

Shared voices from the classroom: Reflections on hybrid project-based learning in an academic writing course

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid project-based learning effectively develops academic writing skills in preparation for a gradual return to face-to-face instruction after a two-year pandemic triggered by Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Since this hybrid project-based learning initiative is a pioneering effort, it is essential to reflect on the program's successes and identify areas for improvement. This case study aims to explore the lecturers' and students' reflections on using hybrid project-based learning in academic writing courses. In-depth interviews and end-of-semester reflection were utilized to obtain data. Thematic analysis was conducted using the qualitative data analysis (QDA) miner lite software for data reduction. the findings revealed three prominent themes that emerged in this lecturers' reflections: i) integrating varied learning modalities; ii) fostering critical thinking and involvement; and iii) improving competencies, as they were also crucial to boosting professional development. Meanwhile, students portray hybrid project-based learning as challenging and rewarding and fosters a sense of value and acceptability among students. This research has transformative implications for curriculum development and instructional practices in higher education, especially academic writing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of the global trend to 21st-century education on higher education, especially in Indonesia, is becoming apparent by the day. This article examines the enormous impact of 21st-century learning concepts on the academic environment in Indonesia, delving into the specific settings of these institutions. It is crucial to acknowledge that national boundaries do not limit this shift in educational paradigm and is having an effect on academic policies all over the world [1]. In the current rapidly changing educational environment, student participation is of the utmost importance since students play a critical part in expanding educational methods, knowledge, and technology. It is impossible to exaggerate how important it is for instructors to have a part in assisting this process [2], [3]. In facing the 21st-century educational reforms to equip pupils not only with practical abilities such as cognitive knowledge but also with professional abilities [4] in addition to problem-solving and collaborative teamwork [1].

After a pandemic triggered by Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) that lasted for more than two years, face-to-face instruction has gradually returned. Therefore, it needs balanced education to integrate online learning as they experienced during the pandemic and face-to-face interaction called hybrid learning. It blends the benefits of traditional classroom instruction with those of online mode [5]. It provides a flexible

learning environment and a comprehensive educational experience, ensures interpersonal interaction and learning engagement, and is considered beneficial for improving the learning outcomes [6] of students with different learning styles [7]. However, the use of hybrid learning itself has not yet made students well-equipped with either adequate knowledge or linguistic competencies. Therefore, integrating hybrid and active learning instruction is essential. Project-based learning is a form of dynamic learning education that encourages students to solve practical issues in a collaborative learning setting [8], [9]. Higher education supports it as a dominant teaching instruction to facilitate meaningful and profound learning by linking concepts and knowledge to the student's everyday life. Also, it revealed that project-based learning also gives chances for students to develop their critical thinking [10], creative thinking [11], creativity [12], and performance [13].

The interview with the lecturers and observation of the students in the essay writing course revealed they have difficulties providing logical reasoning and interpreting information to extract appropriate evidence for supporting their ideas. Therefore, lecturers employed hybrid project-based learning as a preferred approach because it combines the advantages of hybrid and project-based learning. This approach differs from conventional teaching methods, which typically focus only on in-person lecturing or virtual learning. The hybrid project-based learning approach in academic writing permits students to collaborate on academic tasks. Lecturers provide direction at every stage of the writing process, from brainstorming to outlining to drafting and editing. As a result, students' interest is aroused, and their academic writing skills are developed in an engaging and stimulating atmosphere. Since it was the first time implementing hybrid project-based learning, thoughtful considerations of what has worked well and what will be retained with a return to is needed to be conducted [14]. Furthermore, as a sort of self-evaluation, reflection demands teachers to evaluate their professional and personal performance daily to determine whether or not they are living up to the standards [15].

Professional growth in many disciplines relies heavily on reflective practice, including education, nursing, and social work. Reflective practice is the subject of a growing amount of academic inquiry into its advantages and disadvantages and the best ways to include it in professional education. A qualitative study in the social science field found that integrating structured reflection and continuous formative feedback into a social work course at the university level increased student participation, boosted class attendance, and facilitated the integration of students' academic and professional literacy. This strategy excelled in classes with many students [16]. Then, a case study based on the journals of female multilingual students at a Qatari university found that those students preferred lessons built on their existing knowledge. The research did find several problems, however, such as strict classroom management, a lack of electronic feedback, poor time management, and a lack of resources [17]. Finally, a study of future English as a foreign language (EFL) instructors' reflections on their own classroom experiences found that teachers of English need a great deal of teaching experience before they can effectively apply reflective practice [18].

Reflection builds teachers' confidence and makes them more proactive and competent [19]. This concept has been used by educators for a variety of purposes, including problem-solving and decision-making, improving instructional practice [17], as well as having a sharp awareness of the perspectives and attitudes they bring to teaching, especially in problematic situations in their teaching [20]. In line with the previous research, it is essential to reflect on teaching practice in preparation for a gradual return to face-to-face instruction as an impact of the end of the pandemic. As a result, the current study attempts to expand an understanding of lecturers and students through their reflection in an academic writing course using hybrid project-based learning in a university context in Indonesia, which becomes the gap in this research. The current study adds to having lecturers' and students' voices acknowledged and integrated into instructional practices for quality improvement and reflection in higher education. This research is aiming at exploring the lecturers' and students' reflective practice in using hybrid project-based learning in the academic writing course at an Islamic university in Indonesia. The following research questions serve as the basis for this investigation:

- What kind of insights do lecturers get from the hybrid project-based learning in the academic writing course?
- What have students learned from the hybrid project-based learning in the academic writing course?

2. METHOD

A case study was employed as a framework for this research since it allows for in-depth examinations of phenomena, circumstances, and individuals in their life context [21], given the focus on implementing hybrid project-based learning in the academic writing course. This study used interviews and an end-of-course reflection journal with guided questions organized based on Gibbs' reflective cycle [22] to reveal lecturers' and students' reflections on their experiences, respectively.

This 14-week-long study in the academic writing classes was undertaken to be the object of this study for the 2021–2022 academic year. Participants from the English department were selected using a purposeful sampling technique. The respondents of this research were three lecturers (P1, P2, and P3) and students who enrolled in hybrid project-based learning in their academic writing classes. These three female lecturers have five years of experience teaching various writing courses within the English department at The Islamic State Institute of Ponorogo, East Java, Indonesia, beginning with basic writing and progressing through paragraph writing and essay writing. Writing these reflections was entirely optional for the students. They were given an informed consent form and told that their participation was optional and that they might stop at any time. The consent form was sent to three lecturers, and students were instructed to hand in their reflection forms as part of their agreement to participate in the research. At first, 85 students were enrolled in the academic writing classes; 30 voluntarily consented to participate in the research. Since the focus was on in-depth qualitative insights, smaller sample sizes are not acceptable and preferable [21]. These 30 students provided diverse experiences and skills that led us to comprehend hybrid project-based learning in academic writing. In addition, the interview and journal reflection questions were previously validated through peer reviews, assuring both content and construct validity. To eliminate confounding factors of students' prior knowledge and experience, we ensured that all the students in the sample were at the same level of education, and we thoroughly reviewed both the lecturers' interview transcripts and the students' end-of-course reflections to limit any potential biases.

In analyzing data, we employed thematic analysis based on the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke [23] as it is an approach to extracting meaning from texts. We read the lecturers' tape script of the interview and students' end-of-course reflections. The file was imported to create codes in qualitative data analysis (QDA) miner lite. In addition, peer feedback and debate among researchers ensured keyword development into early coding. After completing the data for initial codes as a segment of sub-themes, the researchers discussed and revised them, including confirming QDA Miner Lite's referential adequacy. Next, the researchers integrated and compacted comparable sub-themes into new themes. Finally, data themes were identified and named.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Lecturers' insights into the practice of hybrid project-based learning in academic writing instruction

The interview data was acquired from three lecturers with expertise in academic writing and applying a hybrid project-based learning style in their teaching. The data has been carefully evaluated and structured. The display of this data is arranged to coincide with broader patterns and themes uncovered during the analytical process. By doing so, the objective is to present a full grasp of the instructors' perspectives while also providing insights into the effectiveness of hybrid project-based learning in academic writing courses.

3.1.1. The opportunity to integrate diverse learning approaches

The reflection revealed many opportunities to integrate diverse learning approaches into teaching-learning. The result of the interview expressed how lecturers instruct the academic writing course by combining project-based learning.

"I applied six steps, they are, first, identify the problem to lead them to find the best topic for their project, second design the project then cooperates with the group; next step to employ technology to support the writing, then editing and revising for improving the product, finally, they present the final product." (P1)

"I did synchronous and asynchronous meetings with the students." (P2)

"I use the learning model with a process approach that includes five stages: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing." (P3)

Those respondents briefly describe the employed writing process approach that includes five stages, namely pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, as presented by hybrid project-based learning. This approach can be customized based on student's needs as they explained that they did synchronous and asynchronous meetings for a particular purpose; for example, in the synchronous sessions, hybrid learning through both real and virtual face-to-face learning to discuss how to create good outlining and note-taking as essential skills to compose academic manuscripts. The findings highlighted the necessity of teaching

flexibility and variety. It emphasizes educators' need to constantly evaluate their methods and explore innovative methods to improve student learning.

3.1.2. Stimulating critical thinking and active participation

The participants expressed optimism since hybrid project-based learning encourages students to think critically and creatively. Students must critically think about the content they are learning when participating in hybrid project-based learning, as revealed in the interview.

"I think hybrid learning is the most suitable method for this semester's post-pandemic era. We can't rely on the online mode merely. Based on the previous semester, teaching-learning using a fully online way led the students to learning loss." (P1)

"Using hybrid learning helps them to recover their lost learning. I think this course demands them to enhance their writing and critical thinking skill..." (P2)

"I'm satisfied with this learning process because the students showed their enthusiasm during the learning process, especially when they work in a group to create an argumentative essay." (P3)

Those three participants expressed optimism during and after implementing step-by-step hybrid project-based learning, as seen from the students' enthusiasm during the teaching and learning process. One conveyed further that hybrid learning helps them recover from their learning loss and challenges students to think critically. For students to complete their final project of writing an argumentative essay, they must determine the problems associated with their writing topic, collect information to support their arguments using technology and formulate a solution for presenting their final project by prerequisite criteria. It supports prior evidence that project-based learning promotes critical thinking [10].

3.1.3. Improving competences

The data made it abundantly evident that the lecturers felt satisfied with their activities when they had done professionally in delivering suitable materials. and selecting the approach; the data analysis showed that there were moments when the lecturers felt their efforts were well received. As shown from the interview results in the following

"This strategy can still be utilized for the following academic course, although with some modifications." (P1)

"It needs more preparation by collaborating with a team consisting of some lecturers who teach the same courses.... For the next course, I plan to have different teaching-learning methods, including hybrid project-based learning in various modifications suited to the student's needs." (P2)

"I try to be better in any preparation, starting from materials, methods, techniques, and learning models in a class by discussing with partners who teach the same course." (P3)

Alternatives were included in the suggestions for enhancing activities, such as better preparation, self-regulation, and gaining better knowledge. Lecturers discovered that practice before classroom performance is crucial to teaching and learning. It was inferred that the scheduled activity could be carried out systematically and efficiently with adequate preparation since it directs and facilitates action during class. In addition, lecturers realized that they needed to improve their expertise in academic writing to assist students in producing quality educational documents. It is one way to develop professionalism, as it is one of the benefits of reflective practice. In addition to understanding the subject matter, lecturers must develop their pedagogical knowledge of various teaching approaches. This is because pedagogical knowledge is described as the knowledge that might be categorized as educators' instructional distinctiveness [24]. Therefore, they needed to find a suitable method that was adequate and appropriate to the needs and circumstances of the students as an excellent approach to increase the quality of instructions [19] and assist them in gaining a better understanding of the teaching profession [25]. Even in improving professionalism, they cannot avoid some barriers, such as the difficulty of maintaining the students' engagement, especially in the online phase [26].

3.2. Students' insights into the practice of hybrid project-based learning in academic writing instruction

The primary function of student reflection is crucial to the teaching-learning process, serving as a tool that helps students identify their strengths and deficiencies [27]. Engaged students have contributed numerous views within the context of a hybrid project-based learning course focusing on academic writing. Their thoughts assist in personal development and contribute to the continued advancement of the hybrid project-based learning (PBL) approach in academic writing. These findings possibly offer helpful information for teachers to effective course design, instructional methodologies, and assessment approaches to better suit the different requirements of students.

3.2.1. Rewarding but challenging

Students' reflections demonstrate that the project was not inspiring but also demanding. It can be seen in the following:

"I am very happy with this project because it can help my writing become more focused." (Arefi)

"My friends and I collaborate so that we are happy first and then support each other to help write down what important points and topics will be discussed later." (Charisa)

In general, the students' reflections reveal that the project has provided them with a favorable experience and has assisted them in improving their writing skills. They are all pleased with the project, and they are all eager to keep working on it. Apart from the positive ones, students experienced negative feelings.

"Mobilizing clear ideas in between floating thoughts turned out to be very difficult to apply a work." (Charisa)

"In this project, I found some obstacles such as I am still difficult to divide the time because I have other obligations after lecturer." (Aulia)

"While working on this project I felt dizzy and confused because it was not easy for me to write an article, especially since it was the first time." (Bunga)

All student reflections mention project problems. Charisa struggled to organize clear concepts between drifting thoughts and stay focused. Due to after-class obligations, Aulia had trouble splitting the time. It shows she struggled to balance her project and other commitments. Bunga felt dizzy and bewildered because writing an essay was not easy, especially since it was the first time. She was probably overwhelmed by writing an article for the first time. Despite the difficulties, the students have learned much due to the project. Charisa learned to be more organized and take breaks when she needs them. Aulia learned to establish priorities and ask for support. Bunga learned to be more patient and not be scared to ask for help. Hybrid project-based learning requires students to learn new information, complete various tasks, and work with others. They must find clear evidence to support their argument from journal articles, outline, and draft, and revise their draft based on feedback from the lecturer and peers. It can be overwhelming for students to develop arguments [28], and staying on track can be difficult. While this approach can be overwhelming for students, it can also be very effective in developing their creative thinking [11], especially when they develop a strong thesis statement in an argumentative essay.

Some efforts that teachers can make to solve these challenges are by providing clear expectations and guidelines. Teachers should provide students with clear expectations and guidelines for the project, including the learning objectives, the timeline, and the assessment rubrics [29]. It will help students stay on track and avoid confusion. Implementing the hybrid project-based learning in combination with the process writing approach is the next step that needs to be taken. It will also be abundantly evident how process writing is taught, which facilitates the students' participation in the process of jointly producing texts with the assistance of the instructors [30]. In this context, the process writing approach can scaffold PBL projects. Using the process writing approach, lecturers assign students to write an argumentative essay draft. Students can use the process writing strategy to refine their work throughout the editing phase. They have the option of soliciting comments from their lecturers and peers. The editing process is where they can pay attention to details like grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics. They can also ensure that their work is logically structured and simple to follow. Finally, they can share their work with the rest of the class or post it online.

3.2.2. Feeling valued, welcomed, and accepted

To begin with, hybrid project-based learning creates a collaborative classroom environment where all students feel heard and respected. By facilitating group work and the exchange of ideas on how to select an issue for the topic in their argumentative essay and how to find reliable sources to support their claims both in the offline and online mode, hybrid project-based learning often involves students working in groups [4]. Students can interact with one another, express their thoughts and viewpoints, and gain more knowledge [31]. This condition facilitates the development of inter-student relationships, which may lead to a warmer and more accepting classroom climate.

“I am happiest when my essay is appreciated by my friends which makes me more confident to write my essay.” (Alfiatus)

“I am very happy when I can discuss, exchange ideas or correct my friend's work.” (Alif)

“I am very happy with this project especially the lecturer because it can help my writing become more focused.” (Anis)

Feedback from lecturers and students contributed to improving their final project on constructing highly qualified argumentative essays. It will indirectly establish a shared learning atmosphere that is inviting and welcoming to every student. Students are given chances to reflect on their learning and improve their work when given feedback on their drafts. The way to provide feedback is to meet with students individually or in small groups. During these meetings, students receive individualized evaluations of their work and answers to their queries and improvement ideas. Furthermore, students could ask questions related to the given feedback. Students may have stronger feelings of belonging and acceptance through this method of providing feedback. It refers to the findings of studies that showed that students' satisfaction and motivation increased when they provided and received feedback from instructors and classmates [32].

The interviews among lecturers and students' reflections led to several discernible results. From the lecturers' perspective, their professional competence in delivering information and selecting the appropriate approach improved noticeably, especially when they observed the students' favorable responses to their efforts. It became clear that prior preparation, reflection on past practices, and improving academic writing skills were vital to their success. In turn, despite difficulties with time management and task burden, students demonstrated considerable increases in their critical thinking and collaborative abilities. The collaborative environment produced by the hybrid project-based learning method made them feel valued and welcome. In addition, their ability to compose high-quality argumentative essays was enhanced, as indicated by peer and lecturer comments.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research contributes significantly to the expanding body of knowledge on efficient pedagogical approaches appropriate for the educational environment of the 21st-century. Our analysis reveals significant insights gleaned from the reflective narration of lecturers and students utilizing this innovative learning approach. These experiences show the practical consequences and possible benefits of hybrid project-based learning, such as increasing student engagement, facilitating cooperation, and fostering the development of critical thinking abilities. Furthermore, these findings are not constrained to our geographical or cultural setting; they have global significance for the improvement of educational practices and outcomes. This universality highlights the possibilities for global educators to utilize or adapt these approaches within the context of their academic structures.




However, the study is not without its caveats. The study focused on only three lecturers and thirty students in the academic writing course; thus, students' voices from diverse disciplines were mainly absent. The researchers could only analyse 30 reflections out of 85 students who enrolled in the hybrid project-based learning since 30 students agreed to participate in the research. As a result, rather than making participation voluntary, it may be built into the requirements of the course. It is also crucial to reassure students that their comments will not be counted against them regarding marks or assessments. Regarding the globally shared issues in modern education, we expect that these insights will resonate with international stakeholders, ranging from educators to policymakers, and contribute to the global advancement of successful pedagogical practices.

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