

ESSAY QUALITY IN A PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: CASE STUDY IN EFL WRITING CLASS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

Fitri Febrianti¹, Muamaroh Muamaroh²

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia^{1,2}

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Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the quality of essays produced by undergraduate EFL students in an individual essay-writing PjBL activity using five dimensions of writing quality: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. A qualitative case study design was employed involving 26 undergraduate students enrolled in a Standardized Test of Writing course at a private university in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia. Instrumen to get the data used document and observations all te data were analyzed qualitatively. The findings revealed that the majority of students were classified as Good to Average with Language use was the most challenging dimension and mechanics as the strongest. These result suggest that while PjBL creates meaningful opportunities for writing engagement, students still require targeted instructional support in gramatical accuracy, idea development, and vocabulary use. This study contributes to the growing body of EFL writing research by providing a detailed multi-dimensional análisis of essay quality within a PjBL context at the Indonesian tertiary level, offering practical insights for writing instructors and curriculum developers.

Keywords: EFL Writing Class, Essay Writing, Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Tertiary Level

Introduction

Academic writing plays a central role in higher education because it enables students to communicate knowledge, construct arguments, and participate in academic discourse communities (Hyland, 2016). Writing is often considered one of the most challenging language skills because it requires students to integrate various linguistic and cognitive abilities, including idea development, organization, vocabulary selection, grammatical accuracy, and revision (Saleh & Ibnian, 2017). Therefore, the development of writing skills remains a primary focus in EFL education, particularly at the college level.

Despite having studied English for many years, many students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) still face difficulties in producing effective written texts (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). Previous research has reported that students often struggle to develop relevant ideas, organize information coherently, use appropriate vocabulary, and apply grammatical rules accurately in their writing (Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Muamaroh et al., 2020). These challenges often result in essays that are unclear, lack coherence, and contain linguistic inaccuracies, which ultimately affect the overall quality of students' writing. Therefore, assessing essay quality is crucial for understanding students' writing performance and identifying areas that require further instructional support.

The quality of an essay is typically evaluated across various dimensions that reflect both the content and linguistic aspects of the writing. One of the most well-known frameworks is the ESL Composition Profile, developed by Jacobs et al. in 1981. This framework assesses writing based on five dimensions: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. The content dimension relates to the relevance and development of ideas, while the organization

dimension focuses on the logical structure and coherence of the information. Vocabulary refers to the appropriateness and variety of word choice. Language use emphasizes grammatical accuracy and sentence structure, while mechanics covers spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. This analytical assessment framework offers a comprehensive evaluation of students' writing, enabling researchers to analyze the specific strengths and weaknesses of various aspects of writing performance (Weigle, 2002; Crusan, 2020).

To improve students' writing skills, educators are increasingly adopting the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) approach. Project-Based Learning is a student-centered pedagogical approach in which students engage in authentic tasks, collaborative activities, and inquiry-based learning experiences that result in meaningful work (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Guo et al., 2020). In the context of teaching writing, PjBL encourages students to engage in the entire writing process, which includes planning, drafting, revising, and reflecting on their work. Through these various activities, it is hoped that students will not only develop their writing skills but also enhance their critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities.

Studies show that project-based learning (PjBL) helps students improve their writing skills. For example, Ilham (2022) found that during the learning process, PjBL increased students' engagement and motivation to write. Similarly, Cahyono et al. (2024) found through a meta-analysis that project-based learning improves the writing performance of EFL and ESL students in various educational contexts. Furthermore, Andargie et al. (2025) found that students who participated in project-based learning performed better in several aspects of writing, particularly in terms of content development and organization. The results indicate that PjBL enables students to develop writing skills through authentic, collaborative learning experiences.

Previous research has shown that project-based learning has a positive impact on students' writing performance. However, most of these studies have focused on measuring improvement through quantitative indicators such as pre-test and post-test scores (Cahyono et al., 2024; Andargie et al., 2025). Although such studies indicate that learning has improved, they provide only limited insight into the quality of students' writing. More specifically, very few studies have examined the quality of students' essays based on aspects such as organization, content, vocabulary, language use, and writing mechanics in project-based learning. There has been little research on the quality of essays in project-based writing classes in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the quality of essays written by students in a project-based EFL writing class at a college. This study analyzes students' essays based on five dimensions of writing quality: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and writing mechanics. This is done using the ESL Composition Profile proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981). It is hoped that the results of this study will provide a comprehensive overview of the quality of students' essays and help students understand their writing outcomes in project-based learning.

Literature Review

Project-Based Learning is a student-centered approach in which students develop knowledge and skills through the completion of meaningful, authentic projects (Thomas, 2000). In this approach, students act as active learners who explore real-world questions or problems, rather than simply receiving information from the teacher (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). Larmer and Mergendoller (2015) describe PjBL as a teaching approach where students develop knowledge and skills through a long-term process of investigating and responding to authentic, meaningful, and complex questions, problems, or challenges.

Regarding its characteristics, Larmer and Mergendoller (2015) introduced the Gold Standard PjBL framework, which consists of seven key elements: a challenging problem or question, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, and a public product. These characteristics differentiate PjBL from other active learning approaches because it focuses on both the depth of the inquiry process and the connection between learning outcomes and real-world contexts. In terms of its types, Thomas (2000) categorized PjBL into product-based projects, performance-based projects, and process-

based projects. In language learning contexts, PjBL tasks can also be classified based on participation modes, including collaborative projects where students work together in groups and individual projects where each student creates their own written work (Li et al., 2021).

Batubara et al. (2023) identified several stages in the implementation of PjBL for writing instruction, including formulating essential questions, planning, outlining, drafting, monitoring, presenting, revising, and evaluating. These stages provide a structured framework that supports students' writing development. Several empirical studies have also demonstrated the positive effects of PjBL on writing quality. Ilham (2022) revealed that PjBL significantly enhanced students' writing performance across all five dimensions of the Jacobs rubric. Similarly, Andargie et al. (2025) found significant improvements in content, organization, and vocabulary after implementing PjBL for six weeks. Moreover, Cahyono et al. (2024) confirmed through a meta-analysis that PjBL had a significant positive effect on EFL and ESL students' writing performance, with the duration of the intervention identified as an important moderating factor.

The quality of students' essays in EFL writing instruction is often evaluated using the ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981). This rubric assesses writing quality through five dimensions: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, with a maximum score of 100 points. The content dimension focuses on the relevance and development of ideas, while organization refers to the logical structure and coherence of the writing. Vocabulary evaluates the accuracy and range of word choices, whereas language use examines grammatical accuracy and sentence patterns. Meanwhile, mechanics includes aspects of capitalization, punctuation, and spelling (Jacobs et al., 1981).

This rubric has been widely used in EFL writing research at the tertiary level in Indonesia and has been shown to be effective in identifying students' specific strengths and weaknesses in writing (Muamaroh & Dwiastuti, 2022). Studies using this rubric have indicated that Indonesian EFL students often experience difficulties, especially in language use and vocabulary, while organization and mechanics tend to be stronger aspects of their writing (Muamaroh et al., 2020). Furthermore, Bulqiyah et al. (2021) reported that grammar, vocabulary, and essay structure are the main challenges encountered by undergraduate EFL students in Indonesia, suggesting that these areas require focused instruction even when using innovative approaches such as PjBL.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine essay quality in a Project-Based Learning (PjBL) EFL writing class at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. The participants were 26 undergraduate students (coded S1–S26) enrolled in a Standardized Test of Writing course. The data consisted of one essay per student, written individually under timed conditions (40 minutes, minimum 250 words) as part of the PjBL activities. Document analysis was used as the primary data collection technique, supplemented by classroom observation across three sessions covering task introduction, in-class drafting, and peer review. Field notes from each session were used to triangulate the document analysis findings.

The essays were assessed using the ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981), which evaluates writing across five dimensions: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Each essay was scored and classified into one of two proficiency levels, namely *Good to Average* and *Fair to Poor*. The results were analyzed descriptively using frequency and percentage calculations to identify patterns of writing performance across each dimension.

Results and Discussion

Result

This section presents the findings of the essay quality analysis of 26 undergraduate EFL students (S1-S26) who participated in a Project-Based Learning (PjBL) writing class. The essays were assessed using the ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981), which evaluates five dimensions of writing quality: content, organization, vocabulary, language

use, and mechanics. The results were classified into two proficiency levels: Good to Average and Fair to Poor.

Table 1. Students' Essay Scores Based on Jacobs et al. (1981) Rubric (n = 26)

Student	Content (/30)	Org. (/20)	Vocab. (/20)	Lang. Use (/25)	Mech. (/5)	Total (/100)	Category
S1	14	9	9	10	2	44	Fair to Poor
S2	16	12	11	12	3	54	Fair to Poor
S3	18	13	12	13	3	59	Fair to Poor
S4	15	10	10	10	2	47	Fair to Poor
S5	17	12	11	12	3	55	Fair to Poor
S6	17	11	12	12	3	55	Fair to Poor
S7	25	17	17	18	4	81	Good to Average
S8	22	15	15	16	4	72	Good to Average
S9	16	11	11	12	3	53	Fair to Poor
S10	17	12	12	12	3	56	Fair to Poor
S11	16	11	11	11	3	52	Fair to Poor
S12	20	14	14	14	3	65	Good to Average
S13	18	13	12	13	3	59	Fair to Poor
S14	17	12	12	12	3	56	Fair to Poor
S15	19	13	13	14	3	62	Good to Average
S16	23	16	16	17	4	76	Good to Average
S17	21	15	15	15	4	70	Good to Average
S18	21	15	14	15	4	69	Good to Average
S19	22	15	15	16	4	72	Good to Average
S20	18	13	13	13	3	60	Good to Average
S21	18	13	12	13	3	59	Fair to Poor
S22	21	15	15	15	4	70	Good to Average
S23	21	15	14	15	3	68	Good to Average
S24	15	10	10	11	2	48	Fair to Poor
S25	12	8	9	9	2	40	Fair to Poor
S26	19	14	13	14	3	63	Good to Average
Mean (n=26)	18.38	12.85	12.62	13.23	3.12	60.19	

Based on the scoring results presented in Table 1, the overall essay quality of 26 students showed varied levels of writing proficiency. Out of 26 students, 12 students (46.2%) were categorized as Good to Average, while 14 students (53.8%) were classified as Fair to Poor. The mean total score across all students was 60.19 out of 100. These results indicate that the students were roughly evenly distributed across the two proficiency levels, suggesting that while a considerable proportion of students demonstrated adequate writing ability within the PjBL framework, more than half of the class still struggled to reach the Good to Average threshold across all five writing dimensions.

Table 2. Distribution of Essay Quality per Writing Dimension (n = 26)

Dimension	Mean Score	Mean (%)	Good to Average (n)	Good to Average (%)	Fair to Poor (n)	Fair to Poor (%)
Content (/30)	18.38	61.3%	15	57.7%	11	42.3%
Organization (/20)	12.85	64.3%	19	73.1%	7	26.9%
Vocabulary (/20)	12.62	63.1%	18	69.2%	8	30.8%
Language Use (/25)	13.23	52.9%	8	30.8%	18	69.2%
Mechanics (/5)	3.12	62.4%	22	84.6%	4	15.4%

Content

The content dimension evaluates students' ability to develop relevant, substantive, and well-supported ideas in response to the writing prompt. As shown in Table 2, the mean content score was 18.38 out of 30 (61.3%), with 15 students (57.7%) achieving Good to Average and 11 students (42.3%) classified as Fair to Poor. Content had the second-highest proportion of Fair to Poor students among the five dimensions.

Students in the Good to Average category demonstrated the ability to construct arguments with relevant examples and specific supporting details. S7 achieved the highest content score in the group, producing a well-reasoned essay that addressed both sides of the argument with substantive ideas and concrete examples. In contrast, students in the Fair to Poor category tended to present ideas superficially, often repeating the same point without elaboration or providing statements that lacked relevance to the writing prompt. S1 and S25 received the lowest content scores, with essays characterized by unclear ideas, unsupported claims, and insufficient development of the argument.

Table 3. Content Problems

Student	Criteria	Student's Work	Comment
S1	Fair to Poor: Ideas not developed; off-topic; vague	<i>"the argument about waste of valuable school time totally wrong because everything we study today can be learn in the feature, nothing is nothing for study no reason for no study."</i>	The sentence is logically unclear. The argument is not developed and the student repeats vague phrases without providing substantive support or relevant examples.
S4	Fair to Poor: Limited ideas; insufficient elaboration; off-topic statements	<i>"first, wher they have a good inteligent about International news like understand about historitical country it can be impact for the coutry growth."</i>	The student presents a loosely relevant idea but fails to develop it beyond a single undeveloped claim. Incorrect word forms and unclear phrasing further obscure the intended argument.
S25	Fair to Poor: Not enough to evaluate; content incomprehensible	<i>"Earth has excited for billions of years, skoping it, moulding species from dirt. Animals role upon terra, the blue planet, evolving from alicus to eveatures familiar to us."</i>	The content has no identifiable connection to the writing prompt. Ideas are absent or incomprehensible and cannot be evaluated for content development or relevance.
S7	Good to Average: Knowledgeable; substantive; ideas well-developed	<i>"A structured subject would teach them how to discern credible sources, identify bias, and understand the complex historical and cultural context behind current events."</i>	The student demonstrates good knowledge with a clearly developed argument and specific supporting detail, showing the ability to elaborate ideas beyond surface-level statements.
S8	Good to Average: Some knowledge of subject; adequate range; relevant development	<i>"On the other hand, some people argue that school time should focus on core subjects such as mathematics, science, and language. They believe that international news can be accessed easily outside the classroom."</i>	The student presents a relevant counterargument with adequate supporting reasoning. The ideas are clear and on-topic, though less elaborated than in the highest-scoring essays.

S16	Good to Average: Knowledgeable; ideas developed with relevant examples	<i>"I agree that the widespread use of the internet has a mostly positive effect on life in today's world. The Internet is now a big part of our daily life, helping people communicate, access information, and complete tasks more efficiently."</i>	The student demonstrates familiarity with the topic and supports the main argument with concrete examples. Elaboration is present throughout, though less specific than the highest-scoring essays.
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As shown in Table 3, students in the Fair to Poor category struggled to develop ideas beyond surface-level statements. These findings are consistent with Bulqiyah et al. (2021), who found that content development remains one of the most persistent challenges for Indonesian EFL undergraduate students, particularly in producing substantive arguments with adequate elaboration and relevant examples.

Organization

The organization dimension assesses the logical structure, coherence, and flow of ideas across paragraphs. The mean score for this dimension was 12.85 out of 20 (64.3%), with 19 students (73.1%) categorized as Good to Average and 7 students (26.9%) classified as Fair to Poor. Organization showed the second-highest proportion of students in the Good to Average category after mechanics.

Students who performed well in this dimension, such as S7 and S16, demonstrated clear essay structures consisting of a recognizable introduction, developed body paragraphs, and a conclusion, with effective use of discourse markers such as "First," "In addition," "However," and "In conclusion." Conversely, students with lower organization scores tended to write paragraphs with disconnected ideas, no clear topic sentences, and abrupt shifts between points that made the line of argument difficult to follow.

Table 4. Organization Problems

Student	Criteria	Student's Work	Comment
S1	Fair to Poor: No organization; ideas disjointed; does not communicate	<i>"the argument about waste of valuable school time totally wrong because everything we study today can be learn in the feature, nothing is nothing for study no reason for no study."</i>	The essay has no identifiable structure. There is no clear introduction, body, or conclusion, and ideas shift abruptly without logical connection or transitional language.
S11	Fair to Poor: Little or no organization; ineffective paragraphing	<i>"International news is important for student. Student need know about world. Many country have problem and student should understand this problem for the future of Indonesia."</i>	The paragraph consists of loosely connected statements with no topic sentence, no development, and no conclusion. Ideas are not sequenced logically and paragraphing is ineffective.
S25	Fair to Poor: No organization; ideas disjointed; does not communicate	<i>"Earth has excited for billions of years, skoping it, moulding species from dirt. Animals role upon terra, the blue planet, evolving from alicus to eveatures familiar to us.."</i>	The paragraph has no connection to the writing prompt. The ideas are completely disjointed and impossible to follow, showing a lack of organizational structure.
S16	Good to Average:	<i>"First, the internet makes</i>	The student uses clear discourse markers

	Logically organized; clear transitions; ideas sequenced	<i>communication easier, faster and more practical... In addition, the internet helps people communicate for work and study... Second, the internet gives people unlimited access to information..."</i>	and logical paragraph structure. Ideas are developed sequentially from introduction to conclusion with appropriate transitions.
S7	Good to Average: Well-organized; cohesive; clear thesis and logical progression	<i>"A structured subject would teach them how to discern credible sources, identify bias, and understand the complex historical and cultural context behind current events."</i>	The essay demonstrates clear organizational structure with a well-stated thesis, logically sequenced body paragraphs, and a coherent conclusion. Cohesive devices are used effectively throughout.
S19	Good to Average: Logically organized; adequate transitions; ideas mostly sequenced	<i>"The internet also allows people to work remotely, which can save time and transportation cost. In conclusion, the internet has brought many positive changes to people's daily lives."</i>	The student uses appropriate discourse markers and signals paragraph boundaries clearly. The overall structure is logical, though some transitions between ideas could be developed further.

Table 4 illustrates the contrast in organizational quality between students. S25 showed no recognizable organizational structure, while S16 demonstrated clear and logical sequencing. These findings align with Muamaroh et al. (2020), who found that organization was a key challenge for EFL learners, with many students failing to sequence ideas coherently within and across paragraphs.

Vocabulary

The vocabulary dimension evaluates the range, appropriateness, and accuracy of students' word choice. The mean score was 12.62 out of 20 (63.1%), with 18 students (69.2%) in the Good to Average category and 8 students (30.8%) classified as Fair to Poor.

Common vocabulary problems in the Fair to Poor category included word repetition, imprecise word choice, incorrect word forms, and overreliance on basic high-frequency vocabulary such as "good," "important," and "thing." Some students also produced sentences where poor vocabulary selection obscured the intended meaning entirely. Students in the Good to Average range, such as S7, S16, and S19, demonstrated greater lexical variety and used words that were contextually appropriate for the academic writing task.

Table 5. Vocabulary Problems

Student	Criteria	Student's Work	Comment
S4	Fair to Poor: Limited range; repeated words; meaning obscured	<i>"first, wher they have a good inteligent about International news like understand about historitical country it can be impact for the coutry growth."</i>	The student uses incorrect word form ("inteligent" for "intelligence"), spelling errors, and imprecise vocabulary. Word choice is insufficient to convey the intended argument clearly.
S1	Fair to Poor: Limited range; repeated words; meaning obscured	<i>"the argument about waste of valuable school time totally wrong because everything we study today can be learn in the feature, nothing is</i>	The student's limited vocabulary range and reliance on repetitive, basic phrasing obscures the intended meaning. No academic vocabulary is used and word choice fails to support argument development.

		<i>nothing for study no reason for no study."</i>	
S25	Fair to Poor: Essentially translation; little knowledge of English vocabulary; not enough to evaluate	<i>"Earth has excited for billions of years, skoping it, moulding species from dirt. Animals role upon terra, the blue planet, evolving from alicus to eveatures familiar to us."</i>	The vocabulary is largely incomprehensible, with invented or severely misspelled words (e.g., "skoping," "eveatures") suggesting direct translation and severely limited English vocabulary knowledge.
S19	Good to Average: Adequate range; occasional errors but meaning clear	<i>"The internet also allows people to work remotely, which can save time and transportation cost."</i>	The student uses contextually appropriate vocabulary. Minor errors are present (e.g., "save" instead of "reduce") but these do not significantly obscure the intended meaning.
S7	Good to Average: Effective word/idiom choice; word form mastery; appropriate register	<i>"A structured subject would teach them how to discern credible sources, identify bias, and understand the complex historical and cultural context behind current events."</i>	The student demonstrates strong lexical range with precise academic vocabulary (e.g., "discern," "credible sources," "bias," "cultural context") used appropriately for an academic writing task.
S16	Good to Average: Adequate range; occasional errors; meaning not obscured	<i>"I agree that the widespread use of the internet has a mostly positive effect on life in today's world. The Internet is now a big part of our daily life."</i>	The student uses contextually appropriate vocabulary with adequate range. Word choice is generally accurate and supports the argument, though lexical diversity is slightly limited compared to higher-performing peers.

As illustrated in Table 5, vocabulary limitations affected both the clarity and quality of students' arguments. These findings are consistent with Muamaroh et al. (2020), who identified vocabulary limitations as a major challenge for Indonesian EFL learners, often resulting from overreliance on direct translation and insufficient exposure to English vocabulary in academic contexts.

Language Use

The language use dimension evaluates grammatical accuracy, including the correct use of tense, subject-verb agreement, articles, pronouns, and sentence construction. This dimension yielded the lowest mean score relative to its maximum, at 13.23 out of 25 (52.9%). Only 8 students (30.8%) were categorized as Good to Average, while 18 students (69.2%) were classified as Fair to Poor, making language use the dimension with the highest proportion of students in the lower category.

Errors in this dimension were widespread across most essays. The most common problems included inconsistent verb tense, subject-verb disagreement, missing or incorrect use of articles, pronoun errors, and run-on sentences. Many students also produced sentences that were grammatically incomplete or ambiguous. These errors frequently obscured the intended meaning, reducing the overall comprehensibility of the essays.

Table 6. Language Use Problems

Student	Criteria	Student's Work	Comment
S1	Fair to Poor: Frequent errors of tense, agreement, word order; meaning confused	<i>"nothing is nothing for study no reason for no study. advantage from the news in International news is they can more know about"</i>	The sentence contains multiple major errors: subject-verb disagreement, incorrect word order, missing articles, and a run-on structure that makes the intended meaning very difficult to understand.

		<i>International.</i> ”	
S4	Fair to Poor: Major problems; frequent errors; meaning confused	<i>“first, wher they have a good inteligent about International news like understand about historitical country it can be impact for the coutry growth.”</i>	The sentence contains multiple grammatical errors: incorrect word form, missing articles, subject-verb disagreement, and unclear sentence structure that significantly obscures the intended meaning.
S25	Fair to Poor: Virtually no mastery; errors dominate; does not communicate	<i>“Earth has excited for billions of years, skoping it, moulding species from dirt. Animals role upon terra, the blue planet, evolving from alicus to eveatures familiar to us.”</i>	The writing demonstrates no mastery of grammatical structures. Errors are pervasive across tense, word form, sentence structure, and agreement, making the text virtually incomprehensible.
S8	Good to Average: Some errors present but meaning is not obscured	<i>“On the other hand, some people argue that school time should focus on core subjects such as mathematics, science, and language. They believe that international news can be accessed easily outside the classroom.”</i>	The student constructs grammatically acceptable sentences. Minor errors are present (e.g., "pholitics" for "politics") but overall the grammatical structures are clear and comprehensible.
S7	Good to Average: Effective complex constructions; few errors; meaning clear	<i>“A structured subject would teach them how to discern credible sources, identify bias, and understand the complex historical and cultural context behind current events.”</i>	The student constructs grammatically complex sentences with modal verbs, infinitive phrases, and parallel structure. Minor errors are present but do not impede meaning or comprehension.
S19	Good to Average: Some errors; meaning not obscured; sentence variety present	<i>“The internet also allows people to work remotely, which can save time and transportation cost. In conclusion, the internet has brought many positive changes to people's daily lives.”</i>	The student demonstrates control of sentence structure with varied constructions and appropriate use of connectors. Some minor errors are present but the overall meaning remains clear throughout.

Table 6 highlights the contrast between students with high and low language use scores. These findings are consistent with previous studies by Muamaroh et al. (2020) and Bulqiyah et al. (2021), which identify language use as the weakest dimension of writing among Indonesian EFL learners, particularly in terms of tense consistency and grammatical accuracy at the sentence level.

Mechanics

The mechanics dimension evaluates surface-level writing conventions, including spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The mean score was 3.12 out of 5 (62.4%), with 22 students (84.6%) categorized as Good to Average and only 4 students (15.4%) classified as Fair to Poor. Mechanics showed the highest mean percentage score among all five dimensions, suggesting students had the greatest control over surface-level writing conventions compared to higher-order writing skills.

Despite this, mechanical errors were still present in many essays. The most common issues included inconsistent capitalization (e.g., failure to capitalize the first word of a sentence

or proper nouns), spelling errors in academic vocabulary (e.g., "benefical" for "beneficial," "comunicat" for "communicate"), and missing or misused punctuation, particularly the absence of sentence-ending periods or the use of commas where periods were needed.

Table 7. Mechanics Problems

Student	Criteria	Student's Work	Comment
S1	Fair to Poor: Frequent errors of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation	<i>"the argument about waste of valuable school time totally wrong because everything we study today can be learn in the feature, nothing is nothing for study no reason for no study."</i>	The writing lacks consistent capitalization at sentence openings and contains multiple punctuation omissions. Run-on constructions and missing periods reduce the overall mechanical quality of the essay.
S4	Fair to Poor: Many errors of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation; meaning somewhat obscured	<i>"first, wher they have a good inteligent about International news like understand about historitical country it can be impact for the coutry growth."</i>	The student shows inconsistent capitalization (lowercase "first" at sentence opening) and multiple spelling errors ("wher," "inteligent," "historitical," "coutry") that reduce overall mechanical accuracy.
S25	Fair to Poor: Frequent errors of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation	<i>"Earth has excited for billions of years, skoping it... evolving from alicus to eveatures familiar to us, we evolved from that humanity have how been birthed towards the future of nonkind."</i>	Numerous spelling errors ("excited" for "existed," "skoping," "eveatures") and capitalization issues throughout. Punctuation is missing in many places, severely affecting readability.
S16	Good to Average: Infrequent errors; meaning not obscured	<i>"I agree that the widespread use of the internet has a mostly positive effect on life in today's world. The Internet is now a big part of our daily life."</i>	The student writes with correct capitalization, punctuation, and mostly accurate spelling. Minor typographical errors are present but do not significantly affect the professional quality of the writing.
S8	Good to Average: Infrequent errors; meaning not obscured	<i>"On the other hand, some people argue that school time should focus on core subjects such as mathematics, science, and language. They believe that international news can be accessed easily outside the classroom."</i>	The student demonstrates adequate control of capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Minor isolated errors are present but do not significantly reduce the overall mechanical quality of the essay.
S19	Good to Average: Infrequent errors; correct capitalization and punctuation	<i>"The internet also allows people to work remotely, which can save time and transportation cost. In conclusion, the internet has brought many positive changes to people's daily lives."</i>	The student writes with correct capitalization, appropriate sentence-ending punctuation, and mostly accurate spelling. The mechanical quality of the essay supports overall readability throughout.

As shown in Table 7, while most students maintained adequate surface-level accuracy, errors in spelling and punctuation were still observable, especially among weaker writers. This

finding is in line with Muamaroh et al. (2020), who found that mechanics tended to be a relatively stronger area for Indonesian EFL students compared to content and language use, though errors in spelling and capitalization remained common.

In summary, the analysis of 26 students' essays using the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et al., 1981) revealed that 12 students (46.2%) achieved the Good to Average category, while 14 students (53.8%) were classified as Fair to Poor. Language use had the highest proportion of students in the Fair to Poor category (69.2%), followed by content (42.3%). Mechanics showed the highest relative performance (62.4% of maximum score). These patterns across the five dimensions are further interpreted in the Discussion section below.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of undergraduate EFL students (53.8%) produced essays classified as Fair to Poor within the PjBL writing context, with a mean total score of 60.19 out of 100. These results suggest that while PjBL provides a structured and meaningful framework for writing engagement, students' actual essay quality remains uneven, particularly in higher-order writing skills such as language use and content development. This is consistent with Bulqiyah et al. (2021), who identified grammatical accuracy and idea elaboration as persistent challenges for Indonesian EFL undergraduate students even when innovative pedagogical approaches are employed. The classroom observation field notes further corroborated these patterns, revealing that many students devoted limited time to the planning stage during the in-class drafting session and moved directly to writing without constructing a structured outline, which likely contributed to weaknesses in content development and organizational coherence observed in the document analysis.

Language use emerged as the most challenging writing dimension, with 69.2% of students classified as Fair to Poor and the lowest mean percentage score relative to its maximum (52.9%). This finding aligns with previous research by Muamaroh et al. (2020), who identified language use as the weakest dimension among Indonesian EFL learners, citing difficulties with tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, and complex sentence construction. The prevalence of grammatical errors across essays analyzed in this study suggests that even within a supportive PjBL environment that emphasizes revision and peer feedback, students' grammatical accuracy does not improve sufficiently within a single writing task. This observation is further supported by the field notes from the peer review session, which showed that students tended to focus their revision feedback on surface-level issues such as spelling and punctuation rather than providing substantive commentary on grammatical structures or argument quality. These findings point to the need for explicit grammar instruction to be integrated alongside PjBL activities to address the persistent gap in students' language accuracy.

The relatively stronger performance in mechanics (84.6% Good to Average) and organization (73.1% Good to Average) suggests that students have internalized surface-level writing conventions and basic essay structure through prior instruction and repeated practice. This is consistent with the findings of Muamaroh and Dwiastuti (2022) and Setyowati et al. (2020), who noted that Indonesian EFL students at the tertiary level tend to demonstrate greater control over organizational patterns and mechanical conventions compared to higher-order writing skills. The classroom observations revealed that students were generally familiar with the five-paragraph essay format, which may explain the comparatively higher organization scores. However, familiarity with structure alone was insufficient to ensure depth of content development, as many students who demonstrated adequate paragraph organization still struggled to provide substantive arguments or sufficient elaboration of ideas, as reflected in the relatively lower content scores.

These findings also raise important questions about the design and duration of PjBL interventions in EFL writing contexts. Cahyono et al. (2024) found through a meta-analysis that the duration of a PjBL intervention is a significant moderating factor in determining writing improvement outcomes. The results of the present study suggest that a single PjBL writing task, even when embedded within a structured course framework, may not be sufficient to produce measurable gains across all five writing dimensions simultaneously. A potential limitation of this study is that only one essay assignment was selected for analysis, which may not fully capture the developmental trajectory of students' writing across the entire semester. Future

research should consider a longitudinal design that tracks writing quality across multiple PjBL tasks to assess whether systematic growth occurs in the dimensions where students currently demonstrate the greatest difficulty, particularly language use and content development. Furthermore, incorporating semi-structured student interviews or stimulated recall protocols could provide additional insight into the cognitive processes students employ during essay writing within PjBL conditions.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the quality of essays written by 26 undergraduate EFL students (20 female, 4 male) in a Project-Based Learning (PjBL) writing class using the ESL Composition Profile by Jacobs et al. (1981). The findings revealed that 12 students (46.2%) were categorized as Good to Average and 14 students (53.8%) as Fair to Poor, with an overall mean score of 60.19 out of 100. Language use emerged as the most challenging dimension (69.2% Fair to Poor), followed by content (42.3%), while mechanics was the strongest area (84.6% Good to Average). These results suggest that while PjBL creates meaningful opportunities for writing engagement, students still require targeted instructional support in grammatical accuracy, idea development, and vocabulary use. The findings of this study have several pedagogical implications. For teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), these results highlight the importance of combining explicit grammar instruction with activities that support the gradual development of ideas in the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), so that improvements in writing skills do not depend solely on the implementation of projects. For curriculum developers, these findings indicate the need to allocate specific time for the planning stage and the development of a writing framework in project-based writing instruction. Additionally, assessment rubrics such as the ESL Composition Profile can be utilized as diagnostic tools to help design more effective learning strategies. Meanwhile, for teacher education programs, these research findings underscore the importance of equipping prospective teachers with the ability to design PjBL activities that foster both language accuracy and critical thinking skills in writing. Future studies are recommended to investigate the role of specific PjBL stages, such as peer feedback and revision in improving individual writing dimensions, and to conduct longitudinal comparisons of essay quality across a full PjBL course to better understand the long-term learning gains of this approach.

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