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Beyond the Code: Vocational Students' Perceptions of Project-Based English Writing at IPB University

Irma Rasita Gloria Barus[1*], Amata Fami[2], Bontisesari[3]

[1] College of Vocational Studies, IPB University e-mail: irmabarus@apps.ipb.ac.id
[2] College of Vocational Studies, IPB University e-mail: amatafami@apps.ipb.ac.id
[3] UPN "Veteran" Jawa Timur e-mail: bontisesari.bispro@upnjatim.ac.id

***Corresponding author: irmabarus@apps.ipb.ac.id**

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ABSTRACT

As vocational education becomes increasingly popular, there is a rising focus on preparing students not only for technical skills but also for academic competence, such as English writing. This study examined how vocational software engineering students perceive a project-based English writing task integrated into their coursework. Conducted at IPB University, the study involved 122 second-year students enrolled in an English for Information Technology Communication course. As part of the course, students were guided to write a research article based on their technical projects. Data were collected through a questionnaire consisting of both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The findings suggest that students gained a range of benefits from the project, including: 1) enhanced academic writing, 2) developed research abilities, 3) stronger collaboration skills, 4) a clearer understanding of discipline-specific content, and 5) improved time management. Simultaneously, students reported challenges categorized into four domains based on the project stages: 1) writing and revision: collecting and synthesizing references, paraphrasing, and avoiding plagiarism; 2) planning and drafting: finding novelty and developing the topic; 3) data collection and analysis: reaching the target response, processing data; 4) submission and publication: finding a relevant journal platform and waiting for review. While this study highlights the value of project-based learning in vocational contexts to ensure meaningful learning outcomes, it also indicates areas where further instructional support is needed to improve the course design and delivery.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's vocational education, English plays a key role in preparing students for both professional and academic communication (Yildirim & Bal, 2023; Putri & Syaifudin, 2024; Mi, 2024). Thus, continuous efforts are needed to ensure vocational graduates are equipped with both practical and academic competencies. In addition to technical expertise, academic competencies—especially writing—remain essential in vocational fields to support students in explaining, documenting, and reflecting on their technical work. For learners in technical fields, the ability to write clear, structured texts that convey the logic behind their projects is particularly important (Liang, 2016). However, despite this need, English courses in vocational education often prioritize language form over meaningful and relevant context to the discipline (Sincer, 2017). As a result, students may question the relevance of what they are learning and how it fits into their future. Recognizing this issue, Bertel et al. (2021) and Li & Xiong (2021) highlight the importance of transforming teaching and learning practices to more closely align with global competency demands as well as encourage learning approaches that bridge technical knowledge and language skills.

To address this challenge, previous studies have adopted project-based learning as an instructional approach in the context of English writing (Chao, Rahman, & Soon, 2025; Karim & Na, 2024; Suryani, Rizal, Rohani, & Ratnaningsih, 2024; Lu, 2021). PBL encourages active participation and supports the development of students' self-learning skills, as it also benefits the students to become self-directed learners, particularly at the higher education level (Pan, et al. 2020). Several studies have also implemented English PBL for university-level students (Arochman, Margana, Ashadi, Achmad, & Nugrahaeni, 2024; Wan Yusof, et al., 2022; Köpeczi-Bócz, 2024). These studies emphasize the benefits of using PBL in improving students' performance and attitude.

Avci and Engin-Demir (2021) suggest that higher vocational students are in need of suitable English learning to overcome their negative attitude toward the use of English. This situation might be due to outdated teaching methods, exam-oriented learning, and a lack of integrated learning and training (Mi, 2024; Jiang, 2024). In addition, students' satisfaction with the implementation of PBL becomes a concern (Melguizo-Garín, et al. 2022). Therefore, this study proposed a teaching strategy that integrates English writing with students' disciplinary knowledge—In this case, software engineering—through the implementation of PBL. The project was integrated with three technical courses they enrolled in: *User Experience, Virtual Technology,* and *Information Systems.* This integration was to ensure that the English writing project was relevant.

Subsequently, this study explored vocational software engineering students' perceptions of a project-based English writing experience, focusing on both its perceived benefits and challenges. The participants included 122 students at the College of Vocational Studies of IPB University who completed a semester-long project that required them to write a journal article based on their technical work. This study is expected to contribute to the growing body of project-based learning practices in vocational higher education that binds academic and technical fields to better support vocational students' needs.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the perceptions of vocational software engineering students toward the implementation of project-based English writing. By focusing on students' self-reported experiences, the study aimed to uncover both the perceived benefits and the challenges they encountered while working on the writing project. To better understand how students experienced the project, data were collected through open-ended questionnaires. This method was chosen to gain deeper insights into how students assigned meanings to their involvement in the project (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data were collected during the final two weeks of the semester, in June 2025, after students had completed their English writing project.

2.2 Participants

In this study, participants were purposefully chosen as qualitative research emphasizes selecting participants and settings that best help researchers understand a particular issue. The participants were 122 vocational students majoring in Software Engineering at IPB University. They were enrolled in an *English for Information Technology Communication* course and took part in a fourteen-week writing project that required them to produce a research article based on their technical coursework. The summary of participants' profiles is presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, male students accounted for 68%, while female students accounted for 32%. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21 years old, and all were in their second year at the university. In addition, the majority of participants (68.3%) reported having no prior experience in doing tasks similar to the project.

Table 1. Participants' Profiles

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	83	68%
	Female	39	32%
Age	19 years old	37	30.3%
	20 years old	72	59%
	21 years old	13	10.7%
Year of Study	Second year	122	100%
Prior Experience in Writing a Research Article	Yes	36	31.7%
	No	81	68.3%

2.3 Instruments

To obtain a thorough understanding of students' perceptions and experiences with project-based English writing, data were collected using a questionnaire consisting of two sections—closed-ended Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The first part consisted of a set of closed-ended Likert-scale items designed to capture general trends in students' attitudes, confidence levels, and self-assessed engagement during the project. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale. These responses provided a broad overview of how students responded to the implementation of project-based learning. Meanwhile, the second part included a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit deeper insights into the participants' individual experiences. These prompts encouraged participants to reflect on different aspects of the writing project, including their impressions of the learning approach and the challenges they encountered.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012). Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning across a dataset to better understand the participants' perceptions and experiences related to the project-based English writing activity. The analysis began with a process of familiarization to gain an initial understanding of the collected data. This was followed by generating initial codes, during which relevant data were highlighted. Next, related codes were grouped to form preliminary themes, which were then reviewed and refined into thematic categories. Finally, the findings were organized into a narrative that connected the themes to the objective of the study.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Description of the Project-Based English Writing Task

To contextualize the findings, this section provides an overview of the project-based learning activity. The project, titled "*Research Article Writing in English*," was designed as an integrated academic writing task, where students were required to produce a journal-style research article based on their ongoing or completed software development projects. The goal of the project was to help students enhance their understanding of academic writing conventions. To support the writing process, the course provided key components of academic writing, including formulating titles and abstracts; paraphrasing and avoiding plagiarism; using references appropriately, writing the introduction and methodology sections, and describing findings and drawing conclusions. Moreover, students were assessed based on two main aspects: *process,* which covered drafting, revising, and participating in consultations; and *product*, the final version of the project.

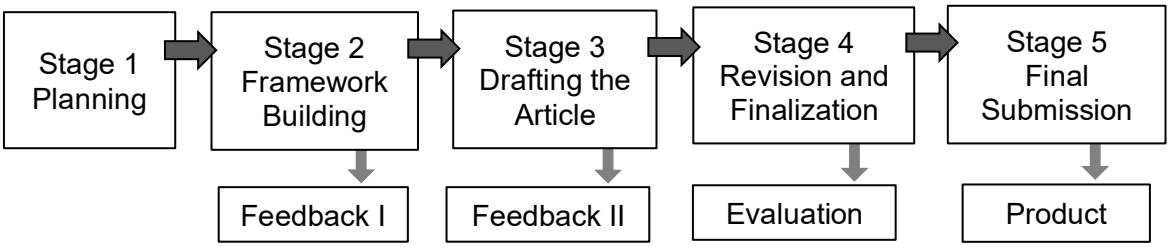
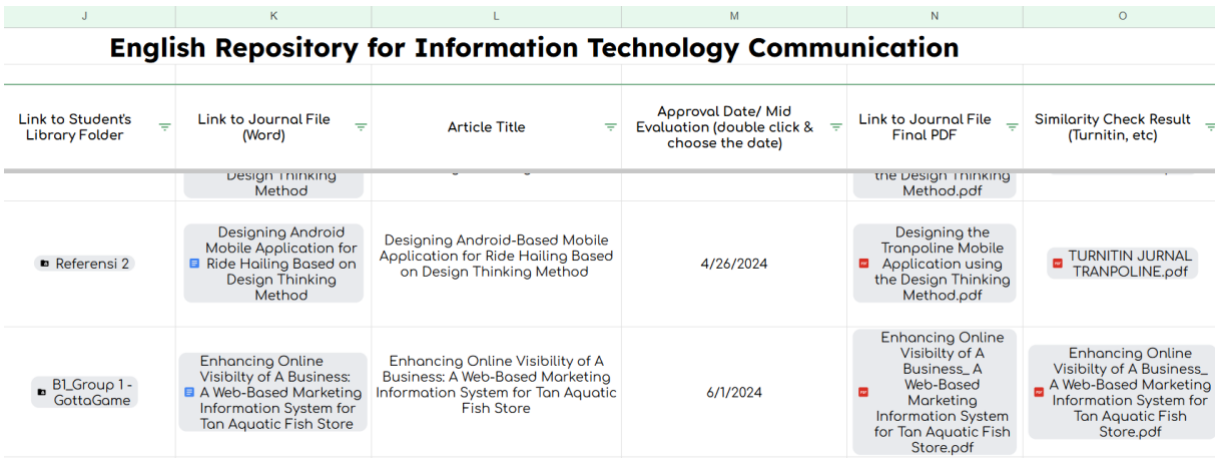


Figure 1. Flowchart of the Project-Based English Writing Task

In the initial phase, students selected a topic related to their ongoing technical project, such as application development, user interface design, and system evaluation. Working in a group of two or three, they brainstormed the article's focus and created an outline that identified the objectives and expected outcomes. They then reviewed relevant references to gain input and identify model texts. With a conceptual framework in place, students began drafting their article using a structured format. Instructional support was provided to guide them in composing the introduction, methodology, findings, and discussion sections. During these stages, students received feedback focused on logical structure, clarity of explanation, and alignment between research objectives and content.

The revision stage emphasized students' ability to respond constructively to feedback. In the final stage, students submitted their completed articles for evaluation. The final article was evaluated under the selected journal's requirements. Students were instructed to submit their work to national publication outlets, such as SINTA-indexed journals. The related documents were stored in an open-source repository, as illustrated in Figure 2.



English Repository for Information Technology Communication

Link to Student's Library Folder	Link to Journal File (Word)	Article Title	Approval Date/ Mid Evaluation (double click & choose the date)	Link to Journal File Final PDF	Similarity Check Result (Turnitin, etc)
	Design Thinking Method			the Design Thinking Method.pdf	
Referensi 2	Designing Android Mobile Application for Ride Hailing Based on Design Thinking Method	Designing Android-Based Mobile Application for Ride Hailing Based on Design Thinking Method	4/26/2024	Designing the Tranpoline Mobile Application using the Design Thinking Method.pdf	TURNITIN JURNAL TRANPOLINE.pdf
B1_Group 1 - GottaGame	Enhancing Online Visibilty of A Business: A Web-Based Marketing Information System for Tan Aquatic Fish Store	Enhancing Online Visibility of A Business: A Web-Based Marketing Information System for Tan Aquatic Fish Store	6/1/2024	Enhancing Online Visibilty of A Business_ A Web-Based Marketing Information System for Tan Aquatic Fish Store.pdf	Enhancing Online Visibilty of A Business_ A Web-Based Marketing Information System for Tan Aquatic Fish Store.pdf

Figure 2. Participants' Document Progress Repository

3.2. Perceived Benefits of Project-Based English Writing

Through an open-ended question, 122 respondents shared their reflections on the benefits they gained from participating in the project-based English writing task. Their written reflections were analyzed thematically, and five main benefits were generated from the data; i.e., time management, collaboration, content knowledge, research skills, and writing skills. The number of students shown in Figure 3 indicates how many participants expressed each theme in their responses. These themes were not mutually exclusive, as individual responses might contain more than one aspect. According to Figure 3, 87 students reported improvement in time management, 92 noted enhanced collaboration, 96 students indicated development in research skills, 98 students reported improved writing ability, and 90 students acknowledged better understanding of content knowledge related to their technical field.

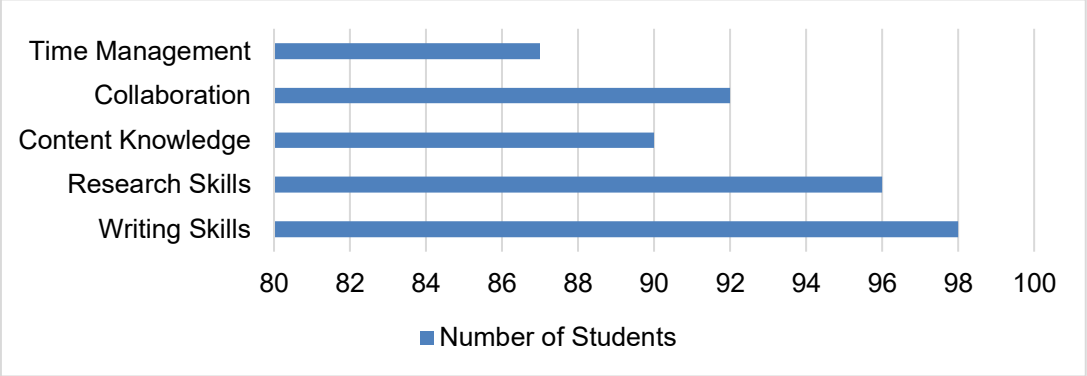


Figure 3. Perceived Benefits of Project-Based English Writing Task

To support this finding, several excerpts from participant responses are presented. For instance, Respondent A stated, *"I became better at managing my time because there were weekly targets to meet, so I had to stay disciplined to keep up."* This commentary demonstrates how the project encouraged students to take responsibility for their schedules. In order to follow the set timeline, students needed to organize their time effectively.

This aspect is closely related to how students work as a team to meet the tight deadlines. Respondent B shared, "*I learned that communication is very important to make sure everything is on track*." Several respondents mentioned that working in a group taught them "*how to share responsibilities, delegate tasks effectively, and support each other when someone struggles*." These responses highlight how the project fostered a collaborative learning environment where students were not only responsible for their individual contributions but also for the group as a whole. Collaborating and communicating are also key soft skills that will benefit students in their future career.

In addition to collaboration, respondents also reported that working on the project topics led to a clearer understanding of their technical field. For instance, writing about their digital products—such as apps or websites—stimulated students to explain complex ideas that needed their full grasp of the subject matter. One student (Respondent C) reflected, "*I needed to explain how my application works, and that made me review the functions again—I realized I understood my own project better through writing*," and another (Respondent D) stated, *"The article helped me understand the topic I chose more deeply*." These reflections illustrate how language production and content mastery are interconnected. Moreover, there are several mentions of "*expanded technical vocabulary*" and gaining "*new knowledge,*" suggesting the cognitive benefits derived from the project.

In terms of research skills, a number of students noted progress in understanding how to "*find the right method*," "*analyze data*," and "*elaborate findings*" in ways that aligned with their chosen topic. Others emphasized "*solving problems*" during data collection and analysis. In addition to procedural skills, participants reported growing confidence in tasks such as "*minimizing revision*," "*finding relevant references*," and "*identifying the research gap*."

"I discovered new insights and improved my understanding of how to write a research article" (Respondent E)
"This experience taught me how to search for relevant references and select the appropriate method for our topic" (Respondent F).

A significant number of participants also reported improvements in their academic writing as a result of the project. The most frequently mentioned outcomes involved a better understanding of article structure, citation techniques, and the overall process of composing an academic text. Two respondents (G and H) noted:

"I now have the ability and knowledge to understand how journal articles work, which I didn't before."
"Through this task, I learned how to convey ideas in structured writing."

These responses suggest that project-based tasks provided real-life exposure to the conventions of academic writing. These findings are consistent with prior studies suggesting that project-based learning fosters deeper genre awareness and academic engagement (Yuliana & Sahayu, 2024; Avci & Engin-Demir, 2021).

Following the discussion of perceived benefits, Figure 4 illustrates students' self-reported confidence levels before and after completing the project-based writing task. The comparison reveals a significant positive shift in how students viewed their own academic writing abilities. Prior to the project, most students reported only moderate (42 students) or low (17 students) levels of confidence. Only 20 students described themselves as having "very high" confidence in their writing, and 40 students reported "high" confidence. A small number (3 students) expressed very low confidence, suggesting that some students approached the task with hesitation or self-doubt.

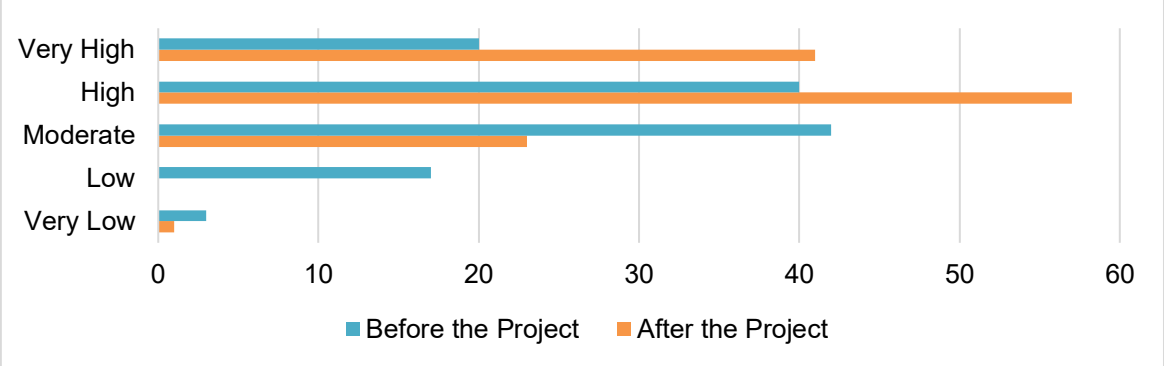


Figure 4. Students' Confidence Levels Before and After the Project-Based Writing Task

However, after completing the project, the number of students who reported "very high" confidence rose more than doubled, reaching 41. Those with "high" confidence increased to 57, indicating that a majority of the students ended the course feeling significantly more capable in their writing. Meanwhile, the number of students reporting "moderate" confidence dropped to 23, and those indicating "low" or "very low" confidence fell to zero and one, respectively. The sense of confidence and personal achievement perceived by the respondents was reflected in some of the responses:

"Publishing a journal article while still in my fourth semester is a major personal achievement" (Respondent I).
"Completing such a complex assignment gave me a strong sense of satisfaction" (Respondent J).
"The process made me feel like I'm capable of contributing to my field and growing professionally" (Respondent K).

In other words, the students expressed pride in completing a demanding task and reported a sense of accomplishment, particularly when their work was accepted for publication. This increase in confidence suggests that participating in the writing project not only supported their skill development but also helped them feel more assured in expressing academic ideas.

3.3. Challenges Encountered in the Project-Based Writing Process

While students reported benefits from the project-based writing experience, many also faced challenges throughout the process. These challenges were categorized into four stages: 1) writing and revision, 2) planning and drafting, 3) data collection and analysis, and 4) submission and publication. Table 3 outlines the key areas where students encountered difficulties.

Table 3. Perceived Challenges

Challenge Domain	Number of Students	Representative Keywords
Writing and revision	84	- collecting and synthesizing references - paraphrasing and avoiding plagiarism
Planning and drafting	68	- finding a research gap - developing topic
Data collection and analysis	67	- reaching the target response - processing data
Submission and publication	29	- finding a relevant journal platform - waiting for review

The most frequently cited challenge domain was academic writing and revision, particularly related to paraphrasing, synthesizing references, and organizing ideas into coherent paragraphs. A total of 84 students reported struggling with genre-specific academic conventions, including citation practices and avoiding plagiarism. Recurring expressions included *"difficulty in paraphrasing and summarizing," "maintaining a consistent writing style,"* and *"managing changes and corrections."*

This was followed by the planning and drafting stage, cited by 68 students. Many described difficulties in identifying a novel topic or defining a clear research question relevant to their technical project. Expressions such as *"finding the gap," "choosing a title,"* and *"aligning topic with the project objective"* were commonly reported. Hence, the role of the instructor is crucial in guiding students to outline the project accurately.

The domain of data collection and analysis was mentioned by 67 students, particularly those conducting questionnaires or interviews. Students cited challenges in *"reaching target respondents,"* due to a lack of participants. In addition, expressions such as *"processing data"* and *"analyzing results"* were frequently mentioned. One respondent stated, "*The most challenging part of writing the article was the results and discussion section, because it had to match the data we collected, and the data analysis process was very difficult for me"* (Respondent L). Meanwhile, in the submission and publication phase, 29 students noted challenges such as *"time-consuming review process," "difficulty finding journal platforms,"* and *"formatting issues."*

Overall, while the project was able to engage students in real-world academic practices, there remains a need for ongoing support in academic literacy, methodological guidance, and publication processes. These findings highlight the importance of the cognitive and technical assistance necessary to support students through each phase of the project.

3.2 Discussion

The findings from this study revealed two major themes based on students' reflections: perceived benefits and challenges. These themes offer insights into how students navigated the process of writing an academic article within a project-based learning context.

On the positive side, students reported a range of benefits, including improved time management and collaboration, stronger connections between writing skills and real-world relevance, and greater autonomy in managing their learning process. This is in line with the core principles of Project-Based Learning, which not only promote subject-specific knowledge but also foster essential soft skills such as time management and self-discipline (Sedubun & Nurhayati, 2024). These outcomes support the findings of Chao, Rahman, and Soon (2025), who emphasize how PBL promotes critical thinking and creativity through authentic, student-centered tasks. Similarly, Karim and Na (2024) found that PBL provided a learning environment that mirrored real-world writing tasks, supporting both language development and learner engagement. For most students in this study, this was their first time writing a full-length academic text in English. Despite the challenge, they recognized how the integration of writing with their technical discipline—software engineering—made the task feel more meaningful and relevant.

This sense of relevance is further supported by Suryani et al. (2024), who highlight how digital-based PBL not only improves writing skills but also supports digital literacy and collaborative learning. Lu (2021) adds that PBL fosters initiative and helps students take ownership of their learning, especially in university contexts. In this case, the sense of ownership was reflected in students' growing confidence and ability to manage their writing projects more independently.

One student (Respondent M) shared that the most demanding aspect of the assignment was the process of transforming raw research data into a coherent and meaningful discussion section. According to this student, *"attention to detail, the ability to elaborate on content, and the skill of concluding were thoroughly tested."* Similarly, another student (Respondent N) emphasized the broader academic value of the task, stating, *"This article writing project provided valuable experience in deepening my understanding of research methodology and enhancing my academic writing skills."* This reflection suggests that the task functioned as more than a writing exercise; it was an integrated learning process that stimulated students' analytical thinking skills.

Despite these positive experiences, students also encountered several challenges. The most frequently reported difficulties involved academic writing and revision. Many students found it difficult to paraphrase, synthesize sources, and maintain coherence in academic writing. Another area of difficulty was planning and drafting, especially when it came to identifying a suitable topic or articulating the novelty of their project. This finding is in line with those of Avci and Engin-Demir (2021) and Lu (2021), who noted that students often lack confidence and clarity when it comes to formulating research ideas.

Challenges also emerged during data collection and analysis, particularly among students using surveys or interviews. These students described the process of gathering responses and analyzing data as demanding and, at times, overwhelming. Similar issues were documented by Wan Yusof et al. (2022), whose study of pre-university students in a science course found that PBL tasks involving research required strong support and careful planning. In few cases, students also struggled because they did not have enough participants to collect sufficient data from.

Finally, students highlighted difficulties related to submission and publication. Some felt unsure about how to find a suitable journal, adjust to formatting guidelines, or manage the waiting period for review. Chao et al. (2025) acknowledge this as a common obstacle, suggesting that more structured guidance can help students navigate the publication process more confidently.

In addition, the role of the instructor in PBL should also be highlighted as argued by Huang & Wang (2022) that collaborative feedback between students and teachers had significant impact on the success rate of the students. According to Pan et al. (2020), instructors in PBL settings act not just as content deliverers but as designers, facilitators, and guides. They need to create opportunities for students to reflect, take initiative, and manage their learning. In this study, the instructor's role in giving feedback, encouraging self-reflection, and guiding students through the publication process was key to many students' positive experiences.

Sorea and Repanovici (2020) emphasize that students should not only be guided in writing but also be encouraged to explain and justify their choices. This can reduce plagiarism and help students develop a deeper understanding of the writing process. As shown in this study, when students were held accountable for their writing decisions, they became more thoughtful and deliberate in their approach.

The insights from this study offer several recommendations for teachers and institutions aiming to implement PBL in vocational English writing courses: 1) Strengthen Academic Writing Instruction: Teachers should offer targeted mini-workshops on paraphrasing, synthesizing sources, and academic argumentation, as suggested by Karim and Na (2024). Such support can be particularly helpful for students with limited prior experience in academic writing; 2) Support Publication Readiness: Institutions can assist students by providing curated lists of appropriate journals, templates for submission, and realistic timelines. Chao et al. (2025) stress the importance of this kind of guidance to help students move from writing to publication; 3) Enhance Research Literacy: Given the challenges students faced with data collection and analysis, introducing foundational research training—such as designing surveys or interpreting results—can strengthen students' readiness for project-based tasks; and 4) Foster Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Coordinating assignments between English and technical courses can make PBL more meaningful. As Bertel et al. (2021) argue, integrating language learning with technical expertise prepares students to meet the demands of today's interdisciplinary workplace.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the students' perceptions of the project-based English writing experience, with particular attention to the perceived benefits they gained and the challenges they encountered throughout the process. By documenting student experiences and challenges, this study provides insights that can inform future English instruction through project-based learning, particularly in vocational education contexts.

The integration of academic writing with students' technical coursework—ranging from app development to system evaluation—was found to enhance not only their writing skills but also their awareness of research processes within their disciplinary field. While a large number of students reported increased academic confidence and competence, they also faced notable challenges, including managing the demands of academic writing, conducting data analysis, and handling publication procedures. These findings suggest that while PBL presents positive impacts, its implementation may benefit from additional guidance to minimize the challenges presented in this study.

Subsequently, the findings support the value of project-based learning in vocational settings where practical and academic competencies must align. However, the study is limited by its single-institution focus and self-reported data, which may affect its generalizability. A broader scope of studies incorporating diverse perspectives, including the instructors, is recommended for future research. Despite these constraints, this study supports PBL as a transformative instructional strategy in vocational education, promoting meaningful language learning connected to the real world, discipline-specific tasks and issues.

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