

STRATEGIES USED IN THE WRITING PROCESS BY ESL STUDENTS THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PJBL) IN EVALUATIVE WRITING

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Abstract: *This study explores the strategies employed by English as a Second Language (ESL) students during the writing process in a Project-Based Learning (PjBL) environment. Writing in English presents significant challenges for ESL students, necessitating the use of specific strategies to enhance their writing skills. Unlike general writing tasks, evaluative writing requires students to critically assess sources, synthesize information, and present well-structured arguments, posing unique challenges. The study focuses on students from three different performance levels—high, moderate, and low—providing a nuanced understanding of how learners with varying proficiencies approach writing in a PjBL setting. This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, analyzing semi-structured interviews conducted with nine ESL students across three classes over a nine-week period. The findings indicate that students used various strategies during the prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing stages. These strategies include brainstorming, outlining, utilizing dictionaries and technological tools, translating from their native language, and employing synonyms to refine their writing. Notably, high-performing students demonstrated greater autonomy in structuring arguments, while low-performing students relied more on external resources and peer support. These insights contribute to the growing body of research on PjBL and highlight its potential in fostering evaluative writing skills among ESL learners.*

Keywords: *Evaluative Writing, ESL Writing Strategies, Project-Based Learning, Writing Process, Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Performance Levels*

Introduction

Writing is a vital skill for ESL students but also one of the most challenging. It is a productive skill as students need to communicate their ideas, feelings, and thoughts effectively (Najlaa' Nasuha et al., 2024). Evaluative writing is especially difficult as it requires critical thinking. Students often face challenges in structuring arguments and using effective writing strategies (Ceylan, 2019). This is due to challenges in teachers' teaching strategies and students' learning styles (Din et al., 2020). Project-Based Learning (PjBL) provides a student-centered alternative, promoting collaboration, research, and real-world writing practice (Chen & Yang, 2019). However, little research explores how ESL students use writing strategies within PjBL, particularly in evaluative writing. This study examines their prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing strategies to understand how they overcome writing challenges and how PjBL supports their learning. The findings will contribute to writing instruction research and offer practical insights for improving PjBL in ESL classrooms.

Literature Review

Academic writing requires the students to state facts, express their stand, opinion, argument, and justification or provide expository information. Evaluative writing demands higher-order thinking skills. Writers of evaluative writing are required to give their opinions reasonably without being too opinionated. Writing strategies play a crucial role in helping ESL students navigate the writing process effectively. Strategies in the writing process includes pre-writing, drafting, and editing process (Ceylan, 2019).

Pre-Writing

Before writing an essay, writers use pre-writing strategies to build a strong foundation. This stage involves generating and organizing ideas while planning the essay's structure. Writers must consider their audience, establish their stance, define the purpose, and decide on organization and style (Abas & Abd Aziz, 2018). Mind mapping is another effective technique. Outlining is also essential, as it provides a structured framework for organizing main points and supporting details, ensuring a logical flow in writing (Salija, 2017). Recent research focusing on digital learning environments reinforces this, finding that the use of digital outlining tools can significantly improve the coherence and logical structure of ESL students' argumentative essays (Lee & Kim, 2023).

Drafting

During the drafting stage, writers turn their ideas into a structured argument or narrative using various strategies. Freewriting allows writers to generate ideas freely, which can later be refined into structured sentences. Alharthi (2021) found that students who used freewriting produced more content and developed stronger sentences and paragraphs, ultimately improving their writing. These strategies help writers organize their thoughts and create coherent essays.

Revising

The revision phase is a crucial stage in the writing process, focusing on refining content for clarity, coherence, and overall impact. One effective revision strategy is receiving feedback from peers or teachers. Studies confirm that structured peer feedback, particularly in collaborative or project-based settings, is highly effective in helping students identify and

correct higher-order concerns like argumentation as well as lower-order language errors (Zhang & Wang, 2022). By incorporating feedback, students can recognize their mistakes and make more informed revisions, ultimately enhancing the quality of their writing.

Editing

The final stage of the writing process is editing. A key component of editing is proofreading, where writers carefully review their work to identify and correct language-related mistakes. Additionally, in academic writing, adherence to specific style guides—such as APA, MLA, or Chicago—is essential for maintaining consistency in formatting, citation, and referencing. A significant development in this stage is the widespread adoption of AI-assisted writing tools. Recent studies highlight the dual role of tools like Grammarly and ChatGPT. On one hand, they provide immediate, sentence-level corrective feedback on grammar and syntax, which can be particularly beneficial for ESL learners (Najlaa' Nasuha et al., 2024). On the other hand, research indicates a risk of over-reliance, where students may accept suggestions uncritically, potentially hindering the development of their own self-editing skills (Graves, 2023). This study will explore how students naturally integrate these tools, if at all, within the PjBL editing process.

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Writing

In PjBL, students engage in research, teamwork, and multiple revisions to improve their writing. Unlike traditional methods that focus on the final product, PjBL emphasizes the writing process. To write effectively, students must understand their topics, and PjBL fosters critical thinking and problem-solving, making writing more engaging. PjBL also promotes teamwork and communication through discussions, idea-sharing, and peer feedback, enhancing both writing and social skills (Kemaloğlu Er, 2022). Students receive ongoing feedback, helping them present ideas clearly (Cao et al., 2021). These findings converge to suggest that the collaborative nature of PjBL directly supports the revising and editing stages of writing. Additionally, PjBL makes writing more meaningful by incorporating real-life tasks (Samarji, 2020). For example, Samarji (2020) found that solving real-world problems improved students' problem-solution essay writing. In this study, PjBL encourages deep inquiry, collaboration, and multiple revisions, aligning well with evaluative writing. This type of writing requires students to analyze sources critically and form logical arguments. As Rogers (2022) explains, evaluative writing is based on real-world applications, where writers assess and critique various subjects like articles, books, and films.

While the existing literature confirms the benefits of PjBL for general writing engagement (Samarji, 2020) and identifies various discrete writing strategies (Ceylan, 2019), a clear gap remains. There is little research that systematically investigates how ESL students, particularly those at different performance levels, actually select and apply specific writing strategies (pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing) within the context of a PjBL framework. Furthermore, how modern AI-assisted tools are being integrated into this process remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by qualitatively examining the specific strategies ESL students employ during an evaluative writing project.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study approach to explore students' experiences and challenges in using PjBL to improve writing skills. The study involved nine ESL diploma students from a public university on Malaysia's east coast. While the sample size is small, it was deemed appropriate for a qualitative case study approach, as the goal was not

generalizability but to gain deep, rich insights into the nuanced writing processes of students at varying ability levels. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling to represent different writing proficiency levels. Students with high performance scored between 24 and 30 marks, moderate performers scored between 18 and 23 marks, while those with low performance scored 17 marks or below. To organize participants, a labeling system was used. Each student received a pseudonym with an alphabet and a number (e.g., Student A1, B1, C1). The classification is illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Classification of participants

Performance Level	Group Label	Class Label	Participants
High Performance	A	1, 2, 3	Student A1, Student A2, Student A3
Moderate Performance	B	1, 2, 3	Student B1, Student B2, Student B3
Low Performance	C	1, 2, 3	Student C1, Student C2, Student C3

For this study, students worked in pairs or small groups to complete an evaluative essay based on a news article over nine weeks. They followed the PjBL framework guided by Stoller (2006) and Hamidah et al. (2020). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over the nine-week period.

For analysis, the study applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. To ensure the reliability of the coding, validation measures were implemented. The research team first collaboratively developed an initial codebook. Following this, a sample of the interview transcripts was independently coded by two researchers. The resulting codes were compared, and any discrepancies were discussed to refine the thematic framework. This process of peer debriefing and establishing inter-rater reliability continued until a consistent consensus on the final themes was achieved.

Ethical procedures were strictly followed throughout the study. Prior to data collection, all participants received a detailed information sheet and provided written informed consent. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., Student A1, B1, C1) as shown in Table 1. All interview data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. Moreover, a Research Ethical Committee (REC) application was implemented and approved as a crucial step in the study's methodology.

Results

Pre-Writing Strategies

Prewriting is a crucial phase where students generate ideas, organize their thoughts, and plan their writing. Table 2 shows the summary of prewriting strategies used by the students from different performance levels.

Table 2: Pre-Writing Strategies

Performance Level	Students	Pre-Writing Strategies used
High Performance	A1, A2, A3	Brainstorming: Chose topics based on interests or prior knowledge. Outlining: Used structured outlines before drafting (A1, A3).

		<p>WH-Questions: Used to clarify arguments (A1). Online Searches: Used broad searches for articles (A2).</p>
Moderate Performance	B1, B2, B3	<p>Brainstorming: Chose topics based on interest, personal connection, or ease of access. Outlining: Created outlines to distribute writing tasks (B2). Mind Mapping: Used to visualize key ideas before writing (B3). WH-Questions: Applied to structure analysis (B2). Online Searches: Relied on searches for topic selection (B2).</p>
Low Performance	C1, C2, C3	<p>Brainstorming: Selected topics based on availability and ease. Unique Topic Selection: Attempted originality by choosing uncommon themes (C3). Minimal Planning: Relied on broad online searches for topic selection (C2). WH-Questions: Used to structure thoughts and analysis (C2).</p>

Drafting Strategies

The drafting phase in PjBL encouraged iterative writing, allowing students to refine their essays through feedback, reflection, and critical thinking. Table 3 shows the summary of drafting strategies used by the students from different performance levels.

Table 3: Drafting Strategies

Performance Level	Students	Pre-Writing Strategies used
High Performance	A1, A2, A3	<p>Started with the Introduction: Believed it set the essay's tone (A3). Free Writing: Focused on idea generation before refining (A1). Write-Stop-Reread: Used to maintain coherence and accuracy (A3). Dictionary & Tech Tools: Relied on online/physical dictionaries (A3). Translation: Translated from native language to English (A3). Synonym Replacement: Used to paraphrase and enhance writing (A2, A3).</p>
Moderate Performance	B1, B2, B3	<p>Started with the Introduction: Used to establish direction (B1). Free Writing: Helped in fluid idea generation (B2, B3). Write-Stop-Reread: Ensured logical flow and accuracy (B3). Dictionary & Tech Tools: Used for vocabulary expansion (B3). Translation: Assisted in expressing thoughts effectively (B2). Synonym Replacement: Used to avoid repetition (B2).</p>
Low Performance	C1, C2, C3	<p>Started with the Introduction: Helped structure the essay (C1).</p>

Started with Body Paragraphs: Avoided mismatches with introduction (C3).
Write-Stop-Reread: Used to maintain coherence (C1).
Dictionary & Tech Tools: Used for word comprehension (C1).
Translation: Assisted in articulating ideas (C1).
Synonym Replacement: Used for paraphrasing (C2).

Revising and Editing Strategies

The revising process in PjBL heavily relied on peer feedback during group discussions. This collaborative approach allowed students to exchange diverse perspectives and constructive criticism, refining their essays through multiple viewpoints. Table 4 shows the summary of revising and editing strategies used by the students from different performance levels.

Table 4: Drafting Strategies

Performance Level	Students	Revising Strategies Used	Editing Strategies used
High Performance	A1, A2, A3	Peer Feedback: Used group discussions to improve thesis, grammar, and structure (A1, A3). Independent Revision: Preferred self-revision without peer input (A2).	Formatting Guidelines: Referred to books and lecturer-provided materials (A2). Technology-Assisted Proofreading: Used Grammarly and Google Docs for grammar/spelling (A1).
Moderate Performance	B1, B2, B3	Peer Feedback: Helped refine grammar, spelling, and sentence structure (B2). External Feedback: Sought help from seniors and roommates (B2, B3).	Formatting Guidelines: Used lecturer slides and assignment guides (B3). Technology-Assisted Proofreading: Grammarly and Google Docs were used, but some remained skeptical (B3). Consulting Lecturers: Preferred manual verification for accuracy (B3).
Low Performance	C1, C2, C3	Peer Feedback: Used to enhance writing coherence and clarity (C3). External Feedback: Consulted family members proficient in English (C3).	Formatting Guidelines: Checked assignment requirements (C1). Technology-Assisted Proofreading: Grammarly and Google Docs were used, but some preferred lecturer confirmation (C3). Peer Collaboration: Sought help from proficient peers (C3).

Discussion

Pre-writing Strategies

In the prewriting stage of PjBL, students mainly used brainstorming to choose topics for evaluative writing. Most picked topics based on interest and convenience rather than deep exploration. However, students often selected readily available articles without thorough brainstorming. Some, like Student B3, used mind mapping to structure reasoning (Agustina, 2020), while others applied WH-Questions to refine their essay focus (Hamidah et al., 2020).

Drafting Strategies

During drafting, students focused on developing content, refining ideas, and improving writing quality. Free writing was commonly used to generate ideas quickly without worrying about grammar. To ensure coherence, students used the write-stop-reread strategy. Students also expanded their vocabulary using dictionaries and digital tools. While helpful, overreliance on technology might limit problem-solving skills (Graves, 2023). Some students translated from their native language to English for better expression. To avoid repetition, students used synonyms for paraphrasing.

Revising Strategies

The revision stage highlighted the importance of peer feedback in improving writing. Some students also sought feedback from outside sources. However, not all students preferred collaboration. Overall, the emphasis on student-led feedback over teacher corrections suggests that PjBL fosters independence, responsibility, and self-directed learning (Sukerti & Yuliantini, 2018).

Editing Strategies

The editing stage focused on formatting and proofreading. Some students used structured guidelines, like books and lecturer-provided outlines, to organize their essays. To proofread, students combined technology and peer discussions.

Conclusion

This study underscores the effectiveness of PjBL in enhancing ESL students' writing strategies. The findings reveal that students at different performance levels employ varied approaches to tackle writing challenges. High-performing students exhibited greater independence, while moderate- and low-performing students benefited more from structured support. The study suggests that educators should integrate targeted instructional strategies to maximize PjBL's benefits. Future research should explore the long-term impact of PjBL on writing proficiency and assess the effectiveness of additional support mechanisms to cater to diverse student needs.

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