IDEAS

Indonesian EFL Students' Perception of Project Based Learning: A Focus on Gender and Learning Style

Wilda Nulhikmah[1], Rahmah Fitriani[2], Ahman Amin Dalimunthe[3]
[1,2,3] Magister Tadris Bahasa Inggris, MTBI UIN Sumatera Utara
Corresponding E-Mail: wilda0333233011@uinsu.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to analyze students' perceptions of the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms at SMP Azzakiyah Islamic Leadership. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, FIAC-based classroom observations, and self-assessment questionnaires. A qualitative approach was employed to identify patterns of student engagement and perceptions based on gender, learning styles, and language proficiency levels. Findings revealed that PjBL fostered a learner-centered environment, with student talk dominating classroom interaction at 57%, reflecting active collaboration and learner autonomy. Students perceived PjBL as a motivating and authentic learning approach that enhanced cooperation and communicative competence. Gender differences emerged in participation tendencies: female students emphasized collaborative and affective engagement, while male students preferred leadership and technical roles. Variations in learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) shaped students' engagement modes, and proficiency levels influenced confidence and contribution within group projects.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning, student perception, learning engagement, EFL, learning styles, gender

Introduction

In the globalized world, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) plays a pivotal role in fostering academic access, professional opportunities, and cross-cultural communication (Cahyono et al., 2024; Dan et al., 2024). As international communication and digital information are predominantly mediated through English, the demand for competent English users in non-native contexts has increased significantly (Prabjandee, 2019). However, traditional teacher-centered

approaches that emphasize rote memorization and passive learning have proven inadequate in cultivating communicative competence and learner autonomy (Haatainen & Aksela, 2021). To meet the evolving needs of 21st-century learners, educational paradigms have shifted toward student-centered learning (SCL), which prioritizes active participation, critical thinking, and real-world relevance (Franco-Dall'Agnol et al., 2021). Within this context, the implementation of innovative and interactive methodologies is essential to enhance learner motivation and engagement in EFL classrooms (Sèna, 2022). This shift lays the foundation for integrating more dynamic pedagogical models that align with students' diverse needs and real-life communication challenges.

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has emerged as a powerful student-centered instructional model that involves learners in extended, collaborative inquiry projects tied to real-world contexts (Becerra-Posada et al., 2022). Rooted in constructivist theory, PBL encourages learners to build knowledge through exploration, problem-solving, and reflection (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2005; Andari, 2024). In EFL settings, PBL facilitates communicative competence, teamwork, and critical thinking by immersing students in meaningful language use and collaborative dialogue (Yaprak, 2022). Numerous studies have demonstrated that PBL enhances learners' motivation, engagement, and language proficiency more effectively than traditional approaches (Al-Bahadli et al., 2023; Armie et al., 2022; Samarji, 2020). Moreover, PBL allows learners to express creativity and autonomy, contributing to their cognitive and emotional investment in the learning process (Venkatesh & Fischer, 2019). These pedagogical benefits make PBL especially relevant in contemporary EFL education, where developing holistic language skills and preparing learners for real-life communication are prioritized objectives.

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has demonstrated significant impact on EFL instruction, particularly in enhancing learner motivation, engagement, and academic outcomes. Empirical studies indicate that PjBL fosters deeper learning and encourages students to take ownership of their educational process (Yushun et al., 2019; Shukla & Arora, 2023). When learners are actively involved in real-world projects, their communicative competence, especially in speaking and writing, improves markedly (El-Sayed, 2020). This is attributed to the authentic contexts and collaborative tasks inherent in PjBL, which simulate real communication needs and promote language use beyond memorization. In writing classrooms, students exhibit greater creativity and coherence, while in speaking tasks, they show increased confidence and fluency (Jin, 2022). Additionally, PjBL aligns with 21st-century learning demands by cultivating critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration (A et al., 2021). These findings underscore PjBL's relevance not only as a pedagogical model but also as a transformative strategy in EFL education.

Despite its proven benefits, the success of PjBL varies depending on individual learner characteristics, making it crucial to consider diversity in EFL classrooms. Research highlights that gender significantly influences participation,

communication styles, and comfort in collaborative environments, with female students often showing more engagement and openness in group tasks (Feng et al., 2023). Additionally, learning styles visual, auditory, or kinesthetic shape how students interact with content and peers in PjBL contexts (Zuana et al., 2023). For instance, auditory learners may thrive in discussion-based tasks, while kinesthetic learners benefit from hands-on project execution (Flippin et al., 2020). Furthermore, a student's language proficiency level affects their confidence and ability to contribute meaningfully, with advanced learners often taking leadership roles in group work (Davin, 2022). These variables deeply influence learners' perceptions of PjBL, suggesting that instructional strategies must be adaptive to maximize inclusivity and learning effectiveness.

A growing body of global research has investigated EFL students' perceptions of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), particularly in relation to their language proficiency levels. In Saudi Arabia, Almulla (2020) found that PjBL significantly enhanced student motivation and engagement across varying proficiency levels, especially through real-world task integration. Likewise, Nikoopour and Khoshroudi (2021) observed that students with higher language proficiency demonstrated more autonomy and strategic learning behaviors when participating in PjBL activities. Dağ (2017) also reported that Turkish EFL learners' self-perceived proficiency levels influenced their selection of language learning strategies and collaborative engagement during project tasks. These global studies consistently underscore how students' language proficiency levels shape their experiences, motivation, and participation in PjBL settings. They highlight the necessity for differentiated instruction within project-based frameworks to ensure equitable engagement and learning outcomes for students at varying proficiency levels.

In the Indonesian context, research has similarly shown that students' language proficiency plays a critical role in shaping their perceptions of PjBL. Rusiana et al. (2023) found that more proficient university students in a critical reading class took on leadership roles and expressed greater confidence during PjBL activities. Fatmawati (2018) revealed that learners across different proficiency levels responded positively to the use of PjBL for developing communication and 21st-century skills, though those with higher proficiency showed deeper engagement. Kirom (2023) further demonstrated that students with stronger language foundations performed better in scientific writing tasks involving project-based learning, showing enhanced idea organization and language accuracy. While these studies affirm the benefits of PjBL in supporting language skill development, they also suggest that students' proficiency levels must be considered in planning and facilitating PjBL effectively. Together, the Indonesian research reinforces global findings and points to the need for adaptive, proficiency-sensitive strategies in EFL classrooms.

Despite increasing global interest in Project-Based Learning (PjBL) within EFL contexts, most existing research has prioritized academic outcomes over the nuanced exploration of students' personal experiences and perceptions. This is especially evident in the way previous studies isolate variables such as gender, learning style, or proficiency level, without addressing how these factors intersect to influence students' engagement and response to PjBL tasks. The lack of attention to learner diversity creates a critical gap in understanding how instructional strategies can be adapted to meet the varied needs of students in real classroom environments. Moreover, within the Indonesian context, empirical studies focusing on PjBL at the junior high school level remain scarce, and tend to generalize students' experiences without considering the differentiated impacts based on individual learner characteristics.

In light of these limitations, this study focuses on students at SMP Azzakiyah Islamic Leadership an institution that combines formal academic instruction with values-based education. English instruction at this school integrates theoretical learning with project-based activities, which are conducted in both indoor and outdoor learning environments. Preliminary classroom observations revealed that students demonstrate active collaboration, enthusiasm, and engagement during PjBL tasks. These observations reflect what We (2020) describes as "student-centered end products that foster motivation, reflection, and language development." However, despite such promising outcomes, there remains a need to investigate more systematically how students from different proficiency levels and learning profiles perceive and experience PjBL. This study addresses that need by examining how gender, learning styles, and language proficiency levels interact to shape learners' engagement, challenges, and perceived benefits during project-based instruction. Through this inquiry, the study aims to generate deeper, contextually grounded insights to support inclusive and differentiated pedagogical practices in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences with Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in an EFL context. A qualitative design is suitable when the aim is to understand how individuals construct meaning from their personal and contextual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology, as a methodological tradition rooted in Husserlian philosophy, seeks to uncover the essence of participants' subjective experiences without imposing external interpretations (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, phenomenology provides a framework for examining how ninth-grade students perceive, feel, and respond to their engagement in PjBL, particularly in relation to gender, learning styles, and language proficiency levels.

By focusing on the lived experiences of learners, the phenomenological method enables the researcher to describe phenomena as they are encountered from the first-person perspective, setting aside presuppositions (Giorgi, 2009). Instead of pursuing generalizability, this study emphasizes identifying patterns of meaning and shared themes that emerge across individuals who have participated in PjBL as part of their English learning process. This perspective highlights students' voices, reflections, and interpretations as central data sources, ensuring that analysis remains grounded in their own accounts of classroom realities.

To capture rich and authentic findings, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, FIAC-based classroom observations, artifact analysis (document review), and a supplementary self-assessment questionnaire. These instruments align with phenomenological inquiry, which values openness, reflexivity, and attentiveness to meaning-making (Van Manen, 2016). The data were analyzed using a combination of thematic analysis for interviews and documents, descriptive statistical analysis for FIAC observations and self-assessment results, and interpretative phenomenological reflection. This integration enabled the identification of recurring patterns while maintaining attention to individual experiences. Ultimately, the phenomenological approach offers a robust means of understanding how learners internalize project-based instruction and how diverse characteristics influence their engagement and perceptions of the learning process.

Table 1: *Data collection table*

| No	Utterance	Time/Scene	Instrument
		20 oktober -5 november	Observation Semi structure Interview Questionnaire Artifact document

Table 2: *The table of observation list*

Results

Based on FIAC classroom observation, student talk dominated classroom interaction with a total of 57%, followed by teacher talk at 35% and silence or confusion at 8%. These figures indicate that the learning environment was primarily student-centered an essential feature of PjBL. Students actively collaborated, discussed, and reflected during project phases, while teachers served as facilitators who scaffolded comprehension and guided problem-solving activities. Gender-based observations revealed that female students demonstrated more frequent participation in collaborative discussions and reflective conversations, while male students were more dominant in leadership roles and

task execution. Learning-style tendencies were also noticeable: visual learners engaged effectively during poster design and multimedia presentations; auditory learners thrived in group discussions and oral project reports; kinesthetic learners expressed higher enthusiasm in outdoor and movement-based tasks. These findings confirm Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that emphasizes the importance of social interaction and collaborative scaffolding in language learning.

Based on the data analysis . The mean perception score for female students was (80%), while for male students was (20%) this finding indicated that female students held slightly more positive perceptions of PjBL than male students. Female students tended to enjoy collaborative, expressive, and creative aspect of project based task, whereas male students emphasized the technical and problem solving components of the project.

1. Female and Male students in Learning style
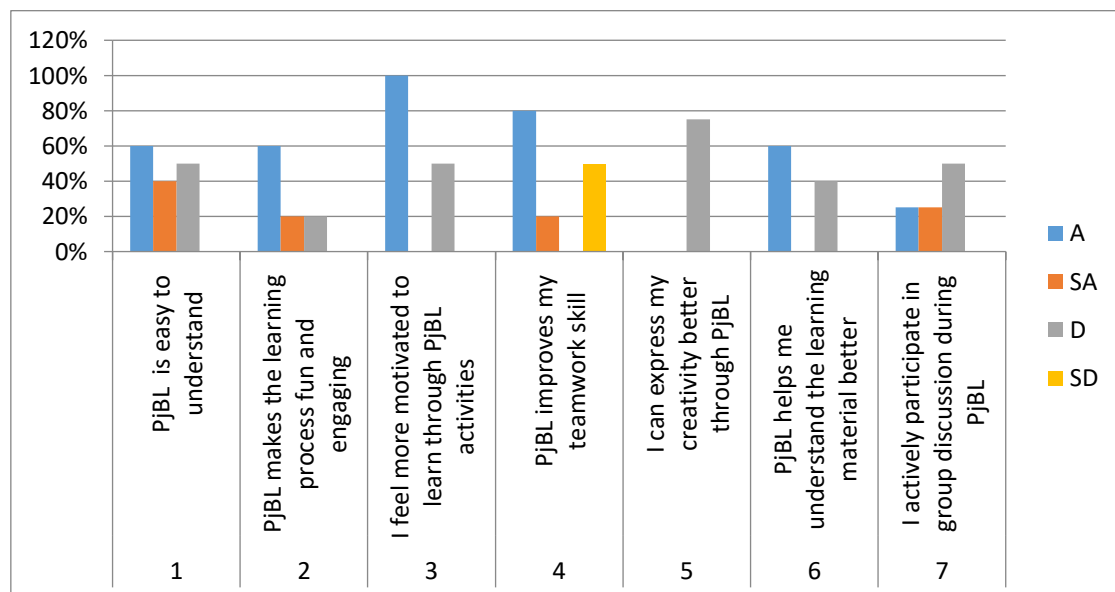
2. PjBL based on Learning style

The second theme, Engagement Shaped by Learning Styles, revealed that the form of task presentation determined learners' involvement. Visual learners preferred multimedia aids; auditory learners enjoyed listening and presenting activities; kinesthetic learners valued practical and field-based tasks. This corroborates Fleming's (1992) VARK model that advocates multimodal learning as a means to enhance inclusion and learner satisfaction.
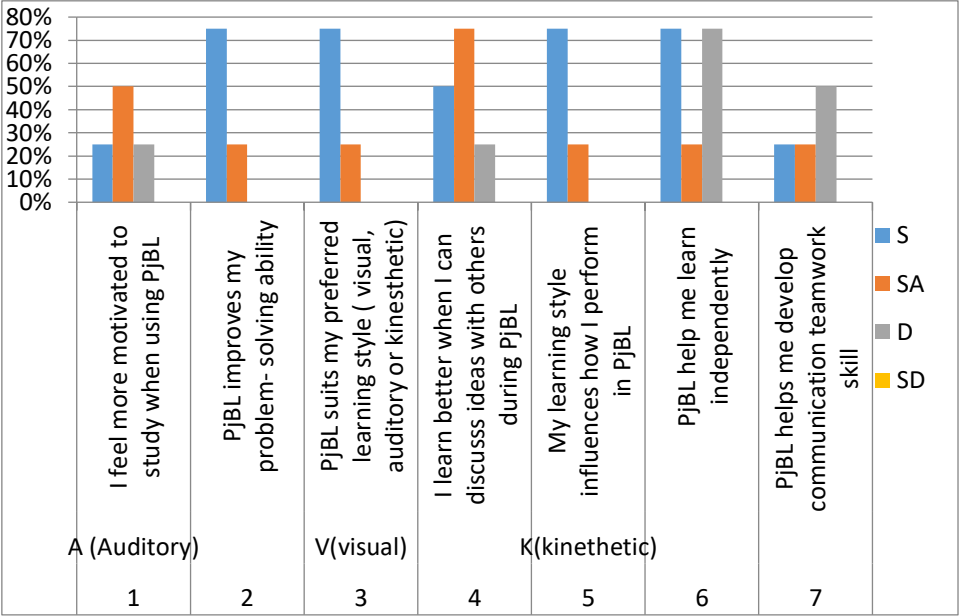
Conclusion

This study employed three primary instruments semi-structured interviews, classroom observations using the Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories (FIAC), and a self-assessment questionnaire to investigate students' perceptions of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) at SMP Azzakiyah Islamic Leadership. The triangulation of these instruments provided a comprehensive understanding of how gender, learning styles, and language proficiency influenced students' engagement and perceptions. Data were collected over four weeks through both indoor and outdoor English.

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