

Students' Perceptions toward Project-Based Learning in English Vocabulary Learning at the Eighth Grade of Junior High School

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* Agista Veranita P, Nadrun, Budi, Mochtar Marhum^{abcd} 

¹²³⁴Universitas Tadulako, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: agistaveranita02@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary learning plays an important role in English language learning because it supports students' ability to understand and use the language effectively. Although Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has been widely implemented in English language teaching and has been reported to enhance students' learning experiences, studies focusing on junior high school students' perceptions of PjBL in English vocabulary learning remain limited. Therefore, this study investigates students' perceptions toward the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in English vocabulary learning at the eighth grade of SMP Kristen Bala Keselamatan Palu. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Data were collected through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire distributed to 28 students and semi-structured interviews with selected students to obtain deeper insights into their learning experiences. The findings reveal that students generally have positive perceptions of Project-Based Learning. Project activities help students understand and remember vocabulary more easily, increase their motivation to learn English, encourage collaboration during group work, and enhance their confidence in using English. However, several challenges were identified, including unclear instructions, unequal participation among group members, and the longer time required to complete project tasks. Overall, the study concludes that Project-Based Learning provides meaningful learning experiences and effectively supports English vocabulary learning in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: *Students' Perceptions, Project-Based Learning, Vocabulary Learning, EFL Classroom, Junior High School*

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery is a crucial aspect of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it serves as the foundation for effective communication and language development. Students with sufficient vocabulary knowledge are better able to understand spoken and written texts, express their ideas, and participate in communicative activities (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2010). In contrast, limited vocabulary often hinders students' ability to comprehend information and use English effectively, as vocabulary knowledge is strongly associated with learners' overall language proficiency. In junior high school contexts, many students experience difficulties in learning and retaining new vocabulary, understanding word meanings in different contexts, and using vocabulary appropriately in communication (Cameron, 2001). These challenges are often associated with traditional teaching practices that emphasize memorization and repetitive exercises rather than meaningful language use (Harmer, 2007). Vocabulary learning becomes more meaningful when students actively use vocabulary in authentic contexts rather than simply memorizing isolated words. Therefore, English teachers need instructional approaches that promote active engagement, contextualized learning, and meaningful vocabulary use (Thornbury, 2002).

One approach that has gained considerable attention in English language teaching is Project-Based Learning (PjBL). As a learner-centered approach, PjBL encourages students to acquire knowledge and skills through inquiry, collaboration, and the creation of meaningful

products. Du (2021) emphasized that learner-centered instruction promotes student engagement and autonomy, while Haniah et al., (2021) found that project-based activities encourage communication, teamwork, and active participation in language learning. Similarly, Waly & Ashadi (2024) reported that Project-Based Learning provides meaningful learning experiences that foster students' creativity and enable them to apply language skills in authentic contexts, making learning more relevant and engaging.

Previous studies have highlighted the potential of PjBL in supporting vocabulary development. Through project activities, students are required to search for information, discuss ideas, and present their work, which naturally exposes them to new vocabulary. Rahma (2024) found that projects such as posters, infographics, and videos encouraged students to learn and apply new vocabulary related to the project topics. Likewise, Harini (2021) reported that repeated exposure to vocabulary during project activities helped students retain and remember words more effectively. These findings suggest that PjBL creates opportunities for vocabulary learning through meaningful and repeated language use.

In addition to vocabulary development, students generally perceive PjBL positively. Amalia et al., (2024) found that students viewed project-based activities as motivating because they allowed collaboration and the production of tangible outcomes. Similarly, Ahmed (2024) reported that Project-Based Learning enhanced students' engagement and active participation through collaborative learning activities. However, previous studies have also identified several challenges. Hong Nhung & Tuyen (2024) found that unclear instructions, unequal participation among group members, and limited time sometimes led to negative perceptions of project activities. Haniah et al. (2021) likewise reported that students experienced difficulties related to project management despite recognizing the benefits of project-based learning.

Despite the growing body of research on Project-Based Learning, several gaps remain. Many previous studies have focused on the effectiveness of PjBL in improving language skills such as speaking, writing, and reading (Andargie et al., 2025); Haniah et al., 2021), while fewer studies have specifically examined students' perceptions of vocabulary learning through project-based activities. Furthermore, most studies have been conducted in senior high schools, vocational schools, and higher education settings (Amalia et al., 2024; Ahmed et al., 2024), leaving limited evidence from junior high school contexts. Research conducted in local and faith-based schools is also still scarce, suggesting the need for further investigation in different educational settings.

To address these gaps, this study investigates eighth-grade students' perceptions toward the implementation of Project-Based Learning in English vocabulary learning at SMP Kristen Bala Keselamatan Palu. Specifically, the study explores students' perceptions regarding vocabulary understanding, vocabulary retention, motivation, confidence, collaboration, and challenges experienced during project activities. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on Project-Based Learning in EFL contexts and provide practical insights for English teachers seeking to enhance vocabulary learning through project-based instruction.

METHOD

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate students' perceptions toward the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in English vocabulary learning. In this design, quantitative data were collected and analyzed first through a questionnaire, followed by qualitative data collection through semi-structured interviews to explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), an explanatory sequential design is appropriate when qualitative data are used to provide a deeper understanding of quantitative results.

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design using an explanatory sequential approach. According to Creswell et al. (2018) an explanatory sequential design involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to explain and elaborate the quantitative findings. In this study, quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire to identify general trends in students' perceptions of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in English vocabulary learning. The qualitative phase was conducted through semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into students' experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of PjBL.

Participant

The participants of this study were 28 eighth-grade students at SMP Kristen Bala Keselamatan Palu who had experienced English vocabulary learning through Project-Based Learning (PjBL). All students in the class were included in the quantitative phase of the study using total sampling. For the qualitative phase, four students were purposively selected based on their questionnaire responses to represent different perspectives and experiences regarding the implementation of PjBL. This selection was intended to provide a deeper understanding of the quantitative findings.

Instruments

Data were collected using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire gathered quantitative data on students' perceptions, while the interview provided deeper information about their experiences and challenges in Project-Based Learning.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 12 statements measuring students' perceptions of Project-Based Learning in English vocabulary learning. The items were developed based on six indicators: vocabulary understanding, vocabulary retention, motivation, confidence, collaboration, and challenges. A four-point Likert scale was used, consisting of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The questionnaire was administered to 28 eighth-grade students of SMP Kristen Bala Keselamatan Palu who had experienced English vocabulary learning through Project-Based Learning. The questionnaire aimed to identify general patterns and trends in students' perceptions of the learning approach.

Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four selected students to gain deeper insights into their perceptions of Project-Based Learning. The interviews focused on students' experiences, perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions regarding the implementation of PjBL in vocabulary learning.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the questionnaire was distributed to 28 eighth-grade students during regular English class hours with the permission of the school and the English teacher. Before completing the questionnaire, students were informed about the purpose of the study and provided with instructions on how to respond to the statements. In the second phase, four students were selected for interviews based on the questionnaire results. The interviews were conducted in a quiet setting outside regular class hours and lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected data.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to identify trends and patterns in students' responses toward Project-Based Learning in English vocabulary learning. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using Miles, M. B., & Huberman's (2024) interactive model, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview recordings were transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes related to vocabulary understanding, vocabulary retention, motivation, confidence, collaboration, and challenges. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions toward the implementation of Project-Based Learning in English vocabulary learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Students' Perceptions toward Project-Based Learning in Vocabulary Learning

The questionnaire results indicated that students generally had positive perceptions toward the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in English vocabulary learning. Most students agreed that project activities helped them understand and retain vocabulary, increased their motivation and confidence, and promoted collaboration with their peers. However, some students also reported challenges related to unclear instructions, unequal participation among group members, and the time required to complete project tasks.

Table 1. Summary of Students' Perceptions toward Project-Based Learning

Category	Mean Score	Interpretation
Vocabulary Understanding	3.21-3.39	Agree
Vocabulary Retention	3.25-3.32	Agree
Motivation	3.03-3.35	Agree
Confidence	3.28	Agree
Collaboration	3.35	Agree
Challenges	2.64-2.85	Moderate Agreement

Vocabulary Understanding and Retention

Students showed positive perceptions of vocabulary understanding and retention, with mean scores ranging from 3.21 to 3.39. Interview findings revealed that project activities helped students understand vocabulary in meaningful contexts and remember words through repeated use. As Student 1 stated, "I could understand the meaning of new words more easily because I used them directly in the project." Similarly, Student 2 explained, "When we repeated the words during discussions and presentations, it became easier to remember them."

Motivation, Confidence, and Collaboration

Students also reported positive perceptions of motivation, confidence, and collaboration, with mean scores ranging from 3.03 to 3.35. Interview findings revealed that project activities increased students' interest in learning, enhanced their confidence in using English, and encouraged peer learning through group work. One student commented, "Learning through projects was more interesting because we could discuss and work together with friends." Another student stated, "Presenting the project made me more confident to speak and express my ideas in English."

Challenges in Project-Based Learning

Despite the positive perceptions, students also identified several challenges in implementing PjBL, with mean scores ranging from 2.64 to 2.85. Interview findings revealed difficulties related to unclear instructions, time-consuming project activities, and unequal participation among group members. For example, Student 3 stated, "Sometimes I did not fully understand the project instructions at the beginning." Student 4 added, "Some group members were less active, so the work was not always divided equally." These findings are

Students' Perceptions toward Project-Based Learning in English Vocabulary Learning at the Eighth Grade of Junior High School consistent with Nhung and Tuyen (2024), who reported similar challenges in project-based learning.

Discussions

Vocabulary Understanding and Retention

The findings indicate that PjBL supports students' vocabulary understanding and retention through meaningful and repeated vocabulary use. This finding is consistent with Rahma (2024) and Harini (2021), who reported that contextualized and repeated exposure to vocabulary enhances vocabulary learning.

Motivation, Confidence, and Collaboration

The positive perceptions regarding motivation, confidence, and collaboration suggest that PjBL creates an engaging learning environment that encourages active participation and peer interaction. This finding supports Ahmed (2024) and Amalia et al. (2024), who found that project-based activities promote student engagement, confidence, and collaborative learning.

Challenges in Project-Based Learning

Although students viewed PjBL positively, challenges related to unclear instructions, time management, and unequal participation were identified. These findings are in line with Hong Nhung and Tuyen (2024), who reported similar difficulties in project-based learning environments. Therefore, teachers should provide clear instructions and monitor group participation to maximize the effectiveness of project activities.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the value of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) as an approach to supporting English vocabulary learning in junior high school EFL classrooms. The findings demonstrate that PjBL creates meaningful learning experiences by enabling students to use vocabulary in authentic and collaborative activities, which supports vocabulary development while fostering motivation, confidence, and peer interaction. Furthermore, this study contributes to the limited body of research on students' perceptions of PjBL in vocabulary learning, particularly in junior high school and faith-based educational settings. Although challenges related to instructions, time management, and group participation were identified, the overall findings suggest that well-structured project activities can enhance vocabulary learning and student engagement. Pedagogically, English teachers can integrate project-based activities that encourage students to apply vocabulary in real-life contexts, collaborate with peers, and actively participate in the learning process. Teachers should also provide clear instructions, establish effective group management strategies, and allocate sufficient time for project completion to maximize the benefits of PjBL in vocabulary learning.

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