

Project-Based Learning to Boost EFL Learners' Ability in Writing Persuasive Essays

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ABSTRACT

Project-based learning and persuasive writing have gained popularity in English classes after the advent of approaches supporting writing tasks with meaningful oral presentations. Although many studies are available to investigate each method's effectiveness, no study has combined them and sought to assess their impact in the Iraqi setting. Thus, the current study attempts to measure the role of project-based learning in sharpening students' persuasive writing skills through essays covering topics such as addictions, electric cars and professional life. To realise this goal, 50 first-year students who took the Foundation English course were chosen via systematic sampling to represent either a control or experimental group at Tishk International University in Erbil, Iraq, in the 2024-2025 Academic Year. Control group students followed the principles of the official curriculum; however, experimental group students addressed brief speeches in presentations before writing their actual essays in a bi-weekly mode. Data was collected within 12 weeks through exams and surveys. SPSS results uncovered that experimental group students outperformed in writing more persuasively, earning far higher grades. Additionally, NVivo analysis showed that they relieved their stress, developed self-study habits, raised their ecological awareness, and spoke more confidently. Conversely, control group students did not benefit as much from the treatment period as their peers in the experimental group. This study's findings may guide practitioners to consider integrating project-based learning in academic writing courses globally.

KEY WORDS: Academic Writing, Persuasive Writing, Project-Based Learning, Relieving Stress

1. INTRODUCTION

An Academic Writing course equips learners with skills vital for academic and professional success. It lays the foundation for lifelong learning, critical analysis, and effective communication, indispensable in today's knowledge-driven society. It improves communication skills so that individuals can express their ideas concisely, coherently, and effectively (Kucuk, 2023). Besides, students can improve their critical thinking and problem-solving skills through synthesis, analysis, and evaluation. Subsequently, writing is at the heart of academic and professional life through essays, reports, e-mails, and petitions.

Moreover, it urges learners to ensure self-discipline because regular and planned writing attempts yield better results; otherwise, it is inevitable to feel disappointed (Yildiz & Celik, 2020). Subsequently, academic writing motivates learners to develop global competency, thereby sharpening their various skills to face difficulties and handle issues wisely. The academic writing course is channelled into four sections: descriptive, persuasive, analytical, and critical (Deveci, 2018). Illustrations of objects, persons, and places characterise descriptive writing. In contrast, persuasive writing is preferred to convince the audience by adopting certain viewpoints through logical reasoning, supporting evidence, and compelling arguments (Issa, 2024; Kara, 2024; Pana & Escarlos, 2017). On the other hand, analytical writing requires a critical and structured approach to analyse facts, data, ideas, or arguments to arrive at well-reasoned conclusions. In contrast, critical writing breaks down ideas, arguments, or theories into smaller parts to understand their structure and impact (Bagheri Nevisi & Adibrad, 2024; Yucedal & Shareef, 2022). As it is obvious, Academic Writing courses need to be designed with a multi-faceted approach to reduce writing anxiety and boost learners' performance

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considerably so that each writing type can be elaborated and taught precisely (Kucuk, 2023).

Project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching method that utilises activities to grasp knowledge and skills through a systematic and significant long-term knowledge-gaining process. Its stages are to define the problem, come up with brilliant ideas, negotiate with others, and take action to resolve the issue permanently (Biju et al., 2024). Its innovative approach inspires educators to implement PBL in increasing numbers, thereby reaping the benefits on many occasions. There are five principles of PBL: centralism, driving or guiding questions, constructive investigation, autonomy, and realism (Yang, 2023). They urge contributors to think individually, compare their ideas with others, weigh pros and cons, and express the final decision in cooperation. PBL has advantages over other methods because it fosters creativity, collaboration, initiative, leadership, and harmony. Besides, students are encouraged to be lifelong learners as PBL guides them to have self-study habits in their collaborative attempts to solve problems. Moreover, seeking solutions to issues cooperatively prepares students for real life, where many chronic problems must be addressed (Abdulrahman & Kara, 2022; Hitimala et al., 2024). Closing the gap between real and academic life can be achieved when the pillars of PBL are chased professionally.

PBL is widely known for its role in teaching concepts with engaging projects. In this regard, it has many common points with proven learning and teaching methods. To name a few, John Dewey's Progressive Education Movement has affected PBL because both put forward the idea that learners are active in expanding knowledge via meaningful tasks, thereby gaining a deeper understanding (Argawati & Suryani, 2020). Subsequently, constructivist theorists like John Piaget and Lev Vygotsky asserted that learning occurs when social interaction and experiences are merged in harmony (Celik et al., 2025; Grazzi, 2024). Likewise, it has certain common aspects with inquiry-based learning, where learners ask questions, explore, investigate, and make decisions based on their experience in the knowledge-gaining cycle (Celik, 2022). In addition, PBL paves the way for differentiated learning where individuals can be assigned to cater to their specific needs according to their weaknesses. Additionally, the Montessori method drives educators to accommodate students' needs with active participation in collaborative initiatives (Cindric & Klubicka, 2024). It can be argued that by deriving the distinguishing qualities of the mentioned teaching methods, the value of PBL has increased in the eyes of educators and learners as they dive into thought-provoking attempts to acquire well-established knowledge in cooperation.

PBL has been extensively studied in EFL and ESL settings because its positive influence on English classes

was acknowledged by various scholars, such as Bilgin (2024) and Issa (2024). Their studies revealed that PBL paved the way for unlocking students' potential to be more ambitious in English classes. In addition, argumentative writing has also been studied thoroughly. In this regard, Yucedal and Shareef's (2022) study revealed that argumentative writing urges learners to examine themes from multiple angles so that they can express their ideas in a more self-assured tone through essays. However, the effect of PBL on enhancing students' argumentative writing skills has been investigated scarcely globally. Similarly, it will be the first attempt to examine the impact of PBL on developing argumentative essay-writing skills at the tertiary level in Iraq on first-year students. It is expected to contribute to the existing literature with novel and practical approaches by addressing the given research questions below:

RQ1: What is the influence of PBL in sharpening students' persuasive writing skills?

RQ2: What are students' perceptions towards implementing PBL in academic writing classes?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The origins of PBL can be traced as far back as 551 B.C, although its popularity has quadrupled in the last few decades (Aldabbus, 2018). In other words, the pioneers of philosophy laid the foundation for applying the principles of PBL to spread to the whole world in the millennia to come. For instance, Chinese philosopher Confucius asserted that hearing and seeing are inadequate for learning well; doing is the key to remembering successfully (Deveci, 2018; Yang, 2023). Additionally, Greek philosopher Socrates posited that asking questions unlocks the potential to find the truth (Balbay, 2019). Subsequently, another prominent Greek philosopher, Aristotle, elucidated that learning by doing is more effective than trying to learn in a sedentary format (Karatsiori, 2023). Subsequently, Czech pedagogue John Amos Comenius stated that education should be centred on the student who is actively learning through meaningful opportunities (Bilgin & Yildiz, 2024). Likewise, a Swiss educational reformer, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, believed that students' passivity should be halted by joining the learning sessions with the whole body, including the heart, hands, and head (Laubach, 2011). Afterwards, a German pedagogue, Friedrich Frobel, put forward the idea that drama, role play, and group activities should be at the heart of education so that learners can be self-assured, thereby speaking their ideas without any hindrance (Pracharova, 2020). Besides, American educational reformer John Dewey argued that assigning meaningful tasks to uncover creativity is more effective than urging learners to apply rote memorization

(Kurudirek & Berdieva, 2024). Aligning with Dewey's assertions, his successor, William Heard Kilpatrick, emphasized that teachers should serve as the guide rather than the sole authority to govern all seconds in the class dominantly (Biju et al., 2024). Furthermore, a Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, defended that social discourse and experience should be prioritized at educational institutions to reap the benefits incessantly (Kara, 2024). Otherwise, a monotonous cycle can be prevalent, reducing education quality dramatically. Having absorbed the principles of pioneers, PBL has been introduced at McMaster University in Canada and improved at Stanford University (Issa, 2024). Since then, its implementations have been observed starkly at educational institutions in many countries to teach languages engagingly (Kucuk & Daskan, 2024; Sinaga et al., 2023).

Persuasive writing has a long and rich history that dates back to Ancient Greece. Speaking persuasively was revered in society, so Aristotle and Plato wrote extensively to develop argumentative writing skills with proven tips (Dornbrack & Dixon, 2014; Pessoa et al., 2019). They contended that outlining was the key to speaking and writing persuasively so that the other side of the conversation could be convinced with a logical thread among sentences. In subsequent periods, such as the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Modern Age, and the Contemporary Age, its value increased because the means of communication accelerated the acquisition of knowledge (Celik, 2022; Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020). Thus, refuting or justifying ideas takes seconds, requiring speakers or writers to gain reliable knowledge and share it with society convincingly. Thanks to its increasing popularity in meeting the needs of individuals throughout their lifespans, argumentative writing takes precedence at all stages, particularly at universities (Ferretti & Graham, 2019). As it is obvious, argumentative writing has been prioritised throughout history to reap the benefits in many stages of life.

Considering the pivotal roles of PBL in enhancing students' academic writing skills, many studies have been conducted to measure its effectiveness at different institutions globally. To name a few, Eslami and Garver's (2013) study in a US setting showed that PBL-enriched writing classes can increase students' performance considerably because it scaffolds to make the outline more satisfying, thereby multiplying their chance to get higher marks in writing sessions. Besides, Kettanun's (2015) study in the Thai context revealed that university students can develop lifelong study habits by keeping journals and writing essays periodically after exposure to PBL in academic writing classes. His study also hinted that they improve their cognition, work ethics, and interpersonal skills through well-established projects

related to chosen writing topics. Likewise, Thomas' (2017) study on college students in Japan revealed that PBL had far-fetched effects on developing students' writing performance when technology-integrated collaborative actions accompany it. Praba et al. (2018) also carried out a notable study on Indonesian secondary school students, which unearthed that PBL-enriched writing instruction yields far better results than a traditional writing mode as PBL promotes students' critical thinking, communication, and creativity through collaborative work. In addition to others, Aghayani and Hajmohammadi's (2019) study revealed that PBL fosters students' academic writing skills continuously because they learn how to create, expand, and shoot their ideas in cooperation, which also empowers them to write more convincingly in individual attempts at the tertiary level in Iran. Additionally, Alotaibi's (2020) study showed that PBL transforms Saudi secondary school students' experience in writing classes because students become more ambitious after laying the background through meaningful projects to write creatively in the final phase. Besides, Rouka and Anastasiadou's (2020) study on primary school students in Macedonia and Greece revealed that PBL sharpens students' writing skills because they learn how to follow the stages of writing in the process, thereby increasing their overall scores in Academic Writing courses, respectively.

Some noteworthy studies have also been conducted to measure the effectiveness of PBL in raising students' writing grades. To illustrate, Qader and Yalcin Arslan's (2019) study hinted that using technology in projects can increase the preparedness of EFL learners in Iraq, so they are equipped with the necessary skills to defend their arguments wisely and earn higher marks in writing classes. Additionally, McKinney's (2022) study displayed that PBL enhances students' writing literacy at the tertiary level in Iraq because it raises their awareness and trains them to write convincingly with compelling reasons. Similarly, Bilgin and Yildiz's (2024) study showed that choosing a problem, brainstorming for a resolution, and converting ideas into easily understandable projects in the form of presentations increased students' writing performance in Iraq as the learning cycle continued incessantly through team-based initiatives. As is evident, PBL has been examined thoroughly in EFL and ESL settings, where its positive effects have been noticed starkly.

On the other hand, some studies have drawn attention to the drawbacks of PBL. For example, Sinaga et al.'s (2023) study in Taiwan showed that PBL is not conducive to some learning environments where there are a lot of prerequisites for the course and classrooms are crowded. Additionally, Aldabbus' (2018) study uncovered that Bahraini primary school students and pre-service

teachers are hesitant about the implementation of PBL in EFL classes because of a lack of facilities, taking too much time, and diverting from the goals of the curriculum are some drawbacks of PBL.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

A mixed methods case study research design was employed in this study. More specifically, one of the prominent types of case study is exploratory sequential design, which was utilised because it allowed the researcher to collect qualitative data, forge connections to quantitative data, make multiple cross-checks for validity, and come to final interpretations (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018). In this case study, various instruments thoroughly tested the phenomenon, and some conclusions were drawn correspondingly. Thus, an in-depth analysis was done about PBL to figure out the case, test it, and contribute to the scientific community.

3.2. Participants

The study participants were 50 first-year students who took Foundation English courses at Tishk International University in Erbil, Iraq, in the 2024-2025 academic year. The university has been renowned for covering all courses in English Medium of Instruction in 34 departments since its establishment in 2008. Likewise, the Foundation English course is a non-elective technical course taken in two semesters for each student whose English background knowledge is unsatisfactory based on the proficiency exam results. The lecturers pay the utmost attention to enhancing their oral and written performance so that they can adapt to their departmental courses and become global citizens upon graduation. It is worth mentioning that students' progress has been monitored closely by online or paper-based exams. Online exams are held to see students' levels and take appropriate action in advance, whereas paper-based exams are conducted to finalise students' official scores professionally. They were chosen by applying the principles of systematic sampling to take advantage of the freedom of selecting them randomly with a software called Number Picker. Further details about the participants can be found in Table 1 below:

Table (1)
Demographic Qualities of Participants

Section	Variable	f	%
Gender	Male	22	44
	Female	28	56
High School Mother Tongue	English Medium Instruction	5	10
	Hybrid	26	52
	Instruction	19	38
Reasons to Choose EMI	Learning a Foreign Language Fully	12	24
	Seizing Employment Opportunities	31	62
	Academic Success	7	14
English Time	Between 1 and 3 hours	24	48
	Between 4 and 7 hours	12	24
	Between 8 and 11 hours	8	16
	Between 12 and 15 hours	5	10
	Over 15 hours	1	2
Major	Information Technology	12	24
	Physiotherapy	3	6
	Pharmacy	16	32
	Civil Engineering	5	10
	Cybersecurity	14	28

When Table 1 is examined in detail based on the preliminary data in the questionnaire, it is clear that female (n=28) students were higher than male (n=22) participants. In addition, most students received either hybrid(n=26) or mother tongue-based(n=19) medium instruction rather than solely English(n=5). Moreover, more than half of the students chose EMI to seize the opportunities in professional life (n=31), while it was followed by mastering English (n=12) and academic success(n=7). Besides, approximately 50 % of students (n=24) opted to study English up to 3 hours apart from scheduled classes. Other categories followed it in varying degrees between 4 and 15 hours. Finally, it was noticed that pharmacy (n=16) students accounted for the highest percentage, which was chased by cybersecurity (n=14), IT (n=12), civil engineering (n=5), and physiotherapy (n=3). Participants' demographic qualities differed slightly.

3.3. Instruments

Several instruments were used to adhere to scientific principles and gather more reliable data among homogenous classes. First, the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT) was applied to place students equally according to their proficiency levels. CPT encompasses all micro and macro skills of English, so it was deemed adequate to place them accordingly (Morgana, 2024). Subsequently, the research committee, including ELT, testing, and statistics experts, formed questionnaires to welcome students' genuine opinions on the effects of PBL in

enhancing academic writing performance. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to triangulate data. Finally, pre-test and post-test writing topics were set to direct them to the participants in the pre-test and post-test period. Of particular note is that 6 ELT experts checked item content and face validity. At the same time, the internal consistency of each instrument was investigated through piloting with students whose proficiency levels were approximately the same as the participants. Based on feedback from experts and piloting, necessary adjustments were made. Accordingly, the Cronbach Alpha index of each instrument is illustrated below in Table 2.

Table (2)
The Reliability Indices of Instruments

Subsection	Cronbach Alpha
CPT	.85
Questionnaires	.93
Interviews	.87
Writing Exams	.89

As shown in Table 2, Cronbach Alpha indices of the Cambridge Placement Test (.85), questionnaires (.93), interviews (.87), and writing exams (.89) were recorded, which met the reliability criteria when Forero's principles (2024) were considered. Forero (2024) postulated that ensuring at least a .70 Cronbach Alpha value is sufficient to be named a reliable item, which is higher in this study.

3.4. Procedure

In cooperation with students, the researchers chose topics suitable for argumentative writing. Subsequently, the researchers showed some examples of PBL to familiarise students with the process. Afterwards, the researchers answered students' queries to clarify. Next, they were grouped to research their projects in advance thoroughly. Afterwards, group leaders were chosen to guide their peers through leadership skills. Besides, presentation and writing sessions were announced to manage the process smoothly. Later, a well-established plan was implemented to initiate and finalise the study within 12 weeks, divided into presentation weeks and concurrent practical writing sessions. Argumentative writing topics are described in Table 3 below:

Table (3)

Topics for presentation and essay writing

Bi-weekly Distribution of Topics

Should mobile phones be banned or free in classes at the tertiary level?
Should fuel-powered cars be replaced with electric vehicles?
Should smoking in public places be illegal?
Should university students work and study at the same time?
Should the government impose an age limit for social media use?
Should all university students pursue a master's degree?

As Table 3 depicts, topics were quite appealing because they could find many common points between issues and real life.

3.5. Data Collection

Pre-defined instruments were utilised to collect data. To begin with, students' perceptions on the effectiveness of PBL in sharpening their writing skills were recorded through surveys. Later, students took pre-test writing exams, which were graded based on the rubric, which included percentages in terms of overall organisation, word choice, exemplification, conventions, and transition words. Upon completing pre-test procedures, the study started with students' presentations and ended with their writing attempts. Once the 12 weeks were over, instruments were used to get post-test results through pre-defined instruments. The researchers welcomed the assistance of other ELT experts in analyzing the items and grading the papers fairly, so biases about unfair grading were dispelled through multiple checking initiatives. In other words, categorising the data in the questionnaire, analyzing the interview transcripts, and accurately calculating writing scores were guaranteed through the constructive feedback of other colleagues. On the other hand, the control group students were not introduced to PBL-enriched writing. They read the sample, brainstormed and wrote their argumentative essays according to the guidelines set by the official syllabus.

3.6. Data Analysis

SPSS 28 and NVivo were the primary tools for appropriately analyzing quantitative and qualitative data. SPSS 28 was activated to compare the mean scores in writing exams through independent samples t-test. In addition, questionnaires were fetched and analyzed through descriptive statistics, thereby evaluating the effectiveness of the treatment period in the pre-test and post-test periods. Finally, NVivo was used to transcribe the interviews, categorize them under distinguishing themes, and come to more reliable interpretations accordingly. According to the themes that emerged in the interviews, some advantages and disadvantages of PBL were highlighted by adopting the pillars of content analysis. Drisko and Maschi (2016) assert that content analysis is widely used in social science studies to split expressions into manageable sections and offer insightful reflections for readers.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The researchers paid utmost attention to scientific procedures within the framework of ethics. First, they elaborated the details of the whole study for scientific committee members, including governing bodies of the faculty of education and research center. Their concerns were considered, and the final guideline of the study was formed. Later, students were informed that they could join the study voluntarily with their consent forms or opt

in not to join. They were also aware that collected data would be destroyed permanently and their names would be coded to keep privacy. Additionally, they were free to quit their studies at any time. Later, the committee members and administrative units periodically inspected the study with their checklists to determine whether the researchers adhered to the guideline. Finally, the manuscript was shared with the authorised bodies to determine whether any modifications were required.

4. FINDINGS

Findings were divided into two sections: quantitative and qualitative data. The former was analyzed by inserting the questionnaires and exams in pre-test and post-test versions, while the latter was formed by meticulously analyzing the interviews.

4.1. Quantitative Data

Questionnaires: The first instrument was the questionnaire, which was formed based on the 5-point Likert scale. The effectiveness of PBL in enhancing learners' writing performance was tested thoroughly by receiving students' perceptions of it. Table 3 illustrates the details of the questionnaire.

Table (4)

Combination of Pre-Test and Post-Test Questionnaire Results

Item	Pre M	Post M	Pre SD	Post SD	p
PBL lays the background to write more convincingly.	2.36	4.44	.907	.870	.000
PBL encourages peer learning.	2.48	4.28	.823	1.02	.000
PBL drives learners to develop self-study habits.	3.08	4.40	1.28	.866	.000
PBL motivates learners to write more accurately.	3.40	4.32	1.29	.945	.001
PBL reduces writing anxiety.	3.72	4.28	1.02	.843	.001
PBL raises awareness for ecological problems.	3.04	4.44	1.01	.711	.000

As depicted in Table 4, the findings of the questionnaires were noteworthy in each item. To illustrate, item one showed that students' perceptions toward PBL changed sharply after joining the study because they learned how to create the template, scaffold their ideas, and increase their persuasiveness through meaningful activities. The mean scores in item one rose

from 2.36 to 4.44, which was quite significant. It indicates that having background knowledge about the topic in advance empowers students to justify their ideas more successfully. Subsequently, item two displayed that PBL was appealing to learn from each other with constructive conversations because debatable topics triggered mind-blowing discussions, so they expanded their knowledge in cooperation. The mean scores in item two switched to 4.28 from 2.48, which was substantial. Besides, item three also proved that PBL pushed the learners to research further and expand their public speaking skills because they were inclined to defend their ideas wisely in each conversation. Undoubtedly, their speaking enhancement had positive reflections on their writing attempts. The mean scores in item three increased from 3.08 to 4.40, which was considerable. Additionally, item four uncovered that fixing mistakes in writing mechanics, including punctuation, capitalisation, and grammar, was another distinguishing advantage of the study because they checked their sentences several times before inserting them into the presentation. In addition, some mistakes were corrected by their peers during the presentation, motivating them to learn from their mistakes and seize the opportunity to reduce their mistakes in essays. The mean scores rose from 3.40 to 4.32, which was quite noticeable, albeit not so stark as others. The fifth item was designed to investigate the relationship between eliminating writing anxiety and PBL, which revealed that it was effective in reducing anxiety as they expressed their ideas in a friendly atmosphere. The mean scores changed from 3.72 to 4.28, which indicated room for improvement in eliminating the anxiety; however, it can be used as one of the strategies to decline it gradually. The final item was about making connections between raising ecological awareness and PBL, which showed that integrating ecology-oriented topics raised students' understanding of how to be more proactive for the betterment of society. The mean scores were 3.04 in the beginning, which amounted to 4.44 in the aftermath of the study. When all items were examined thoroughly, it was unambiguous that PBL enriched instruction paved the way for writing more persuasively in a confident manner.

4.1.1. Writing Exams: Writing exams were held to gauge students' writing performance after being exposed to PBL-integrated instruction, the details of which are illustrated in Table 5 and visualised in Figure 1 below:

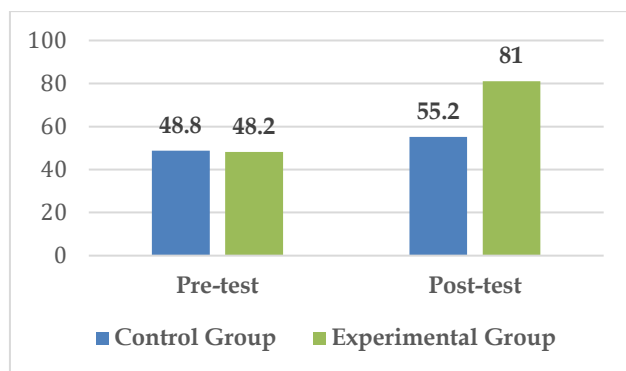
Table (5)

Pre-Test and Post-Test Writing Exam Scores

Variables	Groups	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Pre	Cont	25	48.80	16.66			
Pre	Exp	25	48.20	17.37	.125	48	.001
Post	Cont	25	55.20	22.24			
Post	Exp	25	81	13.22	4.985	48	.000

The numerical data in Table 5 shows that students' mean scores were nearly the same before the introduction of PBL in writing sessions, at 48.80 and 48.20, respectively. Likewise, the p-value of .901 was higher than 0.05, so it was insignificant. On the other hand, a significant enhancement was recorded in post-test grades, paying attention to the p-value of .000, which is highly significant. In other words, the control group students increased their scores by only 7 points. In comparison, it was 32 points in the experimental group due to adopting project-based writing instruction with a well-established plan within 12 weeks. It is safe to conclude that the questionnaires were substantiated with writing exam scores, both of which revealed that PBL ensures a significant leap in the academic writing performance of learners. The differences can also be seen in Figure 1 below:

Figure (1)
Comparison of Writing Grades for Each Group



When Figure 1 is examined thoroughly, the experimental group students took advantage of the PBL, which positively affected their writing scores. On the other hand, the control group students' writing scores did not increase noticeably.

4.2. Qualitative Data

Interviews were used to triangulate numerical data in the questionnaires and writing exams. Students' ideas were recorded in the office, and the analyses were done through NVivo to extract themes and highlight them. In this regard, the study's effectiveness was examined meticulously. Participants responded to the following questions of the study:

- How effective can it be to develop persuasive writing skills through PBL?

- What are participants' thoughts about integrating PBL to write persuasive essays?

Participants' opinions were saved under six themes: speaking assertively, improving overall proficiency,

enjoying, using conveniently, and suffering from a lack of emotional intelligence. Table 6 depicts the meticulous details below:

Table (6)
Themes to Reflect Learners' Opinions on Developing Writing Through PBL

Main Themes	Codes	Categories
Tech Gadgets	Various Devices	ICT Literacy User Friendly
Exchanging Ideas	Friends Lecturers	Peer Learning Constructive Feedback
Motivational	Intrinsic Extrinsic	Seeking Novel Knowledge
Raising Awareness	The UN's 17 SDGs	Eco-friendly Approaches
Promoting Hands-on Learning	Practical Implementations	Tackle Real Life Issues
Boosting 21st-Century Skills	Fostering Creative and Critical Thinking	Self-assured
Source of stress	Perfectionism	Public Speaking Anxiety

The first theme highlighted in the interview was using technological tools integrated into the study by PCs, laptops, smartphones, and smartboards. Students were privileged to examine presentations in advance, read further, or zoom. In addition, they figured out how to insert slides in PowerPoint presentations with visually attractive animations. "Sharpening our ICT literacy intrigued us because we learned how to defend our ideas wisely and insert slides in a visually stimulating format. It was a piece of cake to convert those ideas into meaningful sentences in essays because laying the solid foundation through projects substantially developed our academic writing skills," said several participants. Subsequently, the second theme was exchanging ideas with friends and providers of the course. Thus, peer learning and passing on the responsibility from the lecturers to the students were guaranteed, as suggested by many modern language teaching methodologies (Thomas, 2017). "Displaying our presentations, receiving feedback from both sides, discussing our ideas with constructive arguments, and coming to more reliable interpretations motivated me to write more convincingly, so I refined my essays and earned more satisfactory grades," remarked some participants. The third theme was about raising intrinsic and extrinsic motivation through PBL. Participants elevated their inherent motivation through projects because they wanted to take sides with the winners at the end of the debates. This cycle urged them to develop self-study habits and become more knowledgeable during sessions. In addition, getting extra participation marks increased their alertness to grasp more details. Subsequently,

exposure to knowledge from different points of view helped learners learn novel information. *Forming slides, checking our mistakes, finalising the projects with team members, defending our ideas collaboratively, and earning respect or appreciation from the lecturers were game changers, so we took advantage of the period fully without wasting any second,*" quoted around a quarter of participants. The fourth theme was raising awareness to ensure sustainability aligned with the UN's 17 SDGs. Participants appreciated the inclusion of topics such as pollution, electric cars, and smoking. They became aware of the dire consequences of using fuel-run cars or smoking excessively in public spaces, which may harm the health of the smokers and people nearby. *"I was not aware of the harmful effects of fuel-powered cars and smoking among people, so this study was a turning point in my life to behave more responsibly, thereby contributing to society positively,"* said approximately three-quarters of the participants. Furthermore, the fifth theme showed that enriching writing classes with carefully chosen team-based projects stimulated their creativity and critical thinking. Thus, they articulated their ideas more persuasively, receiving the winning position in debates. Accordingly, positive gains in oral tasks were transferred to essays without difficulty. *"We evaluated the topics from various dimensions during projects, which assisted us greatly in unlocking our full potential to be creative and think critically,"* stated many participants. The final theme was about the implications of employing PBL in writing classes. Some students said that composing ideas in slides, expressing notions to justify ideas, and managing the time logically were burdens of the study. *"I am a perfectionist, so planning my sentences and finalising my thoughts took a lot of time. Thus, I could not allocate much time for my other assignments. I wish I could kick this habit. Then, all stages would progress smoothly like my peers. They prepared their slides and shot their responses within the given time,"* stated one of the participants. When all themes were examined, it was clear that participants seized all opportunities of PBL in writing to write more convincingly.

5. DISCUSSION

The study's findings uncovered positive outcomes in changing students' attitudes towards gaining expertise in writing persuasively and receiving more satisfactory marks in the Academic Writing course through PBL. More specifically, laying the background via presentations expanded students' repertoire by exchanging their ideas and raising awareness. In addition, learning how to defend ideas wisely and making reliable justifications paved the way for writing more persuasively, increasing their marks significantly in the Academic Writing course. This finding is consistent with Thomas's (2017) study, which revealed that PBL-

enriched writing classes effectively increase motivation and writing scores simultaneously because they continuously delve into a constructive learning cycle to improve their oral and written competency. Likewise, Argawati and Suryani (2020) postulated that using projects before practical writing sessions can relieve students' anxiety so that they can proceed more confidently. Thus, they transform into a first-rate writer gradually. Similarly, Piniel and Csizer (2015) pointed out that PBL can be a great motivational source for gaining comprehensible input, thereby reducing pauses and hesitations during essay writing. Therefore, dispelling hesitations and pauses can give way to writing more persuasively.

Questionnaires also shed light on essential points to forge the relationship between writing persuasively and applying PBL. Students reiterated that they lowered their writing anxiety in a welcoming atmosphere. In addition, they composed their ideas on a robust framework with the assistance of their peers. Moreover, they became aware of serious problems, such as ecological disasters, traffic congestion, and various addictions. Those knowledge-seeking attempts urge them to research further and gain novel information. Those findings are consistent with Bilgin's (2024) assertions, which implied that constructive feedback in presentations can elevate students' writing skills. Besides, they can raise awareness for certain chronic issues to articulate their ideas more enthusiastically. In other words, gaining in-depth knowledge and sharing ideas yielded better results. The final instruments were the interviews, which unearthed the positive and negative themes of PBL in improving persuasive writing skills. The findings documented that developing critical thinking skills fostered students' learning because they kept learning continuously. However, they also remarked that using the cycle repetitively or assigning tasks frequently can be demotivating factors against their improvement. In this regard, Praba et al. (2018) contended that PBL can boost critical thinking skills and promote students' learning in writing; however, time management and frequency should be reconsidered to eliminate the negative sides.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of PBL in raising students' writing competence in writing persuasive essays. At first, students in the experimental and control groups suffered from serious weaknesses in writing classes. However, at the end of the treatment, the experimental group started writing more compelling essays, earning far higher grades. They improved their critical thinking skills by gaining in-depth knowledge about environmental issues and addictions and pursuing degrees and professional occupations. Thus, an anxiety-free atmosphere, guided

presentations, feedback, brainstorming, and whole-class and individual writing attempts greatly increased academic writing scores. Meanwhile, a few students reiterated that perfectionism and public speaking anxiety declined their performance sharply, so they could not seize opportunities as much as their peers.

This study's results offer varied implications for policymakers, researchers, and educators. Firstly, lecturers who cover academic writing courses can implement presentation-based writing activities to relieve their stress, increase their motivation through collaboration, and offer timely constructive feedback to write essays as persuasively as possible. Administrators and heads of ELT departments can set guidelines to apply PBL in writing classes professionally with the highest benefits. Policymakers can urge the relevant parties to raise awareness for global issues in writing classes through established PBL practices so that mutual benefits can be gathered. Students should be trained with intensive workshops to close their knowledge gaps via self-study habits, thereby defending their arguments with more compelling reasons in an appealing tone. Furthermore, stress management and ICT literacy workshops should be held periodically to eliminate certain barriers and continuously observe their development.

Though the current study has promising results, it does not mean that it has no limitations. To begin with, a larger sample size would better represent the population, so its generalizability would increase substantially. The duration was short, but it can be extended in future studies to get a clearer image. Besides, PBL has many reflections in EFL settings so that other skills can be examined in the future. Only persuasive writing was investigated in this study, which can be extended to different types of writing, including narrative, expository, and descriptive. Finally, the current study was conducted on first-year university students, which can be enlarged with other regional private or public educational institutions to compare the findings.

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