



EFL Teacher's Challenges in Implementing Project Based Learning (PjBL) in the Context of Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High School

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the challenges faced by English teacher in implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational High Schools (SMK). Using descriptive qualitative method, data was collected through non participant observation conducted three times and fifteen minutes of semi-structural interviews with an EFL teacher at SMKN 5 Pangkep. The findings reveal that teacher encountered various obstacles, such as limited class hours, students' lack of understanding of project concepts, and insufficient opportunities for professional development. These findings highlight the need for ongoing support, whether in the form of training or policy adjustments, to ensure that PjBL implementation can be carried out more effectively in line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning, Merdeka Curriculum, EFL Teacher, Challenges, Vocational High School

Introduction

In the 21st century, education was expected to equip students not only with academic knowledge but also with essential life skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. These skills were considered vital to help learners navigate the dynamic challenges of the modern world. In response to this demand, Indonesia introduced the Merdeka Curriculum, a learning framework that emphasized student-centered learning, contextual relevance, and flexibility in instruction. Within this framework, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) emerged as one of the innovative approaches considered effective in promoting active learning and enhancing students' 4C skills.

PjBL encouraged students to engage in authentic, real-world projects that

allowed them to apply their knowledge in meaningful contexts. It aligned well with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which supported differentiated instruction and provided teachers the autonomy to adapt lessons based on student needs and local contexts. Recent studies showed that PjBL positively influenced student motivation conceptual understanding, and higher order thinking skills (Almulla, 2020; Insyasiska, Zubaidah, & Susilo, 2017; Rahmawati & Hakim, 2024). In the context of vocational high schools (SMK), where students were prepared for specific career paths and global competitiveness, English language proficiency played a critical role. Thus, integrating PjBL into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction was seen as a strategic move to foster both language competence and workplace readiness.

SMKN 5 Pangkep, located on Jl. Muh Tahir Dg. Liong, Kec. Mandalle, Kab. Pangkajene Kepulauan, South Sulawesi. SMKN 5 Pangkep was selected based on survey showing that the school has implemented merdeka curriculum since 2023, which requires teachers to adapt to a student-centered learning approach.

Despite its potential benefits, the implementation of PjBL, particularly in EFL classrooms at vocational high schools, remained limited. Preliminary observations at SMKN 5 Pangkep revealed that English teachers rarely adopted the PjBL model. This phenomenon raised important questions about the challenges that hindered its implementation. Previous studies highlighted general obstacles in applying PjBL, such as a lack of resources, inadequate training, and difficulty in designing appropriate assessments (Hidayati & Fitriani, 2022). However, there was a noticeable gap in research specifically examining the challenges faced by EFL teachers in vocational settings within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Addressing this gap was essential, as the successful implementation of PjBL in EFL classrooms greatly depended on teacher readiness, institutional support, and the alignment of instructional design with curriculum demands. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the challenges encountered by English teachers in vocational high schools in implementing PjBL. Specifically, it sought to answer the research question: "What are EFL teachers' challenges in implementing Project Based Learning in the context of merdeka curriculum?" By understanding these challenges ranging from instructional planning and resource availability to assessment strategies and teacher perceptions this research sought to provide insights and recommendations that could inform future training programs and support systems for teachers. Ultimately, empowering teachers to effectively implement PjBL was expected to contribute to more meaningful, engaging, and skill-oriented English learning experiences for students in vocational education.

Method

The researcher used a descriptive qualitative method for this research. Descriptive qualitative study is a research approach that focuses on exploring and understanding complex phenomena within their real-life context (Cresswell, 2023). This research was conducted in SMKN 5 Pangkep, Jl Muh Tahir, Pangkep. The

subject of this research consists of an EFL teacher who was implemented PjBL. Purposive sampling was employed to select the participant, considering that the teacher had teaching certification, approximately three years of teaching experience, and direct experience implementing PjBL in the classroom. The selected participant, Teacher 1, had been teaching since 2015 and started teaching at SMKN 5 Pangkep in 2023 when the Merdeka Curriculum was implemented.

To conduct the data, observation checklist, interview and documentation was researcher used. The non-participant observation was carried out three times, each focusing on identifying the challenges faced by the teacher in implementing PjBL. The observed activities included classroom management, learning material delivery, student engagement, and assessment practices. The semi-structured interview was conducted with the EFL teacher at the end of the research period. The interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes and consisted of 13 prepared questions to get the in-depth explanation about the challenges faced by teacher in impelenting PjBL.

Interactive model by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) was used to analysis the data of this research. The analysis followed three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data condensation stage, the researcher summarized and coded the data to identify patterns and themes. In the data display stage, the findings were organized into tables and descriptive narratives. Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher compared the findings against the raw data and theoretical framework to ensure validity and reliability.

Results

The interview results revealed there are several challenges were identified as commonly faced by teacher in impelementing project based learning.

Students' Lack of Understanding and Motivation

One of the main challenges faced by teacher in implementing PjBL at SMKN 5 Pangkep is the low level of student understanding of the project instructions given. Difficulties in understanding the tasks cause students to be less actively involved in the learning process. Teacher attempt to overcome this obstacle by forming heterogeneous groups based on academic rankings, with the hope that students with higher abilities can guide their peers. However, in reality, not all students demonstrate a willingness to ask questions or collaborate. Some students tend to be passive and do not show initiative to learn more about their tasks

(Interview Teacher 1, June 2025) "The challenge is that students often don't understand, but if they don't understand, I usually tell them to ask students who do understand"

(Interview Teacher 1, June 2025) "Challenges affect his involvement if he doesn't want to move. For example, if he is told to do something, but he ignores it, is inactive, stays quiet, and doesn't want to find out more"

Time Management Issues and Deadlines

The next challenge that often arised in the implementation of PjBL was students' difficulty in managing their time effectively. Many students are unable to complete projects on time, even after being given an extension. This indicates issues with time management, planning, and students' sense of responsibility toward their tasks. Teacher notes that these obstacles are not entirely due to the difficulty of the tasks themselves, but are more influenced by internal factors such as a lack of awareness of urgency, low motivation, and difficulties in coordinating within groups.

(Interview Teacher 1, June 2025) "If, for example, a deadline has been set, he hasn't finished it yet. Even though more time has been given, it still hasn't been completed"

Limited Professional Development Opportunities

Teacher also faced challenges in terms of professionalism, particularly a lack of training or workshops relevant to the implementation of PjBL in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. As of the time of the interview, teacher had never participated in specialized training on the application of PjBL for English language subjects. As a result, teacher's understanding of the strategies, methods, and assessments appropriate for this approach remains limited, thereby affecting the quality of implementation in the classroom.

(Interview Teacher 1, June 2025) "It's good if there is a workshop for English teachers about project-based learning in the independent curriculum. Because so far there hasn't been any workshop".

Data triangulation from three observation sessions and interviews with an EFL teacher indicated recurring issues, summarized in the following table:

No	Challenge	Example from Interview	Observation Evidence
1	Students' lack of understanding & motivation	"The challenge is that students often don't understand, but if they don't understand, I usually tell them to ask students who do understand" (T1, June 2025)	In 2 of 3 observations, several students appeared passive, did not initiate questions, and relied on group leaders
2	Time management issues & deadlines	"If, for example, a deadline has been set, he hasn't finished it yet. Even though more time has been given, it still hasn't	In all 3 observations, some groups submitted incomplete work beyond deadlines

No	Challenge	Example from Interview	Observation Evidence
		been completed" (T1, June 2025)	
3	Limited professional development opportunities	"It's good if there is a workshop for English teachers about project-based learning in the independent curriculum. Because so far there hasn't been any workshop" (T1, June 2025)	The observations revealed that the teacher's understanding of appropriate strategies, methods, and assessments for PjBL was limited, which affected the quality of classroom implementation

Discussion

The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in English language teaching at SMKN 5 Pangkep, though generally beneficial, is not without significant challenges. One of the most frequently encountered difficulties is students' lack of understanding. Teacher reported that many students struggled to comprehend project instructions, leading to minimal participation and passive classroom behavior. Although heterogeneous grouping was used as a strategy to bridge the gap where high-performing students were expected to support their peers the results were inconsistent due to some students' reluctance to ask questions or take initiative.

This challenge illustrated the gap between the collaborative expectations of PjBL and the actual readiness of students to engage. According to Helle, Tynjälä, and Olkinuora (2006), successful project-based learning requires learners to possess or develop autonomy, inquiry skills, and internal motivation attributes that are still limited among some vocational students in this study.

Another pressing challenge lies in students' weak time management skills. Teacher noted that even when project deadlines were extended, many students still failed to submit their work on time, reflecting a lack of planning and responsibility. In PjBL, where tasks are complex and often span several sessions, time management is a critical skill (Krajcik & Shin, 2014). However, findings suggest that many students lacked the ability to organize tasks independently or coordinate effectively with their peers.

This issue is compounded by low levels of group accountability and intrinsic motivation. It reinforces the argument that soft skills such as discipline, collaboration, and self-regulation must be taught and nurtured alongside academic content in vocational education settings (Voogt et al., 2015).

Lastly, the success of PjBL is also has implemented by systemic issues, particularly the lack of professional development opportunities for teacher. In

Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins (2016) they found the challenges in implementing the PjBL in English learning are complex classroom management, differences in student abilities, and difficulties in project assessment. Meanwhile, in this study, researcher found that the main challenge causing the ineffective implementation of PjBL was the lack of training on PjBL, especially in English subjects. Teacher expressed a clear need for workshops or training focused on implementing PjBL within the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly tailored for English language learning.

As noted by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), effective implementation of curriculum innovation depends heavily on ongoing teacher learning and capacity building. Without adequate training in PjBL design, facilitation, and assessment, teachers are left to interpret and apply the approach based on limited resources or personal experience, which may hinder its effectiveness. These highlights disconnect between curriculum policy and field-level support. Hence, addressing these professional gaps is critical to ensure that PjBL can be implemented with fidelity and effectiveness in vocational education contexts.

This research has limitations in terms of a limited sample size, so the results cannot be generalized. Therefore, future researchers are expected to increase the sample size and conduct quantitative research.

This research implied that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) had a positive impact on improving students' engagement, creativity, and collaboration in English language teaching at vocational schools. However, its effectiveness depended on students' readiness and teachers' skills in facilitation and assessment. The findings also highlighted the need for professional training to support teachers in implementing PjBL in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum and students' needs.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that several challenges faced by teacher in implementing PjBL, including limited class hours, students' lack of understanding, and the need for more professional development opportunities. Addressing these challenges is essential for optimizing the effectiveness of PjBL within the context of the merdeka curriculum.

The suggestions include for teachers are encouraged to engage in continuous professional development to enhance their understanding of PjBL and its effective implementation within the merdeka curriculum. They should explore a variety of teaching strategies that promote student engagement, such as collaborative projects, interactive learning activities, and reflective practices, to better meet the diverse needs of their students. It is recommended for school to create an environment that supports the effective implementation of PjBL by providing training programs for teachers on PjBL strategies and classroom management techniques. Additionally, schools should allocate resources for professional development, including workshops and seminars, to enhance teachers' skills in facilitating PjBL and addressing the challenges they face.

For future research, it is recommended to expand the scope of participants and contexts, possibly involving multiple vocational schools, in order to gain a broader understanding of the challenges and effective strategies for implementing PjBL in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, employing a mixed-methods approach could provide more comprehensive insights by combining qualitative perspectives with quantitative measures of student outcomes.

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