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The Implementation of Problem-Based Learning to Improve EFL Junior High School Students' Writing Skills

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A B S T R A C T

This research investigated the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) to improve the writing skills of 32 seventh-grade EFL students in class VII D. The study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design conducted over two cycles, each consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The methodology integrated both quantitative and qualitative data collection, utilizing writing tests, interview sheets, observations, and photographic evidence. The results demonstrated a significant and consistent improvement in students' writing performance and classroom engagement. The mean score progressed from 55.59 in the pre-test to 73.87 in Cycle I, and reached 83.68 in Cycle II.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is a productive and expressive language skill used for indirect communication. It does not develop automatically but requires consistent practice. Mastering writing offers numerous benefits, including the ability to articulate ideas and expand vocabulary. Given its importance, it is crucial for educators to ensure students achieve writing proficiency. However, teaching writing is often challenging because it is perceived as more difficult than listening, reading, or speaking. Teachers must address students' specific needs while demonstrating that writing is an engaging activity, thereby motivating them to improve.

This study focuses on descriptive text, a required topic in the seventh-grade curriculum centered on describing surrounding objects. Based on classroom observations, students frequently lose personal belongings such as stationery. By mastering descriptive text, students can practically apply this skill to announce and describe lost items. However, students face several difficulties: struggling to express ideas in written form, relying heavily on the teacher, and lacking understanding of tenses, vocabulary, and generic structures. This condition aligns with Ismayanti and Kholiq (2020), who state that students struggle with descriptive writing due to inadequate competence in sentence construction, a lack of ideas, and low interest in learning English.

To address these issues, the researcher intends to implement Problem-Based Learning (PBL). PBL provides an effective learning environment that encourages group discussion, analytical thinking, and independent learning. A classroom atmosphere must stimulate students to be active and creative in writing tasks (Jumariati & Irawati, 2017). By utilizing open-ended problems based on real-life situations, PBL stimulates students to generate ideas (Amalia & Rusfandi, 2020) and makes the learning process meaningful (Yew & Goh, 2016). In the modern EFL context, PBL serves as a vital pedagogical tool that fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills simultaneously (Sajidin, 2025).

Furthermore, working collaboratively to solve real-world problems significantly enhances students' active learning and engagement in the language classroom (Sajidin & Ashadi, 2021). By facilitating this structured activity, PBL helps students overcome difficulties in formulating ideas and arranging coherent descriptive sentences (Ibnian, 2023).

The integration of PBL into writing instruction provides a structured pathway that aligns seamlessly with the writing process. When students are presented with a real-world problem, such as identifying the specific characteristics of a lost item, they are naturally guided through the pre-writing stage by brainstorming relevant vocabulary and physical descriptions. During the subsequent investigation and group discussion phases, students collaboratively outline their ideas, which directly supports the drafting process. This systematic approach ensures that students are not left staring at a blank page; instead, they have a clear context and a shared linguistic foundation to construct well-organized descriptive paragraphs.

Beyond cognitive improvements, PBL fundamentally addresses the affective challenges of writing by reducing student dependence on the teacher. Traditional, teacher-centered classrooms often leave students feeling anxious and hesitant to make mistakes. By shifting the instructional focus to student-led inquiry, PBL fosters a strong sense of ownership and autonomy over their learning process. When students realize their writing serves a practical, communicative purpose, such as helping a peer recover a lost belonging, their intrinsic motivation increases. This reduction in writing anxiety, combined with peer support during collaborative problem-solving, builds the necessary confidence for students to explore language and express their ideas more freely.

Several recent studies corroborate the efficacy of PBL in enhancing writing skills. Mairani (2022) demonstrated that PBL helps students increase their knowledge and write more creatively by finding ideas based on their needs. Similarly, Nafisah, Setianingsih, and Qomariyah (2022) found a significant improvement in writing proficiency among students taught using the PBL method. Motivated by these findings and the specific writing challenges observed, this research aims to investigate the extent to which PBL can improve the descriptive writing skills of seventh-grade students at SMP Generasi Cerdas and to identify the main factors influencing this improvement.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Writing in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context is widely recognized as a highly complex and demanding skill that requires learners to synthesize multiple cognitive and linguistic elements simultaneously. Unlike spoken communication, writing demands precise control over grammar, vocabulary, and structure. Aminah and Supriadi (2023) highlight that EFL students consistently encounter significant barriers in writing, primarily due to grammar errors, lack of vocabulary, and insufficient reading interest. These foundational linguistic weaknesses impede their ability to effectively express their ideas on paper, making writing one of the most challenging language skills to master in a classroom setting.

Beyond basic language mechanics, students also struggle with the cognitive demands of organizing texts logically. Empirical investigations by Rahman and Chonpracha (2023) confirm that students' predominant challenges lie in adapting to academic writing styles and structuring their thoughts coherently. Addressing these complex barriers requires more than traditional, teacher-centered theoretical explanations. Pedagogical models like Problem-Based Learning (PBL) have proven to be highly effective in building students' academic writing proficiency by forcing them to actively construct sentences in response to specific, structured challenges, rather than merely memorizing language rules (Wati, 2024). In the junior high school EFL curriculum, descriptive text serves as an essential genre that bridges foundational vocabulary with structured writing. The primary objective of a descriptive text is to detail the specific characteristics of objects, people, or places to create a clear mental image for the reader. The mastery of this genre requires students to construct well-organized paragraphs adhering to specific generic structures—namely

identification and description, while utilizing accurate language features such as specific nouns and simple present tense.

Despite its practical communicative purpose, junior high school students often face acute difficulties when tasked with composing descriptive texts. Recent classroom-based research by Yuniar and Siswana (2024) reveals that students struggle significantly in generating initial ideas, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and constructing grammatically correct sentences to describe a subject. To facilitate this complex process, instructional support is crucial. Hasan and Bidin (2023) assert that targeted pedagogical interventions, particularly scaffolding strategies, significantly enhance students' descriptive paragraph writing skills by guiding them systematically from the brainstorming phase to the final drafting of coherent sentences.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) emerges as a highly suitable student-centered pedagogical model to address these specific descriptive writing challenges. In the EFL classroom, PBL shifts the focus to collaborative, inquiry-based language application where real-world problems dictate the learning process. Research by Alghamdy (2023) demonstrates the high efficacy of PBL strategies in significantly enhancing EFL learners' paragraph writing and grammar skills. This is further corroborated by Fiddin et al. (2025), whose recent Classroom Action Research confirms that implementing PBL significantly improves not only the students' vocabulary and grammatical accuracy but also the coherence and content organization of their written texts. By presenting a concrete problem, such as writing an accurate description to recover a lost item, PBL compels students to actively seek the necessary linguistic tools, fostering a highly engaging and effective writing environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to solve practical problems in the English writing classroom. According to Burns (2010), CAR is highly appropriate for English Language Teaching (ELT) as it allows educators to systematically investigate and improve their own instructional practices. The research adopted the cyclical model developed by Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014), which consists of four interdependent stages in each cycle: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The study was conducted in two complete cycles to ensure a comprehensive improvement in students' writing skills through the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL).

The research was conducted at the seventh-grade level, specifically targeting class VII D. The subjects consisted of 32 students. This class was selected based on preliminary observations indicating significant difficulties in composing descriptive texts and a high dependency on teacher-centered instruction.

The research was executed in two cycles, with each cycle consisting of two meetings. The procedures were structured as follows:

1. Cycle I: The researcher administered a pre-test requiring students to write a basic descriptive text to establish a baseline score. Subsequently, the first

pedagogical treatment utilizing PBL was implemented. The cycle concluded with Post-test I to measure initial cognitive progress.

2. Cycle II: Based on the reflection of Cycle I, the researcher redesigned the lesson plan to provide more intensive PBL treatments and specific guidance for students who still lacked a profound understanding of descriptive texts. This cycle concluded with Post-test II to evaluate the final improvement in writing proficiency.

To ensure data validity and reliability, this study utilized a mixed-methods approach for data collection, combining both quantitative and qualitative instruments (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021):

1. Quantitative Data: Writing tests (Pre-test, Post-test I, and Post-test II) were administered to objectively measure the statistical improvement in students' descriptive writing scores.
2. Qualitative Data: Observation Sheets: Utilized to systematically record students' active participation and behavioral changes during the PBL process.
3. Interview Sheets: Conducted to gather in-depth responses regarding students' enthusiasm, perceptions, and remaining difficulties.
4. Photographic Evidence: Collected as visual documentation of the classroom atmosphere and group discussions during the problem-solving activities.

Quantitative data derived from the writing tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate the mean scores of the pre-test and post-tests, tracking the progression across cycles. Concurrently, qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to evaluate qualitative changes in students' learning behaviors and engagement levels.

RESULTS

The findings of this Classroom Action Research utilize both quantitative data (writing test scores) and qualitative data (observation checklists, field notes, and interviews) to illustrate the improvement in students' descriptive writing skills and the factors driving these changes. The success criterion was set at a minimum passing grade (KKM ≥ 75) for at least 85% of the students.

Table 1. The Improvement of Students' Writing Scores

Research Stage	Mean Score	Students Passing (Score ≥ 75)	Percentage of Passing (%)	Category	Improvement Notes
Pre-Cycle	58.59	6 out of 32	18.75%	Poor	Baseline condition.
Cycle I	73.87	15 out of 32	46.87%	Sufficient	Increased by 15.28 points. Passing rate rose by 28.12%. (Target not met).
Cycle II	83.68	28 out of 32	87.50%	Good/Successful	Increased by 9.81 points. Passing rate rose by 40.63%. (Target achieved).

Qualitative data strongly support the quantitative surge. Observation of the pilot study showed only a 40% active participation rate, characterized by confusion, shyness, and noise. Following the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), participation increased to 66% in Cycle I and peaked at 82% in Cycle II. Interviews and photographic evidence confirmed that students became highly attentive, enthusiastic, and collaboratively engaged in solving the contextualized writing tasks.

DISCUSSION

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data unequivocally demonstrates that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is a highly effective pedagogical strategy for teaching descriptive writing to seventh-grade EFL students at SMP Generasi Cerdas. Beyond merely showing numerical improvement, the findings reveal a complex interplay between cognitive engagement, social interaction, linguistic development, and instructional design, suggesting that the success of PBL lies not only in its structure but also in its capacity to reshape the learning ecology within the classroom.

Initially, the pre-cycle results highlighted a severe deficiency in students' writing capabilities, characterized by a lack of ideas, vocabulary constraints, and grammatical confusion. These weaknesses indicate that students were likely operating within a passive learning paradigm where language knowledge remained inert and disconnected from authentic communicative needs. The absence of meaningful context appeared to limit students' ability to activate

existing linguistic resources, resulting in fragmented and mechanically constructed texts. From a cognitive perspective, the pre-cycle phase illustrates a classic case of low engagement and insufficient schema activation, where learners struggled to connect abstract language rules with practical communicative purposes.

The transition into Cycle I yielded a moderate improvement, increasing the mean score by 15.28 points. This phase functioned as a crucial transitional stage, reflecting the cognitive and behavioral adjustments students underwent as they shifted from teacher-centered instruction toward a learner-centered paradigm. Initial confusion observed during this phase should not be interpreted as instructional failure; rather, it represents productive cognitive dissonance. Students who were accustomed to passively receiving information were suddenly required to engage in problem-solving, collaboration, and independent idea construction. Such cognitive restructuring naturally involves temporary uncertainty, as learners renegotiate their roles and responsibilities within the learning process.

Despite measurable progress, the achievement level in Cycle I remained below the targeted 85% classical completeness threshold. This gap underscores a critical insight: PBL is not inherently self-sufficient. Without sufficient scaffolding, learners may struggle to fully harness the benefits of open-ended problem-solving environments. Recognizing this limitation, the researcher refined the instructional strategy in Cycle II by introducing more targeted scaffolding mechanisms, structured prompts, and deeper facilitation of group discussions. These refinements transformed the learning environment from loosely guided exploration into a strategically supported inquiry process.

The outcomes of Cycle II demonstrate a significant breakthrough, elevating the mean score to 83.68 and achieving an 87.5% passing rate. This dramatic improvement highlights the importance of adaptive teaching within PBL frameworks. Rather than adhering rigidly to a fixed methodology, the teacher engaged in continuous formative assessment, analyzing emerging learning patterns and injecting precise instructional interventions when necessary. This adaptive responsiveness illustrates that effective PBL implementation requires dynamic pedagogical decision-making grounded in ongoing data analysis.

One of the most influential factors behind the success of PBL in this study is its contextual authenticity. By framing the writing task around a relatable real-world problem—describing a lost item to facilitate its recovery—the activity transformed writing from a purely academic exercise into a purposeful communicative act. Authentic contexts stimulate intrinsic motivation by establishing clear relevance between classroom activities and real-life experiences. Students began to perceive writing not as a rigid grammatical obligation but as a meaningful tool for achieving specific communicative goals. This shift aligns with constructivist theories suggesting that meaningful learning occurs when new knowledge is embedded within personally relevant contexts.

From the perspective of cognitive constructivism, the collaborative nature of PBL activated the students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Peer interaction served as a powerful scaffold, enabling learners who initially struggled

to produce individual sentences to collaboratively construct coherent paragraphs. Unlike traditional teacher-centered correction, peer-mediated scaffolding provided immediate feedback that was socially accessible and cognitively aligned with students' current understanding. This collaborative negotiation of meaning fostered deeper processing and allowed learners to internalize linguistic structures through social interaction.

The transformation in student motivation represents another critical dimension of the findings. The PBL framework facilitated a shift from extrinsic motivation—completing tasks solely to satisfy teacher expectations—to intrinsic engagement driven by curiosity and problem-solving. When students focused on solving the authentic challenge presented in the task, linguistic accuracy became functionally necessary rather than externally imposed. This intrinsic orientation increased persistence, reduced anxiety, and encouraged experimentation with more complex language forms.

Linguistically, the PBL intervention produced a notable increase in lexical density. During the pre-cycle phase, students relied heavily on generic vocabulary, leading to vague and repetitive descriptions. However, the communicative demand to precisely identify specific objects encouraged active lexical exploration. Group discussions became spaces for collaborative vocabulary negotiation, where students compared word choices, clarified meanings, and experimented with more precise descriptive terms. This process not only expanded vocabulary breadth but also enhanced depth of lexical knowledge, as students learned to differentiate nuanced semantic meanings.

Parallel to vocabulary development, students demonstrated measurable growth in syntactic complexity. The need to distinguish one object from another encouraged the use of modifiers, relative clauses, and compound sentence structures. Rather than mechanically applying grammatical rules, students developed syntactic sophistication organically through communicative necessity. This finding supports usage-based theories of language acquisition, which emphasize that linguistic complexity emerges naturally when learners engage in meaningful communication tasks.

The iterative cycles of the research also fostered metacognitive awareness among students. As learners engaged in repeated problem-solving stages, they gradually developed strategies for planning, monitoring, and revising their writing. Metacognitive regulation was particularly evident during peer editing activities, where students consciously evaluated grammatical structures and corrected errors collaboratively. This process significantly reduced first language interference, as students collectively monitored syntactic patterns such as adjective placement and sentence structure.

Moreover, the group dynamic inherent in PBL transformed the classroom feedback culture. Feedback shifted from a top-down teacher evaluation to a distributed, peer-mediated process embedded within collaborative work. This continuous formative feedback loop created a psychologically safe learning environment, reducing fear of mistakes and encouraging linguistic risk-taking. Such environments are crucial for language acquisition, as learners are more likely to experiment with new structures when error tolerance is normalized.

From a cognitive psychology perspective, the structured phases of PBL effectively managed cognitive load. Writing requires simultaneous coordination of idea generation, vocabulary retrieval, and grammatical accuracy, which can overwhelm novice learners. By dividing the task into sequential stages—problem analysis, brainstorming, drafting, revising, and presenting—PBL reduced cognitive overload and allowed students to allocate attentional resources more efficiently. This structured segmentation enabled deeper processing without overwhelming working memory capacity.

The resulting written products exhibited greater coherence and authenticity. Students demonstrated clearer organizational patterns, beginning with identification and followed by systematic descriptions. This improvement reflects not only linguistic development but also an emerging understanding of genre conventions. Students learned that textual organization serves communicative clarity, reinforcing the functional relationship between form and meaning.

Another crucial factor contributing to success was the teacher's strategic use of instructional fading. During Cycle I, intensive scaffolding provided necessary support for learners adjusting to new roles. As competence increased in Cycle II, the teacher gradually reduced direct intervention, allowing students to assume greater cognitive responsibility. This gradual release of responsibility fostered learner autonomy and demonstrated the importance of balancing support with independence within constructivist pedagogies.

Finally, the findings carry significant implications for EFL curriculum design at the junior high school level. The success of PBL challenges traditional grammar-translation approaches that isolate language learning from authentic communication. Instead, the results support a paradigm shift toward contextualized, collaborative, and problem-oriented instruction. Consistent with previous research, including Mairani (2022), this study confirms that PBL can simultaneously enhance linguistic proficiency and develop essential twenty-first-century competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity. By integrating authentic tasks, adaptive scaffolding, and collaborative learning structures, educators can create environments where language learning becomes both meaningful and transformative.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides compelling evidence that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) constitutes an effective and pedagogically meaningful approach for enhancing descriptive writing skills among seventh-grade EFL learners at SMP Generasi Cerdas. The integration of quantitative gains and qualitative classroom observations demonstrates that the success of PBL extends beyond score improvement, reflecting deeper transformations in cognitive engagement, linguistic development, and learner autonomy.

The progression from the pre-cycle phase to Cycle II illustrates that writing improvement is not an immediate outcome of methodological change but rather the result of iterative pedagogical refinement. While Cycle I revealed transitional challenges associated with shifting from teacher-centered instruction to learner-

centered inquiry, these challenges functioned as productive stages of cognitive adjustment. The substantial improvement achieved in Cycle II highlights the critical role of adaptive scaffolding, structured collaboration, and continuous formative assessment in maximizing the potential of PBL environments.

The findings suggest that contextual authenticity is a central mechanism underlying the effectiveness of PBL. By embedding descriptive writing tasks within meaningful real-world scenarios, the instructional design transformed writing from a decontextualized grammatical exercise into a purposeful communicative practice. This shift facilitated increased intrinsic motivation and encouraged students to actively negotiate meaning, resulting in measurable gains in lexical precision, syntactic complexity, and overall text coherence. These outcomes align with constructivist learning theories, particularly the activation of learners' Zone of Proximal Development through peer-mediated scaffolding and collaborative problem-solving.

From a cognitive perspective, the structured phases inherent in the PBL framework appear to support effective cognitive load management by segmenting complex writing processes into manageable stages. This segmentation enabled students to focus sequentially on idea generation, vocabulary expansion, and grammatical structuring, thereby reducing cognitive overload and enhancing learning efficiency. Additionally, the iterative nature of collaborative drafting and peer feedback contributed to the development of metacognitive awareness, allowing students to regulate their linguistic choices and reduce first language interference.

Importantly, this study reaffirms the evolving role of the teacher within contemporary EFL pedagogy. Rather than functioning solely as a knowledge transmitter, the teacher acted as a facilitator, cognitive coach, and adaptive decision-maker who continuously analyzed classroom data to refine instructional strategies. The deliberate implementation of instructional fading supported the gradual transfer of cognitive responsibility from teacher to students, fostering independent learning behaviors and reinforcing learner autonomy.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate classroom context. In contrast to traditional grammar-translation approaches that isolate language learning from authentic communication, PBL offers a holistic pedagogical framework capable of integrating linguistic competence with higher-order thinking skills. The results indicate that PBL not only enhances writing proficiency but also cultivates essential twenty-first-century competencies, including collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity.

Nevertheless, future research may explore the long-term sustainability of writing improvements achieved through PBL, as well as its applicability across different language skills and educational contexts. Further investigation into varying levels of scaffolding and group dynamics may also provide deeper insights into optimizing PBL implementation in EFL classrooms.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting contextualized, collaborative, and problem-oriented approaches to language teaching. By demonstrating how carefully scaffolded PBL can transform both linguistic outcomes and learning processes, the findings underscore the

potential of PBL as a powerful pedagogical model for advancing meaningful and sustainable EFL instruction.

FURTHER STUDY

This study suggests future research explore the long-term effects, broader language skill integration, scaffolding strategies, comparative approaches, and technological enhancement of PBL to optimize its effectiveness in EFL learning.

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