysis rather than a deep exploration. As P3 explained:

- (E11) Sometimes the problem is really complicated, and I don't have enough background to understand it fully. We have to come up with a solution quickly, so I just write what I think is best, but I'm not always confident that my answer is correct or complete. It feels like I'm guessing. (P3)

Such concerns echo the findings of [Ruslai and Salam \(2016\)](#) and [Muslem et al. \(2024\)](#), who observed that insufficient prior knowledge and limited time often hinder the students' ability to engage deeply with PBL tasks. Finally, the group work required in both PjBL and PBL sometimes led to uneven contributions, mirroring the group work challenges already described. As noted by [Hashim and Samsudin \(2020\)](#), group-based models can both foster collaboration and generate conflict if not managed carefully.

4.4 Comparison of the Use of PjBL and PBL in Writing Classes

Comparing the effectiveness of PjBL and PBL in writing instruction reveals that each method has distinctive strengths, catering to different students' needs and learning outcomes. PjBL, in particular, was perceived as valuable for developing long-term writing skills, critical thinking, and deep topic engagement. As reflected in the following student's voice:

- (E12) PjBL is more effective and helpful because it provides practical experience. When we work on a big project, I learn how to organize my time, work with my friends, and bring together information from different sources. I can choose a topic I like, so I am more motivated to work hard and finish it well. (P1)

This excerpt highlights how PjBL supported the development of soft skills such as time management, collaboration, and information synthesis. The autonomy to select topics also enhances student motivation and ownership over their learning process, leading to higher engagement and a stronger sense of accomplishment upon project completion. Consistent with previous studies ([Andargie et al., 2025](#); [Boardman et al., 2024](#)), these findings suggest that the students with greater autonomy in topic selection were more likely to produce polished, reflective, and in-depth writing. The iterative cycle of drafting, peer review, and revision in PjBL also enabled the students to internalize the writing process and achieve meaningful improvement over time.

In contrast, PBL was often cited as beneficial for developing the students' quick-thinking and real-world problem-solving skills. P3 described their view as follows:

- (E13) I feel that PBL is better because it focuses more on real-world problems, but in my opinion, PjBL is a more helpful method because it allows students to address real-world challenges by engaging in comprehensive projects. With PBL, I have to think fast, analyze the problem, and write clearly about what I would do. It helps me to be more logical and use evidence in my writing. (P3)

This excerpt shows that PBL tasks, which require concise, evidence-based responses to specific problems, could help students develop practical, analytical, and communication skills that are important for professional and academic success. The structure of PBL nurtured argumentation, reasoning, and logical thinking. However, the students also acknowledged certain limitations of PBL. The relatively short time frames and focus on problem resolution sometimes constrained opportunities for in-depth exploration and creative writing. Thus, a work produced in PBL contexts could feel more utilitarian and less expressive of the student's unique voice.

Taken together, these perspectives confirmed that each approach contributes distinct advantages to the students' writing development. While PjBL was effective for fostering sustained engagement, deep exploration, and creative autonomy, PBL strengthened quick-thinking, problem-solving, and logical reasoning. Thus, a balanced curriculum that integrates both PjBL and PBL may best support the diverse needs of learners in academic writing classes.

4.5 Alignment with Islamic Educational Context

The implementation of PjBL and PBL within an Islamic educational context required particular attention to the alignment of pedagogical approaches with the values and goals of

Islamic education. This context emphasizes not only intellectual development but also the cultivation of moral character, community values, and ethical reasoning. PjBL, with its long-term and collaborative project focus, was especially effective in engaging the students with Islamic values, ethics, and historical themes. Many students selected projects closely connected to their beliefs, enabling them to relate classroom learning to their lived experiences as Muslim youth. For example, P2 shared:

- (E14) In our project, we discussed the importance of zakat and how it helps the poor. Working together on this project, I realized how much cooperation and sharing are important in Islam. We divided the work, helped each other, and learned not just about the rules of zakat, but why it matters for the community. For me, PjBL aligns well with Islamic values because it teaches us to cooperate and care for others, not just study for ourselves. (P2)

E14 illustrates how PjBL supported both academic and moral growth by embedding Islamic values such as cooperation, social justice, and collective responsibility into the learning process. These findings echo the findings of [Rahmatika et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Ulum et al. \(2024\)](#), who reported that collaborative, project-based approaches reinforced the students' engagement with religious principles and promoted both intellectual and moral development. On the other hand, PBL created opportunities for the students to apply Islamic ethical reasoning to real-world dilemmas, integrating faith and problem-solving. Through case studies and scenario-based writing, the students were encouraged to draw on Islamic teachings as frameworks for action. P4 explained:

- (E15) We had to write about how to handle a business problem using Islamic values. At first, it was hard to connect what we learn in religion class to business, but when we talked about honesty, fairness, and helping others, it made sense. The PBL method is consistent with Islamic education, especially when it comes to solving problems in the right way, not just the fastest way. (P4)

The testimony in E15 reflects the integration of Islamic perspectives into academic problem-solving, as students recognized that Islamic principles could guide practical decision-making in a modern context. The findings align with studies showing that embedding Islamic/religious values in PBL/PjBL tasks strengthens students' moral/ethical reasoning alongside analytical skills ([Farida et al., 2017](#); [Lin et al., 2010](#); [Nawi & Zakaria, 2019](#)), who highlighted that embedding religious values in PBL tasks strengthens the students' moral reasoning as well as their analytical skills.

Nevertheless, implementing these methods within the Islamic context required careful topic and task selection. Teachers need to ensure that problems and projects are not only intellectually stimulating but also relevant and respectful of students' religious and cultural backgrounds. As reported by several participants, this necessitated a deep understanding of both Islamic teachings and contemporary issues facing Muslim youth, so that PjBL and PBL activities would resonate and inspire genuine engagement.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that PjBL significantly enhanced the students' writing abilities by promoting sustained engagement, in-depth content exploration, and iterative refinement through extensive project work. By promoting a continuous cycle of drafting and revision, PjBL encouraged the students to integrate critical research, analytical thinking, and feedback, leading to sophisticated written outputs. Evidence from a meta-analysis and a university case study shows that PjBL writing typically involves multiple drafts and peer/teacher feedback, improving organization, clarity, and coherence ([Cahyono et al., 2024](#); [Rochmahwati, 2024](#)). Despite these benefits, however, the demanding timelines and extended project structure inherent to PjBL may pose challenges in educational settings with limited schedules ([Kokotsaki et al., 2016](#)). Additionally, the focus on audience awareness through public-facing tasks, while beneficial for professional development, may create obstacles for students less accustomed to such requirements ([Grieve et al., 2021](#)). Thus, while PjBL proved advantageous for cultivating advanced writing

skills, careful curricular adaptation is necessary to mitigate potential students' stress and disengagement.

In contrast, PBL enhanced analytical and problem-solving skills by engaging students in real-world challenges. Meta-analytic and quasi-experimental evidence shows that PBL's emphasis on practical, immediate application helps students articulate complex ideas concisely and effectively, including in writing contexts (Liu & Pásztor, 2022; Sari et al., 2021). However, this pragmatic focus may limit the depth of writing development, as tasks are oriented towards immediate problem resolution rather than extended exploration. This suggests that while PBL fostered clarity and brevity, it may not support the deeper critical analysis and sustained idea development which PjBL offered. Additionally, PBL's reliance on collaborative group work introduced challenges related to group dynamics and contribution equity, potentially detracting from individual engagement, particularly when group conflicts or imbalances arise. To address these issues, enhancing PBL's effectiveness may require incorporating individual accountability measures and collaboration-focused training, enabling students to navigate the interpersonal aspects of group-based problem-solving more effectively.

The study's findings align with Habibi et al. (2017), who emphasized the need for comprehensive support for educators, such as smaller class sizes and improved access to technology. These provisions could foster an environment conducive to effective classroom management and flexible instructional approaches, including PjBL and PBL. Further supporting this, Sulistiyo et al. (2020) advocated for policy reforms in primary English education that standardized curricula and increased resources, addressing existing educational disparities and elevating students' language skills.

Furthermore, as Al Arif et al. (2024) suggested, integrating ICT into educational practices could enhance the students' autonomy and motivation, especially in EFL contexts. Embedding ICT tools within PjBL and PBL frameworks could promote self-directed learning and ICT literacy, enabling the students to develop both technical and academic skills. This aligns with Sulistiyo et al.'s (2022) emphasis on fostering positive attitudes towards technology, which is crucial for maximizing the benefits of ICT in interactive, student-centered learning environments. While PBL's emphasis on collaboration fosters teamwork, it may occasionally sideline individual development, particularly when consensus-building overshadows personal contributions. Addressing these challenges calls for a balanced instructional approach that incorporates structured support and flexible timelines, ensuring that students can fully engage with their work while making meaningful contributions within collaborative frameworks. By combining the strengths of PjBL and PBL, educators can create a more adaptable and supportive learning environment, maximizing both individual and collaborative learning outcomes.

The comparative evaluation of PjBL and PBL reveals that each approach uniquely contributes to writing development by supporting complementary skill sets. PjBL encouraged the students to engage in reflective and in-depth topic exploration, often leading to more sophisticated and comprehensive written work. On the other hand, PBL's real-world problem-solving focus cultivated analytical precision and effective communication. Integrating both methods within a writing curriculum could establish a balanced instructional model that draws on each approach's strengths, offering a more holistic and versatile learning experience (Darmawan et al., 2024). Particularly within Islamic educational contexts, combining PjBL and PBL aligned the students' academic and spiritual development, helping to reinforce their cultural and ethical values. Nonetheless, these methods must be carefully adapted to resonate with students' cultural backgrounds and to support the dual objectives of religious and academic education (Annida et al., 2024).

Distinct from previous research, this study highlighted the complex relationship between the students' autonomy and structured guidance, particularly within the context of Islamic higher education. Unlike much of the existing literature, which tended to focus separately on either PjBL or PBL, the findings of the present study showed the value of integrating both approaches to address the diverse cognitive and cultural needs of EFL students. Notably, the data reveal that the students benefited not only from the skill development by each model but also from the alignment of project and problem-based pedagogies with Islamic educational values, such as collaboration,

ethical reasoning, and contextual relevance. This integration represents a unique contribution, offering practical implications for writing instruction that are tailored to culturally specific educational settings (Garim et al., 2023).

While the findings demonstrated the effectiveness of PjBL and PBL in enhancing writing skills within Islamic universities, there are limitations in generalizing these results to other educational contexts. Islamic educational institutions possess distinctive characteristics, where the integration of religious and academic values creates a unique learning environment that may differ significantly from secular institutions. Consequently, the applicability of PjBL and PBL in non-religious settings may yield varied outcomes. Recognizing this limitation not only enriches the analytical depth of this study but also emphasizes its unique contributions to understanding pedagogy within culturally specific contexts. Moreover, this limitation opens pathways for a more critical comparison with prior studies and underlines the need for future research to explore the adaptability of these pedagogical approaches across diverse educational frameworks.

In line with these findings, we recommend that educators adopt a balanced integration of PjBL and PBL, provide structured guidance throughout the writing process, and ensure that instructional practices are relevant to students' cultural and religious contexts. Professional development for teachers is essential to facilitate the effective implementation of both approaches, and ongoing assessment and feedback should be emphasized to support students' continuous growth. By applying these strategies, educators can create more meaningful, engaging, and effective writing instruction that is responsive to students' diverse needs.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical importance of implementing a balanced framework in writing instruction by integrating Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL). PjBL was particularly beneficial for developing in-depth content engagement, iterative refinement, and advanced writing capabilities through prolonged project work. Its structure supported the students in developing polished, well-organized written outputs by encouraging a continuous process of drafting and revising. On the other hand, PBL contributed to the development of analytical precision and problem-solving abilities by focusing on real-world applications, which helped the students articulate complex ideas concisely and effectively.

The findings suggest that a dual approach, incorporating both PjBL and PBL, could substantially enhance the quality of writing instruction, equipping the students with a versatile set of skills. Specifically, the combination of extensive exploration through PjBL and focused problem-solving through PBL addresses both depth and practicality in writing tasks, preparing the students for a range of academic and professional demands. Educators are therefore encouraged to adopt a hybrid model, which leverages the strengths of each approach while providing structured guidance to support students through each phase of their writing process. Additionally, contextual relevance, particularly within culturally specific educational settings such as Islamic education, should be considered to align instructional methods with students' cultural and ethical values, further enhancing engagement and learning outcomes.

Enhancing the practical relevance of this study involves offering educators guidance on balancing PjBL and PBL across diverse settings through strategic alignment with specific objectives and constraints. PjBL may be more effective in advanced or research-focused courses that require in-depth, iterative exploration, while PBL suits vocational or professional programs demanding immediate, real-world problem solving; hybrid models combining PjBL's structure with shorter PBL tasks can also reinforce practical skills. Adapting the balance according to institutional goals, student readiness, and resources enables a flexible framework that leverages the strengths of both methods. Professional development is essential to equip educators with the skills needed to implement these approaches effectively, while future research should examine their adaptation in varied contexts to assess long-term impacts on writing proficiency. Together, these recommendations advance writing instruction and support holistic educational growth through integrated PjBL and PBL methodologies.

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