



Transformative Learning Through Project-Based Learning: Enhancing Student Engagement and Creativity in Writing

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This research aims to explore the transformative impact of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in improving engagement and creativity in short stories. It also discusses the limitations of the traditional method, which makes the teacher the center of the study and limits students' active participation and creative exploration.

Methodology – Descriptive qualitative research was used, involving 17 students. This research was conducted in two weeks and implemented PjBL in three phases: preparation, implementation, and evaluation. Data collection methods included classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of students' creative output. The collected data were analyzed based on engagement indicators, creativity dimensions, and narrative quality.

Findings - The research revealed a significant increase in student engagement; 82% of students actively engaged in group discussion, and 88% responded to the teacher's instruction. The average creativity score was 3,55 out of 4, which was categorized as "Very High," specifically in originality and imaginative language use. The quality of the short story was scored "High," showing the strength in the originality of the theme and creativity of diction. Students highlight the PjBL characteristics of autonomy and collaboration as the main factors in enriching their learning experiences. This finding offers valuable knowledge for the teacher, curriculum designer, and policy maker to integrate an innovative student-centered pedagogical approach in writing instruction.

Contribution – The combination of PjBL would enable the school to foster creativity, engagement, and problem-solving skills, equipping the students with the important competencies for the demands of 21st-century education.

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INTRODUCTION

Transformative pedagogy has been an important focus in modern education to respond to the increasing demand for 21st-century skills, such as creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. These skills are very important in equipping the student to significantly develop in a highly developed, globalized, and technologically advanced society (Alowayyid, 2023; Horton et al., 2017; Kain et al., 2024; Mahmud & Wong, 2022; Shadiev & Wang, 2022). As the education systems around the globe attempt to adapt to this change, the stakeholder's perspective has gained significant attention. Their opinions and attitudes are critical in shaping strategy implementation and practical assessment to develop this competence (Kain et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is broad agreement among the researchers on the urgency of revising the education approach to fulfill this contemporary demand (Benvenuti et al., 2023; Soulé & Warrick, 2015). By prioritizing innovative and dynamic teaching models, education could prepare students for lifelong learning and solving complex 21st-century problems.

Education plays a vital role in preparing the student with the essential skills of the 21st century, such as creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration, which are increasingly recognized as vital for success in the modern workplace (Avdiu et al., 2025; Garay & Quintana, 2019; Mahmud & Wong, 2022; Shadiev & Wang, 2022). To overcome this need, education systems have adopted innovative pedagogical approaches; among others, Project-Based Learning (PBL) stands out as the most effective strategy. PBL engages the students in meaningful projects that demand them to apply their knowledge, solve real-world problems, and present their findings, fostering active learning and the development of critical skills (Irwandi et al., 2024; Wurdinger et al., 2007). By emphasizing creativity and problem-solving in a collaborative context, PBL increases student engagement and fosters the necessary competencies to develop in dynamic and complex environments.

The traditional method, which the teacher centralizes, is highly criticized for its incompetencies in engaging students effectively or fostering high-order thinking skills, vital to navigating the complexity of the modern (Adnan, 2018; Benson, 2011). These methods often emphasize rote learning instead of creativity and critical thinking, limiting the student's preparation for real-world challenges. Otherwise, there is a growing confession of the need to adopt the student-centered approach, prioritizing active learning, critical thinking, and creativity. These methods align with the 21st-century demands, which enable the students to develop important skills, such as problem-solving, adaptability, and collaboration (Qafa et al., 2024; Zabeli et al., 2018). By focusing on the engagement of the student and high-order thinking skills, these innovative methods offer a more effective framework for modern education.

Writing is vital in transformative learning and is a creative and cognitive tool in language education. Writing fosters critical thinking, improves communication skills, and strengthens academic literacy. Therefore, it is important for self and professional development (Itani, 2023; Jwa, 2024; Price, 2020; Wittek et al., 2015). Among the variative writing forms, short story writing stands out as the ideal medium to integrate linguistic competencies, imaginative narrative, and emotional expression. This approach enables the students to explore their creativity and connect to their emotions. Thus, it would increase their deep understanding of themselves and their environment (Howe & Wig, 2017; Hunt, 2013). By writing, particularly in a reflective and supportive context, students reshape their literacy, develop agency, and experience valuable self-development (Hunt, 2013; Wu, 2024).

The project-based approach, such as a writing workshop and a collaborative writing project, increases the students' engagement and creativity by providing authentic and meaningful context to write. Unlike the traditional assessment, which prioritized the last product, this approach emphasizes the creative process and combines metacognitive instruction and reflective practice, encouraging transformative learning experiences (Price, 2020; Revell et al., 2022; Wittek et al., 2015). The benefit of transformative learning encompasses critical thinking skills and problem-solving because the students are encouraged to organize and articulate their ideas logically and coherently. Furthermore, this approach inspired creativity, innovation, and emotional involvement, which led to deeper and more valuable learning outcomes. (Esmail & Matthews-Roper, 2022; Vula et al., 2024).

Writing teaching faces significant challenges, particularly in fostering the engagement of the students.

Many students are less motivated to do writing tasks, especially those unwilling to write or have difficulty writing mechanisms (Flanagan et al., 2024; Lowe, 2019). Traditional feedback methods often fail to overcome this difficulty effectively, making the students not engage and unable to improve their skills meaningfully (Caro & Parra, 2018; Högemann et al., 2021). Moreover, the emphasis on testing has a high risk and formulaic writing approach that can hinder creativity, making the student unwilling to actively engage in writing (Lovejoy et al., 2020; Pasqua, 2017). Large classroom sizes worsen the problem by limiting the teacher's ability to give feedback and individual support, which brings a negative impact on the development and engagement of the students (He & Wang, 2024; Wallace et al., 2023).

The obstacle of creativity in writing also obstructs the transformative learning opportunity. The rigid assessment criteria and the domination of testing standards reduce the scope of creative expression, thus making the students unwilling to explore their imagination in their writing (Lovejoy et al., 2020; Pasqua, 2017). Traditional teaching methods often lack innovative pedagogical practice and fail to inspire students or create a conducive environment for creative learning (Ash et al., 2021; Chen & Zhao, 2024). Emotional and psychological factors, such as fear of failure and discomfort with ambiguity, increasingly limit students' skills to engage in creative writing (Cremin, 2006). In a limited resources environment, the limitation of technology and materials adds another difficulty layer, limiting students' access to the tools and opportunities to increase their creativity (Hieu & Thao, 2024).

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is a student-centered teaching approach emphasizing interdisciplinary long-term projects connected to real-world issues and practices. Unlike the traditional method, which puts the teacher at the center of the teaching process, PjBL focuses on students' autonomy, collaboration, and implementing practical knowledge to solve complex problems (Capraro & Jones, 2013; Pan, 2013; Sahin, 2013). By involving the students in designing their learning activities, PjBL grows a deeper understanding of the subject through engagement and active investigation (Pan, 2013; Sahin, 2013). This approach aligns to increase creativity and student engagement because it encourages high-order thinking skills, problem-solving, and the development of literacy skills core through continuous exploration of challenging real-world problems (Yu, 2024; J. Zhang et al., 2023). PjBL encourages creativity by empowering the students to establish their knowledge, reflect on their learning, and engage in meaningful tasks, increasing self-motivation and efficacy through goal setting, collaboration, and communication (Ding et al., 2021; Yu, 2024). PjBL has been effectively implemented in writing instruction to increase engagement and creativity. Dalam instruksi menulis, PjBL telah diterapkan secara efektif untuk meningkatkan keterlibatan dan kreativitas. For example, combining technology such as Plotagon in a narrative course enables the students to visualize their stories, making the learning more dynamic and contextually relevant (Alwasilah, 2019).

PjBL hybrid has also proven to increase critical thinking in academic writing while pushing active engagement, mainly when combined with brainstorming activity (Rochmahwati et al., 2024). Based on the observation in di SMA Neg. 1 Banawa Tengah, the urgency of transformative learning implementation is on the Project Learning program, as seen from the low student engagement in the creative writing program. Most students tend to be passive at writing, often prioritizing outcomes over exploring ideas and creativity. The lack of innovative teaching methods that integrate real-world contexts worsens this situation, making it difficult for many students to connect their writing skills with life challenges or complex problems. The dependency on traditional methods emphasizing rote learning and product-based assessment limits the opportunity for creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration among the students. This highlights the urgent need to adopt PjBL, which enables the students to engage actively and gain high-order thinking skills. This observation shows that the innovation in writing learning through PBL can overcome the old challenges related to engagement and creativity in local educational contexts.

To overcome the observed challenges in SMAN 1 Banawa Tengah, some researchers highlight the effectiveness of PBL in changing writing instruction by encouraging involvement, creativity, and active engagement. Mantra et al. (2023) show that combining brainstorming and PBL significantly improves creativity and cognitive students. As well as Ningsih et al. (2020) found that PBL improves creative thinking by involving students in their real-world tasks, enabling autonomy, problem-solving, and valuable knowledge construction. Ummah et al. (2019) highlight the impact of PBL on creativity, originality, novelty, and flexibility.

Meanwhile, Ulva et al. (2024) and Yuliani et al. (2024) observe the development of narrative quality through multimedia and ecology themes. However, this research often does not explore the detailed dimension of creativity and the dynamic of the involvement. This research was established based on that foundation by serving three structural phases of PBL (preparation, implementation, and evaluation), which are designed to improve the involvement and creativity in writing short stories by overcoming the gap of the previous research.

Unlike the previous research emphasizing examination test results or isolated creativity indicators, this research used qualitative methods to analyze the originality, thematic expression, and narrative quality. By overcoming this gap, this research would contribute to overcoming the limitation of teacher-centered methods, in line with the recommendation of Ningsih et al. (2020) and Ummah et al. (2019) to deeply explore creativity and active learning. This research validates PBL as the transformative research for writing instruction. It offers the framework to equip the students with important knowledge of 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creative expression.

This research aims to explore the transformative impact of implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in increasing the involvement and creativity of the students in short story writing skills. By overcoming the limitations of traditional teaching models that often limit active engagement and creative exploration, this research gives more profound knowledge on how PjBL grows inclusive learning and a student-centered environment. The researchers aspire that the findings contribute to the development of theoretical creative pedagogic and offer a practical guide to improving writing learning methods. In the long term, this research is expected to be widely adopted to equip students with critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills. Ultimately, this research aims to support the transformation of education to become better, more innovative, and adaptive.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses the qualitative case study method (Yin, 2018) to explore the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) as a pedagogic transformation to increase the involvement of students' engagement and creativity in writing short stories. SMA Negeri 1 Banawa Tengah was chosen as the research location based on the variety of population and the challenge identification in creative reading, making it the ideal context to test the potential transformative of PjBL. The population consists of 31 students from X IPS B, with 17 students purposively chosen as participants based on their consistent attendance and full engagement during the two weeks of research in October 2024. This purposeful sampling allows a focused and in-depth analysis of the PjBL process, capturing the knowledge of the fully experienced students of all interventions. The qualitative method is chosen to explore the students' subjective and specific context, which aligns with the research guide of Creswell dan Poht (2018) about learning the process and the value deeply.

The data is collected using class observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The observation in Kelas X IPS B is focused on the involvement of their behavior, cognitive and emotional during PjBL, guided by the engagement model of Fredricks et al. (2004), and recorded through field notes and checklists. A semi-structured interview is conducted with 10 siswa, ensuring the mixture of their role in the group to capture a variety of perspectives about autonomy, collaboration, and teacher guidance. Besides, the student short story is analyzed by using the creativity dimension (Guilford, 1950).

FINDING

This research finding highlights the transformative potential of PjBL in increasing student involvement, creativity, and short story writing quality. This analysis is organized into four main areas: student engagement, creativity improvement, short story quality, and student perception of PjBL.

Student engagement in the learning Process

Implementing PjBL resulted in high student involvement in most behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. The involvement is marked through observation during group discussion observation during

group discussions, brainstorming, and teacher and teacher-student interactions. Table 1 summarizes the percentage of students' engagement.

Table 1. Student Engagement

Engagement Aspects	Student Behavior Percentage
Active participation in group discussion	82%
Independent idea expression	75%
Teacher question respond	88%

This result aligns with Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), who argue that meaningful engagement is a multidimensional construction involving active engagement, critical thinking, and emotional relations. The data show that the behavior is collaborative and student-centered; they effectively foster the participant's activity because the students feel empowered to contribute ideas and collaborate with the other students in the group. For instance, during the group discussion, the observed student's enthusiast brainstormed on the story's unique concepts and gave valuable responses to the teacher's instruction.

The high level of emotional engagement deeply reflects the increasing students' interest and motivation, which is related to the autonomy and relevancy of PjBL. The opportunity to cooperate collaboratively and independently fosters a sense of belonging to their project, changing the writing task from a daily routine to a meaningful creative activity.

The increasing of Student Creativity

The PjBL approach significantly impacts the growth of student creativity in writing short stories. Creativity is marked based on four indicators: originality of ideas, realistic character development, creative use of language, and logical flow construction. The result can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2. The increasing Students' Creativity

Creativity Indicators	Average Score (from 4)	Categories
Originality of Ideas	3.7	Very High
Realistic Character Development	3.5	High
Creative use of language	3.6	Very High
Logical Flow Construction	3.4	High

The average creativity score is 3,55, categorized as "Very High." High scores in originality and the use of language show that PjBL fosters divergent thinking, and the students explore unique ideas and use imaginative expression. This result is consistent with the theory of creativity by Guilford (1950), which emphasizes originality, fluency, and elaboration as the main dimensions of creative performance. For example, one group of students developed a story about a character that can deal with a natural disaster, combining the realistic details of imaginative elements to create an engaging and meaningful narrative.

However, the lower score in the logical flow (3,4) shows that some students faced challenges in maintaining the coherence of the narrative. This highlights the need for additional guidance during the construction process to help the students accelerate their creative ideas in the proper narrative structure. The responses from the teacher and the other students during PjBL play an important role in overcoming this challenge; it will allow the students to complete their drafts continuously.

The quality of the student's short story

The quality of the student's short story is evaluated using the rubric based on Nurgiyantoro's (2013) framework, which covers four aspects: theme originality, logical flow structure, diction, creativity style, and character depth. Table 3 shows the details of the evaluation result.

Table 3. The quality of the student's short story

Evaluation Aspects	Average Score (from 4)	Categories
Originality of theme	3.6	Very High
Logical flow structure	3.4	High
Diction and creativity style	3.5	High
Character Depth	3.3	High

The overall average score is 3.45, which is indicated as "High"; this result shows that PjBl effectively increases the quality of students' writing. The strong performance in thematic originality and diction reflects students' competence in creating fresh ideas and using creative language. For example, one group wrote a story about a magical journal that allows the character to revisit past decisions. This story shows its originality and depth.

However, the lower score in the logical flow structure and character depth shows the area to develop. Some students showed creativity in conceptualizing the ideas, while others had difficulty balancing the imaginative elements with a coherent narrative and the realism of the character. This finding shows that although the students are imaginative and able to explore the flow of the story creatively, they still need explicit guidance to construct coherent narratives and develop the realism of the characters. This finding supports Hillock's (1986) recommendation that writing teaching should be able to combine open exploration with explicit instruction about narrative techniques.

The student's view on PjBL

The student's view on PjBL is explored through semi-structured interviews that reveal positive feedback. Two main themes arose:

The Freedom to Explore Ideas

The students consistently highlight the autonomy provided by PjBL, emphasizing how they can develop a story that reflects their private interests and creativity. One student shared, "This method gave me the freedom to write what inspired me, making the process interesting and meaningful." The other students said, "For the first time, I can make a real story of mine without worrying about the rigid rules or stiff topics." Moreover, the third student noted, "I am able to express and explore my opinion and decide the theme in our group, making all the process more interesting because everyone can contribute their ideas." This view is similar to the self-determination theory of Deci dan Ryan (2000), which emphasizes the individual role in developing one's motives and intrinsic involvement. The ability to explore ideas independently increases student motivation and encourages them to own their creative process, leading to a more meaningful and personal narrative.

The Value of Collaboration and Guidance

Students emphasize the vital role of teamwork and teacher feedback in improving their writing skills. Collaborative discussion enables them to complete their story ideas and have new points of view. One student shared, "Working in a team helped me see ideas I never thought of before. It made the story more interesting and richer." The other added, "Sharing ideas with my team was very helpful, especially when we have different opinions; the situation pushed us to find the best ideas together." Teacher feedback also plays an important role in ensuring the coherence and structure of the narrative. The student comments, "The teacher's suggestions helped me see the lack of my story and guided me to make it stronger and clearer." The other student explained, "Having the feedback from my friends and the teacher made me have confidence in writing my story because I know how to correct and develop it." This finding aligns with the concept of scaffolding by Vygotsky (1987), where the support given by the peer and teacher can facilitate deep learning and develop complex skills. This collaborative environment enriches students' creative process and encourages shared responsibility and growth. A positive point of view shows that PjBL is not merely increasing academic results

but also creating a supportive and interesting learning environment, which at the next point would motivate the student to excel in their writing.

DISCUSSION

The finding of this research proves that the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) functioned as a pedagogical transformative approach to increase student engagement, grow creativity, and develop the quality of the writing of short stories. This discussion investigates the implication of this finding by analyzing critically how PjBL is in line with the education theory, overcoming the gap in traditional instruction and supporting the development of 21st-century skills. This analysis is provided comprehensively at all cores of the engagement dimension, creativity, and writing quality and is supported by the relevant studies.

The student engagement transformation in PjBL

This research shows that PjBL significantly increases student engagement by changing the class into a dynamic, student-centered environment. The finding revealed behavioral, cognitive, and high emotional engagement, with 82% of students actively engaging in group discussion, 75% expressing their ideas independently, and 88% responding to teacher instruction. This result aligns with Fredricks et al. (2004), emphasizing the important role engagement dimension in fostering meaningful learning. As for comparison, Mantra et al. (2023) also reported increasing engagement through brainstorming, combined with PjBL, but did not extensively explore emotional and cognitive engagement. Furthermore, while Kania dan Suhara (2024) highlights increasing student engagement in writing short stories using PjBL, the study does not have a detailed analysis of how autonomy and collaboration foster engagement.

This research developed literature by integrating economic collaboration relevant to the learning process. As highlighted in Deci dan Ryan (2000), the theory of self-determination, autonomy, and competency are vital in increasing intrinsic motivation. By enabling the student to choose the story theme and contribute actively in a discussion group, PjBL fulfills the psychological needs and creates a meaningful and engaging learning experience. The connection to Dewey's (1983) experiential learning principle can be seen clearly by the student acting in connection with the writing task in the classroom to real-life practice, changing the writing from a usual activity to a creative and engaging activity.

In overcoming the disengagement problem observed in SMA Negeri 2 Banawa Tengah, the characteristic of PjBL, which is structured and interactive, offers an effective strategy for the limited method of the traditional learning process. The emphasis on active participation encourages engagement and equips students with critical thinking and collaborative skills, which are vital to navigating the complexity of the modern world (Ningsih et al., 2020; D. Zhang & Hwang, 2023).

Nurturing creativity through structured freedom

This finding revealed that PjBL grows creativity by providing structured guidance and the freedom to explore ideas. It enables the students to express themselves imaginatively while keeping the narrative coherent. This research showed a significant increase in creativity, with a high score of originality (3,7) and imaginative language (3,6), even though the score is lower in plot coherency (3,4), highlighting the areas that need further improvement. This result is in line with Smart & Elfatihi (2024), which emphasizes the role of autonomy in growing originality, and also in line with the statement of Csikszentmihalyi (1996) that creativity develops in an environment that balances challenge and freedom.

Compared with the previous research, Ummah et al. (2019) showed increasing creativity in manipulative projects through PjBL but did not analyze creativity in the narrative context. Yuliani et al. (2024) also report that the increase in creativity in short stories is ecological but does not have a detailed indicator for imaginative expression. This research overcomes this gap by combining qualitative dimensions of creativity, such as originality, fluency, and flexibility, which shows the transformative impact of PjBL on narrative writing.

The finding highlights the double role of PjBL as a creative catalysator and guide to complete the ideas. Collaboration among friends facilitates divergent thinking because students can share their opinions and

complete their stories collectively. This is in line with the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1987). However, the coherency plot score is lower, which shows the need for explicit instruction about the narrative structure, as emphasized by Hillocks (1986). Integrating the mini-targeted lesson about plot development in PjBL will help the student balance creativity and structured logic, ensuring the imaginative ideas have been translated into a cohesive narrative.

Increasing writing quality

The quality of short stories produced by students significantly improved through PjBL. Originality gained a high score (3,6), diction (3,5), structured plot (3,4), and character depth (3,3). This result aligns with Ulva et al. (2024), who observed the increasing narrative quality through pJBL multimedia and validated the potential framework to develop interesting and quality literary work.

Apart from the previous research, which focused on the isolated aspects of writing, this research uses a comprehensive evaluation of narrative quality that uses Nurgiyantoro's (2013) framework, which enables analysis of the nuance of originality, thematic, and creative diction. The drafting process and continuous feedback facilitated by PjBL support the student in completing their work, as in the theory of feedback by Bandura (1986) as the tool to gain skill. These findings also align with Harmer's (2007) argument that authentic and meaningful tasks improve writing quality by increasing student motivation and engagement.

However, the lower score is in character depth and plot flow coherency, which highlights the importance of properly integrating examples of structured narrative in the PjBL process. This adjustment will give the students a concrete model to guide their story and ensure the balance of creativity and structure.

The contribution and Scientific Implication

This research contributes to this field by integrating engaging, creativity, and writing quality in the framework of cohesive PjBL. Meanwhile, the previous research (e.g., Mantra et al., 2023; Ummah et al., 2019) focused on isolated aspects; this research is bridging these dimensions, offering a holistic understanding of the impact of transformative PjBL. By overcoming the gap in traditional pedagogic, this research provides the model to develop 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, collaboration, and creative expression (D. Zhang & Hwang, 2023)

PjBL, with three structured phases (preparation, implementation, and evaluation), fosters creativity and engagement collectively. The research finding has significant implications in education. It emphasizes the importance of balancing the student autonomy and structured guidance of the teacher in the writing learning process. However, explicit guidance on narrative structure and the validation of its potential must be implemented in more diverse educational contexts for further research.

CONCLUSION

This research proves that Project Learning (PjBL) significantly increases student engagement, creativity, and the quality of short story writing, with 82% of students actively engaging in group discussion and 88% responding to the teacher's instruction, and also an overall average score of 3.55 (categorized, as very high) which can be seen from the originality of the ideas and imaginative use of language. Even though the development of a coherent storyline still requires more attention, these findings emphasize that PjBL cannot only overcome the lack of traditional methods but also create a meaningful learning environment through the freedom of exploration and collaboration. Therefore, it can be adopted as an innovative approach to developing 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking and collaborative work.

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