

# The Use of Project-Based Learning to Enhance Grade Seven Students' English Narrative Writing Skill: A Case of Chinese Students

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to find out the impact of Grade 7 Chinese students' English narrative writing skill and their satisfaction level by using Project-based Learning approach. The one-month-long study was a mixed-methods research. Data were collected from 50 Chinese Grade 7 students in a class randomly selected from 22 classes. The pretest and posttest were used to collect the students' narrative writing scores which were assessed by a rubric scoring tool. The structured interviews and Semantic Differential Scale were conducted to collect the students' responses after the treatment of Project-based Learning. The results of the study indicated that the majority of the students enhanced their narrative writing skill with a higher mean score in the posttest ( $\bar{X}=21.02$ ) than in the pretest ( $\bar{X}=11.06$ ). The students reported that the course was interesting, well-organized, active, and easy. They demonstrated that other 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, i.e. teamwork skill, cooperative skill, critical thinking skill, creativity and presentation skill were developed when working in teams. The results of the study could be guidelines for teachers of other different subjects who wish to adopt Project-based Learning approach in their teaching.

**KEYWORDS:** Narrative writing skill, Project-based learning, English teaching

## Introduction

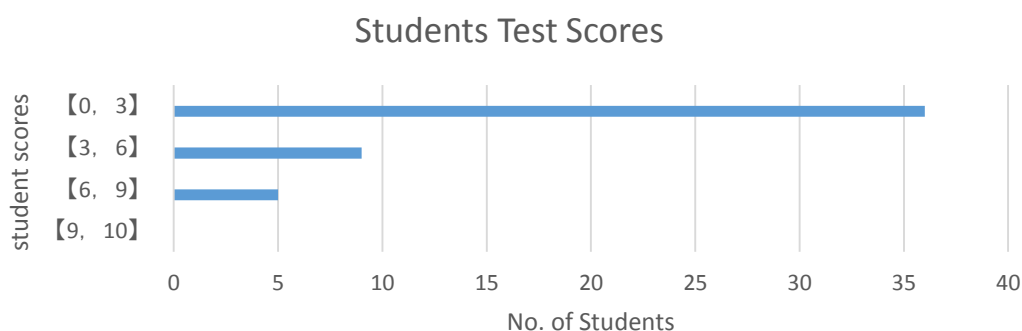
In English Language learning, writing as the productive skill is more difficult than other skills for students because students need to master the ways to express themselves and share information in writing (Yiitolu & Reichelt, 2019). Narrative writing is the first step to other

types of writing skill in which they can use the content they know very well (Roth, 2000). In China, One of compulsory subjects that Grade Seven students have to study is "Basic English Writing Skills". The most obvious is the school's adoption of the teacher-centered teaching method (Strayer, 2007). In traditional classes, students learn

from the teacher’s explanation, recitation of relevant sentences and the model essay (Li & Song, 2007; Lin, 2019); therefore, most students seem to lose interest in learning writing.

Before the Grade Seven students entered the middle school, they had never studied narrative writing. According to the English curriculum in Chinese Middle school (2020), this is the first time they took the lessons with narrative writing. Furthermore, in the traditional narrative

writing teaching mode, students’ in narrative writing skills were limited. Based on the result of writing of the target class of the study, in the first exam when they entered Grade 7, the average score was only 1.95 points from a total of 10 points. In addition, only 9.09% students had good writing ability. The result could be found in the school website <https://hfs.yunxiao.com/> (2019). The figure below shows students’ reported scores.



**Figure 1** Analysis of the target students’ scores in the writing test in 2019

Source: <https://hfs.yunxiao.com/>

From the researcher’s experiences, the Grade Seven students usually wrote by copying from others without showing any creativity (Liu, & Zhang, 2019). At the same time, teachers taught according to existing textbooks, and students only followed the teacher. In narrative writing, students used words only from the textbook, having difficulty in choosing the right vocabulary. Grammar-translation was the main teaching and learning approach used by the teacher. This would not help students to improve their writing. (Zhang, Yan, & Liu, 2015). Chinese and English are two different languages (Xing, 2006). Besides,

translation from Chinese to English is a big problem (Ye, 2019), making writing lack of logic in English. In addition, the teachers and students have a one-side view that grammar and vocabulary are the most important in learning English writing (Fang & Sun, 2018). But they have to be aware that over-emphasis on grammar and vocabulary will block their improvement in English writing (Li & Liu, 2019). Creativity is also necessary in writing (Ravitz, 2012).

From all of the narrative writing skill obstacles mentioned, the researcher would like to conduct a study on the topic of using Project-based Learning approach to

enhance Grade Seven narrative writing skill.

### Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

1. To find the impact of the Project-based Learning on students' English narrative writing skill.
2. To identify the satisfaction level of Grade 7 Chinese students in learning English narrative writing skill through the use of Project-based Learning approach.

### Scope of Study

#### Population and Sample

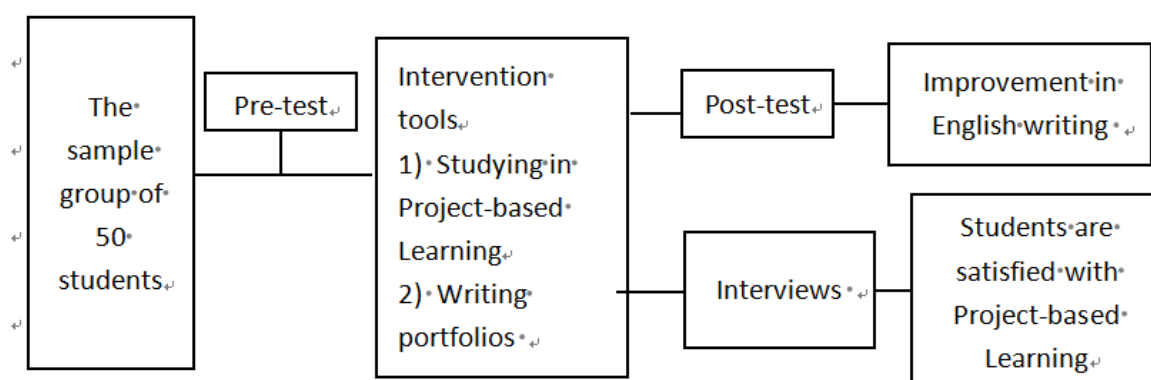
This study was conducted at Qingyun Middle School in Lingshan district. The data collection started from April 1st to April 30th. The population of research were Grade Seven students from the Academic Year 2019 at Qingyun Middle School. There were 22 classes in Grade 7. The total population consisted of 1,165 students in the age range of 14-15 years old with mixed

gender and mixed abilities. The target class was selected by the principal who randomly picked a class number within 22 Grade 7 classes of mixed abilities. Simple random sampling was a method used to derive at a smaller sample size from a larger population group and to make generalizations about the larger group (Wang & Tang, 2006). The researcher asked for permission from the subject teacher, the principal and the students' parents to allow the study to take place.

### Conceptual Framework

The study was designed with experimental format. Students took the pretest and posttest to find whether students would improve their English narrative writing skills. The satisfaction of the lessons designed with Project-based Learning was assessed by a structured interview and semantic differential scale.

The conceptual framework was shown below:



**Figure 2:** The Illustration of conceptual framework

## Research Hypothesis

The research hypothesis was: the students' English narrative writing scores were higher in the posttest than in the pretest.

## Literature Review and Concept

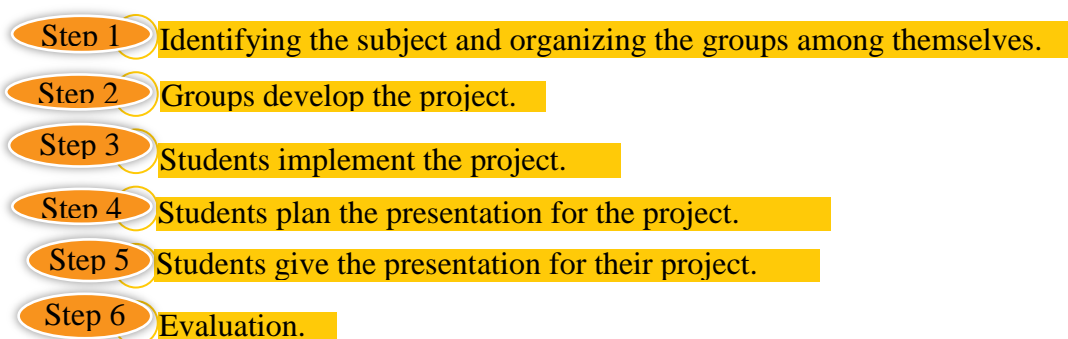
The literature review covers three major keywords of the study, they are: Project-based Learning, students' satisfaction and narrative writing.

### 1. Project-based Learning (PBL)

Project-based Learning (PBL) is an active teaching and learning approach, which is more and more effective and popular in education (Bayraktar, 2015). In Project-Based Learning, students will be required to do a project of their choice with challenge questions. It gives students the chance to develop their abilities in designing and decision making (Holm, 2011). In its simplest definition, throughout the process, also, it is considered to be an approach to achieve the 21st century skills (Solomon, 2003). Project-based Learning provides an opportunity to create productive and enjoyable classroom atmosphere through integration of students' knowledge, attitude, and skills.

For the advantages of Project-based Learning approach, it makes students perform significant work (Howard, 2002). According to Markham (2003) and Bender (2012), Project-based Learning (PBL) was an approach that integrates theory to practice in which students are challenged to work in teams in order to develop a project. Also, students can enhance different skills along the study process; for example, group working skill, critical thinking and creative skill (Nunan, 1989; Demirhan and Demiral, 2003).

In Project-based Learning, the teacher plays a role as a coach to guide students in developing a project in a group, while students have the chances to enhance their skills and adapt to the new study environment which requires students to work together. At the same time, after being taught by Project-based Learning approach, students have better abilities to solve the problems (Diffily, 2002; Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Now, in implementing it, experts said there are 6 steps as shown in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3.** The Six Steps of Project-based Learning

Source: Grant (2002)

Project-based Learning offers a chance for students to learn how to work out a project and overcome challenges. Also, it is useful for them to promote their different active skills (Chen, & Yang, 2019). For example, critical thinking skill. Students can master critical thinking skill that analyzes the information and apply it to construct knowledge (Cottrell, 2017). In addition, studying in Project-based Learning course, students learn to communicate with their group members. They discuss how to create their projects, how to clarify the materials and so on. Students can exchange their information or ideas for the success of the project.

In Project-based Learning studies, a wide variety of instructional activities claim to be based on constructivism learning, students-centered, cooperative learning theories. In this study, constructivism learning theory enables students to be the major makers of meaning and knowledge (Krahenbuhl, 2016). Students-centered theory makes students have the option on what they want to learn and they were allowed to select their own way to study and evaluate their achievement (Yoder, 2019). Cooperative learning enables students to discuss their work with others by face-to-face activities to improve their learning as well as achieve individual goals and group work goals to accomplish their project (Tran, 2019).

## **2. Students' Satisfaction**

Satisfaction is the pleasure that someone feels when he or she does something or get something (Andrea & Florica, 2013). In the study, a seven points rating Semantic differential scale with two bipolar adjectives

(interesting, well-organized, active and easy) was designed to see the students' satisfaction level on these aspects "1" means very low satisfaction, "7" means very high satisfaction. The levels 5-7 show satisfaction of the lessons.

## **3. Narrative writing**

According to Hooper & Roberts (2010), narrative writing is about events in a given period of time (past) and the sequence of events followed to tell a story (Syarifah & Emiliasari, 2019). Basic narrative writing includes telling a story or describing a past event (Beckley, 2014).

In addition, the language features of narrative are specific, using past tenses, conjunctions, adverbs of time and place, and verbs. At this level in school, students are taught to talk about the events that happened in the past. It can be their own stories on something imagined. In this study, a good narrative writing consists of good content instruction (Clear introduction and conclusion, attractive body with a good organization.), good language use (appropriate grammar and basic words choice captures the experience).

## **4. The areas of difficulty in narrative writing**

As a difficult skill in a foreign language, writing puts most students in trouble.

First, students normally lack the ability to add more details in constructing a clear introduction and conclusion with some feeling words. Second, the body may be considered the most difficult part in narrative writing for most students. Normally, students prefer to copy others or translate the sentences from Chinese directly. This makes the body looks very blunt. Students lack the ability to organize

information in the body part. Third, mostly, it was a difficult for students to use experiences of time such as time clauses with when...after...before... and actual words and reported speech to make the story more attractive and well-organized. What's more, the enriched vocabulary is one of the challenges for students. Students must learn more and read more not only in the textbooks but from outside resources, such as stories and novels.

### Research Methodology

The study employed major instruments to collect data: pretest and posttest, structure interview and semantic differential scale and lesson plans. Three experts were invited to validate each instruments, the scores of each instruments were: "1" for the pre-post test, 0.87 for structured interview and semantic

differential scale.

### 1.Pretest and Posttest

This instrument was designed to answer Research Objective 1 and Research Question 1. In this research, the pretest was aimed to assess the students' writing levels before the treatment of Project-based Learning. The post-test was used after the treatment to examine whether the students had any improvement on learning achievement. Both the pre-post tests were based on Chinese curriculum and standard of Grade Seven English. There was one question in the Pretest and one in the Post-test. The whole test carried 45 minutes. After the tests were collected, the scores came from a rubric which assessed in five aspects of writing skill: introduction, body, conclusion, grammar and word choice. Table1 below displayed the rubric.

**Table 1** The rubric used to evaluate narrative writing quality

	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Content</b>					
Introduction	The introduction sentence is really clear.	The introduction sentence is clear.	The introduction doesn't cover the story.	The introduction is not clear.	No Introduction
Body	The narrative shows an unforgettable experience or time. The details make the story truly memorable.	The content show an interesting experience or time. Details help create the interest.	The content tells about an interesting experience. More details are needed.	The content need to focus on one experience or time. Some details do not relate to the story.	The content needs to focus on one experience or time. Details are needed.
Conclusion	With an appropriate conclusion.	A better conclusion with more strong details.	With some conclusion but not strong	With a little sentences on conclusion.	No conclusion.
<b>Language</b>					
Grammar	With correct grammatical, no errors, such as verb tense...	Few minor grammatical errors.	Several grammatical errors	Some grammatical errors confuse the reader.	Many errors on grammar, such as in verb tense.
Word choice	Basic words choice captures the experience.	Specific nouns, strong verbs are used to express clear feelings.	Specific nouns, strong verbs are used.	Specific nouns, strong verbs are needed to create a clear picture.	General and overused words do not create a clear picture.
comment					

Source: Adapting from Chayanuvat (2017) & <http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A26/>

### 1) Structured Interview

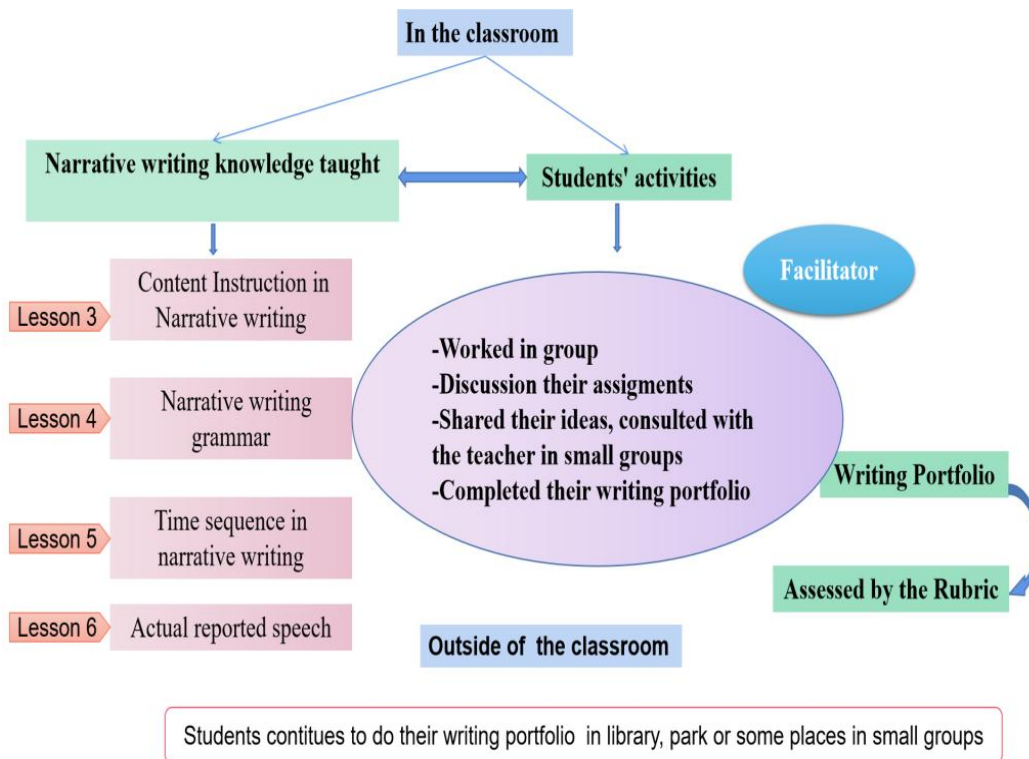
This instrument was used to find out the satisfaction of students in the study of Project-based Learning. Here were two sections in the interview. Section one was structured interview with five listed questions. Section two was a semantic differential scale to get the levels of students' opinion/satisfaction of the course.

### 2) Intervention/Experiment

The study was conducted in one month to use 8 lesson plans in total. The students were required to do the writing portfolios with ten narrative assignments in the course. They selected the topics adapting from Unit 4 to Unit 6 of English

Textbook for the Seventh Grade. Example of the topics are: A trip to the zoo, An experience in the park and The funny story. All topics write in past tense. In the study, a writing portfolio was a collection of student writing in hand-writing form, which aimed to demonstrate the student's development over the course of one month learning in the first academic term. A writing portfolio could help students gain the improvement of proficiency skills, content knowledge and grammatical ability.

The course consisted of two parts: in the classroom and out of the classroom. The following figure shows the process of the course.



**Figure 4** The Intervention of PBL in the Course

Source: Adapting from Zhang & Lin (2018) and Xue (2019)

### 3) Writing assessment tool: The Rubric

Rubric scoring tool offered an average of students' performance. A rubric enables an evaluator to transform a given satisfaction of a student's work right into a letter grade, percentage, or degree (Liew ,

Lim, Saleh & Ong, 2019). In the study, students' improvement on the narrative writing skill came from the assessment of the content of instruction and language use in the rubric which was shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2** The rubric used to evaluate the writing portfolio quality

Evaluation aspects	Good	Acceptable	Poor
1.Appearance	Well-designed	Attractive	Poorly designed
2.Amount of work produced	10 narrative topics one page for each	9-7 narrative topics one page for each	6-0 narrative topics one or more than one page for each
3.Narrative writing skill	Show all four features: past tense, time sequence, actual words and reported speech.	Show some features of four: use past tense, time sequence, actual words and reported speech.	Only one or two features: use past tense, time sequence, actual words and reported speech.
4.Display of language creativity	Use a lot of creative language for the storytelling, words or sentences...	Use some creative language for storytelling, words or sentences...	No creative language for storytelling, words or sentences...
5.Other comments			

Source: Adapting from Chayanuvat (2017) & <http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A26/>

### Findings and Discussion

There were two major findings from the study, one from the 1) the Pretest and Posttest and the other from 2) Structured Interview and Semantic Differential Scale. The first major finding based on Objective 1 came from the Pretest and Posttest.

Project-based Learning enhanced the Grade 7 students' narrative writing skill. The comparison of the pretest and the posttest scores was done by comparing mean, standard deviation and significance value (p) by a computer program.

Table 3 illustrated the findings from the



Pretest and Posttest. Pair Sample T-Test showed significant differences between

students' pretest and post-test narrative writing test scores.

**Table 3** Paired sample T-test showing significant differences between students' Pre-test and Post-test Narrative Writing Test Scores

Paired sample t-test							
Tests	Mean	Student Number	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig (one tailed)	
Pair	Pretest	11.60	50	1.955	- 45.682	49	0.0005
	Posttest	21.02	50	0.892			

Significance level (p): < 0.05-Significant

Table 3 showed that there was an improvement of students' writing score from the mean score 11.60 before the treatment to 21.02 after the treatment. Moreover, the table above showed the effect of the Project-based Learning on students' writing skills with statistically significance level .0005. It could be concluded that there was a significant effect of Project-based Learning on students' writing of the Grade 7 students. The standard deviation of the pretest was 1.955, while that of the posttest was 0.892 as shown in Table 3. The standard deviation of the posttest had decreased by 1.063 when compared to the Pretest. It indicated that students' scores were more concentrated around the mean in the posttest. It indicated that students had more similar ability in narrative writing skill after the intervention by Project-based Learning. Therefore, it could be concluded that the Project-based Learning had a positive effect on students' learning achievement.

The finding was in line with the study conducted by Praba, Artini, and Ramendra (2015) which found that Project-based Learning was an effective approach on improving student's English writing skill. This finding was also consistent with Emiliasari & Syarifah's opinions (2018) who conducted a research about Project-based Learning to develop students' ability on narrative writing story. They found that Project-based Learning contributed to effective development of students' abilities in different aspects of narrative writing skill. However, there was the time limitation on this study. Teaching writing should be a frequent activity (Fragoulis, 2009; Larasati, 2015; Collier, 2017; Essien, 2018 ). Writing needs more practice time so maybe one course is too short. Besides writing, Project-based Learning also supported students in the development of other 21st century skills, such as presentation skill, critical thinking skill, cooperative skill and creativity (Scott,

1994, Bell, 2010, Cottrell, 2017, Arman, 2019, Chen & Yang, 2019).

The second finding based on Objective 2 came from the structured interview and semantic differential scale. The majority of Grade 7 students were satisfied with the Project-based Learning in the study. In the structured interview, 50 students answered the questions and wrote their own opinions, supervised by another

teacher. The researcher used content analysis to find out the satisfaction factors. The researcher identified themes for each question from the responses. The responses were analyzed based on the meaning conveyed into themes showing the factors that the students were satisfied with Project-based Learning. The five questions with the emerging themes were shown below

**Table 4** Structured Interview Questions And Emerging Themes

QUESTIONS	Themes
QUESTION 1: TELL ME ABOUT THE ATMOSPHERE IN THE CLASS.	(1)Friendly (2)Active (3)Good
QUESTION 2: DO YOU LIKE THE WAY YOUR TEACHER TEACHES?	(1)Innovative (2)Supportive
QUESTION 3: HOW DID YOU PREPARE YOUR WRITING PORTFOLIO?	(1)By searching internet (2)Materials out of textbooks
QUESTION 4: DO YOU PREFER WORKING IN TEAM OR WORKING ALONE?	(1)Team working
QUESTION 5: CHECK WHETHER YOU HAVE IMPROVED OTHER SKILLS? SUCH AS PRESENTATION SKILL, COOPERATIVE SKILL, CRITICAL THINKING SKILL.	Presentation skill Cooperative skill Critical thinking skill Creativity

Most students said that the class was conducted in a friendly and active atmosphere. In the study, the researcher played a role as a facilitator to guide the

work for students. Contrary to the traditional teaching, the researcher allowed students to look on writing as a process (Bender, 2012). Students were at the center of

their learning. Thus, most students stated that the new teaching and learning way was more helpful to them, more innovative and supportive. Students could learn more this way. It could be seen that most students were satisfied with the teacher's teaching approach. Project-based Learning helped students to adopt inquiry learning (Bell, 2010). Through Project-based Learning, students processed information from various sources. Project-based learning encouraged students to merge their knowledge and skills to be able to complete the given project (Stoller, 2002).

Since Project-based Learning provided students with a chance to work together in teams, in the interviews, most students stated that they preferred to work in teams instead of working alone. Besides, students said that they had learned other 21st century skills such as presentation skill and cooperative skill.

Further, in order to make sure the students were satisfied with Project-based Learning, a semantic differential scale was implemented in the interview. According to the data, most students were satisfied with learning narrative writing through Project-Based Learning. One of the most important reasons was the course. When they learned in the course, they felt the course was active, interesting, well organized and easy to understand. That was the motivation for students to start their work with the project. Thus, the researcher believed that using Project-Based Learning could create a better learning environment for students (Andrea, 2013).

The findings of this research were confirmed by Efstratia (2014), Project-based

Learning aims to help students to gain the improvement through cooperation and critical thinking and supports the opportunities for the students to study in groups, discussing their work, creating their project in a friendly learning environment. Project-based Learning supported student-centered learning, to make students cooperate and communicate with each other (Sigman, 2019). In the process of the project work, there was a friendly learning atmosphere in the course. Besides, students enjoyed working in teams which made them develop the abilities in finding the resources and enrich their knowledge from outside. However, some students said that it was difficult at first to design the project. In this point, Wurdinger (2007) stated that Project-based Learning was an active learning and teaching approach, it was a challenge for most students (Harris, 1987). Thus, when students did not know something before, it was an obstacle for them at the beginning. The teacher who wish to implement the Project-based Learning in the class should play a facilitative role. This means students must look for the answers themselves but come back to the teacher when they want suggestions and feedback (Boss, 2002)

### **Recommendation**

English is the most widespread spoken and written language in the world. In English language learning, writing, as a productive skill, is more difficult than other skills for students, because students need to master the way to express themselves and share information in writing with a focus on accuracy. Additionally, one more practical

reason why it is important to improve writing skill is the English major undergraduates and graduate students take English writing courses to cope with written assignments, tests and all kinds of projects during their study terms. It is believed that when they have good basic writing skills, they can do advanced writing more easily.

According to the two findings of this study, the researcher would like to offer suggestions and recommendations: First,

Project-based Learning encourages students to work in groups. The teacher as a facilitator should pay attention to all students. Second, a friendly learning environment should be created to motivate students to create their own knowledge, Third, future researches should experiment the use of Project-based Learning in regular courses which have longer time of study than the study presented here to confirm the results.

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